Dialogue 16: School Dropout – The Path to Prevention

Hybrid meeting – 12 April 2022

01 Setting the Scene

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South Africa's learner dropout rate of 40% was already significant prior to the advent of Covid-19, but it has risen even further due to the pandemic's intensification of the impact of factors that lead to disengagement from school. Whereas in 2018 approximately 230 000 learners dropped out of the school system, it has been estimated that between 650 000 - 750 000 learners had not returned to school by May 2021 – an increase of 200% (NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 data).

Given the importance of education in South Africa's socio-economic environment, these young people face a bleak future. This is a crisis with serious consequences – not only for the affected individuals and their families, but also for the future of our country – and requires urgent and committed attention.

To this end, Dialogue 18 focused on:

- Unpacking some of the many push and pull factors that make learners vulnerable to dropping out, and sharing strategies and tools to counteract these pressures.
- Highlighting the role of school-parent communication and parental monitoring of performance and attendance, and how technology can support this.
- Enabling the speakers, panellists and participants to share their knowledge and experience to assist principals and schools in supporting at-risk learners.

These *Meeting Highlights* provide an overview of the main themes and issues discussed. Links to a range of resources are included.

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

Presented by the Catholic Institute of Education, the LRS Academy, Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, 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 Welcome

Dialogue 18 was held as a hybrid session, with participants attending virtually and, for the first time since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, in person. The session was arranged by BRIDGE and hosted by the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG).

Facilitator Mduduzi Qwabe of the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) welcomed all contributors and attendees, and shared important insights on the topic of learner dropout to open the conversation.

03 Presentations

PRESENTATION 1:

Advocating for collective action to address the problem of dropout – Rahima Essop, DG Murray Trust (DGMT), and Head of Communications and Advocacy at the Zero Dropout Campaign

The Zero Dropout Campaign is a national advocacy campaign focused on halving the rate of dropout by 2030. It is working to raise awareness and change perceptions about school dropout, to share practical and implementable solutions, and to provide support for implementing these solutions.

Rahima focussed on deepening understanding of the factors that lead to disengagement from school and eventual dropout, and shared strategies and resources that schools can use to identify and support at-risk learners.

> "We are here today to talk about an urgent crisis. I would encourage you to take the wheel as we navigate the path to zero dropout."
>
> (Rahima Essop)

School dropout is 'a crisis on many levels', yet it has been normalised in many communities. The extent and consequences of the problem are often not fully recognised and far too little is being done to help vulnerable learners stay in and succeed at school.

At present millions of young people in South Africa are not in any form of education, training or employment. School dropout contributes significantly to this situation, which increases the burden of social ills and crime, and 'wastes the potential, the energy and the vibrancy of our young people'. In this environment, possession of a matric certificate is important for several reasons: it improves the uncertain chances of finding employment or studying further, breaks the cycle of intergenerational poverty and enables social mobility.

Addressing the problem of dropout will require both collective and individual action by a range of stakeholders at school, community, government and national policy levels. Rahima stressed that there are simple interventions that can work, and that schools are central to driving these interventions.

What are some of the push and pull factors that lead to dropout?

Dropout is a complex issue, with up to 40 different risk factors having been identified. It is important to recognise that learners who drop out do not do so because they are disinterested in school – and that dropout comes at the end of a long process of disengagement in which learners are pushed or pulled away from school by factors at home, at school, or in their communities, that are beyond their control. Some examples of these factors are:

- Neglect in the home environment
- Gangsterism in the community (which lures young boys into destructive and violent forms of masculinity, and can make walking to school dangerous)
- Poverty
- Falling behind academically
- Bullying or punishment in the school environment
- The lack of a caring adult to support the learner through school.

> **ACCESSING RESOURCES**
>
> **Visit the website https://zerodropout.co.za to read more about or download the resources listed in these Meeting Highlights, or to explore other aspects of the Zero Dropout Campaign.**

Strategies for preventing dropout

The Zero Dropout Campaign encompasses two key programmes: *Yethu* and *Reading for Meaning*. Because Principals Upfront is directed towards the interests and needs of school leaders, Rahima focused her presentation on the Yethu programme, which is implemented at school level – and is the vehicle the Campaign is using in schools across the country to drive the commitment to zero dropout.

The Yethu Programme

Yethu is essentially a network that builds a comprehensive support system within schools to help at-risk learners 'keep their grip on schooling', and ultimately creates a positive school experience where all learners can thrive.

- The programme depends on Champion Teachers, who act as conduits for change by starting and rallying support for Yethu Clubs through which the diverse members of school communities – learners, staff, parents, members of the broader community, and other individuals in the school's eco-system – can work together to prevent dropout in their various spaces. Champion Teachers are innovative and value change.

- Principals (supported by their SMTs) are 'in the driver's seat' with the key responsibilities of nominating Champion Teachers, providing them with moral and administrative support, and monitoring the implementation and progress of Yethu Club and network activities.

- To create the learner support system, Yethu Clubs tap into resources, structures and other support systems that already exist – both within schools (such as the SBSTs), and more widely in the broader community (such as childcare community workers).

- Because Yethu is a network, Champion Teachers and Yethu Clubs are able to share experiences and collaborate with other Champion Teachers and Yethu Clubs in other schools, both within and outside of their own areas. The Yethu network extends to officials and managers at district, provincial and national levels, who are encouraged to promote and support the initiative.

What resources are available?

To help schools get started, the Zero Dropout Campaign and Yethu provide direction and make available a number of tools/ resources (which can be downloaded from the Zero Dropout website). These include:

A usable, practical dropout prevention toolkit

This toolkit was developed over a 4-year period in collaboration with a number of NGOs working in various provinces and in different school contexts to identify best practices and test different models of intervention to determine what works and doesn't work in various school spaces.

Children who are struggling emotionally or psychologically find it very difficult to learn. For this reason, psychosocial support and mentoring are central to the various dropout prevention strategies contained in the toolkit, that school leaders can implement in their school spaces to prevent dropout. It is also vital that schools utilise the various support systems that are available (such as childcare community workers and other learner support agents).

> "Psychosocial support is at the heart of the interventions that have been proven to work. We find that having just one caring adult to support the learners in the school dramatically improves their chances of completing schooling." (Rahima Essop)

An early warning system (EWS)

Because dropout comes at the end of a long process of disengagement, it is possible to be proactive and to intervene during that process, to pre-empt and prevent dropout.

To this end, the Campaign has developed an EWS that schools can use to track learner attendance, behaviour and academic performance. These key indicators signal when learners are at risk of dropping out, so that they can be referred for appropriate academic or psychosocial support.

Resources for building foundational literacy

Falling behind academically is a major contributor to dropout. Ensuring that learners can read for meaning and are able to do basic mathematics sets them up for academic success. To address this need, the Zero Dropout Campaign makes available a number of resources through its *Reading for Meaning* programme (an accelerated catch-up after-school programme to improve reading skills). These guidelines, audiobooks, activities and instructional videos can be downloaded from the Zero Dropout website.

Yethu can benefit school leaders by:

- Providing resources and direction that will set the school on the path to zero dropout.
- Creating spaces where school leaders can share information and best practices, and learn from each other.
- Creating connections and linking schools so that the innovative actions taken by one school to reduce dropout are shared with other school leaders.

Questions and Comments

Are schools being trained on the Early Warning System toolkit?

Response: The EWS is intuitive and teachers should not find it difficult to use the indicators. The toolkit includes an interactive user guide. The system consists of an Excel spreadsheet that allows schools to capture and track information about individual learners, together with 'traffic light' colour coding that shows which learners are at high, medium or low risk of dropping out. The EWS tool and user guide can be downloaded from https://zerodropout.co.za.

Several years ago, the CJCP developed an EWS which was included in the National School Safety Framework – is this going to be incorporated?

Response: The work of developing the EWS took place over 4 – 5 years and was led by the New Leaders Foundation. DGMT's role has related mainly to developing the user guide and making the EWS available. The indicators used in the EWS reflect the UNESCO and UNICEF endorsed ABC early warning indicators for determining disengagement. These are academic performance, behavioural issues, and chronic absenteeism.

> "Partnerships are crucial to getting the Dropout Prevention and EWS toolkits utilised in every school throughout our country. If schools track at least those three indicators it will enable them to tell whether learners are at risk, and to create a safety net to prevent dropout." (Rahima Essop)

PRESENTATION 2:

The Mzali App – Themba Mbele, founder and CEO of the Mzali App communication and monitoring tool for parents

Themba drew attention to the role that effective school-parent communication plays in minimizing failure and dropout rates, and outlined how the Mzali App supports this purpose.

The Mzali App is a communication and monitoring tool that equips parents to become better involved with their child's schooling. The App creates a secure, open line of communication between school and parent, and when used optimally, deepens the parent's connection with their child's learning by giving them an awareness of their child's attendance patterns, schoolwork behaviours and academic performance.

Themba Mbele, Mzali App

Accessibility

Currently, the Mzali App is endorsed by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and is partnering with the Eastern Cape Department of Education, where the focus is on onboarding Quintile 1 - 3 schools. It is free to schools and parents, although using the App does require data. It is currently zero-rated for Telkom and MTN cellphone contract holders.

Mzali is working to extend its reach to other provinces, and to make the App available on as wide a range of platforms as possible. It is accessible from any smartphone, using Google Chrome, Internet Explorer or a web application within the Mzali website. The App is supported by Android, Apple and Huawei.

> **See https://mzali.co.za and YouTube for step-by-step video tutorials on downloading, logging in, and using the Mzali App.**

Getting started with the Mzali App

Schools need to register with Mzali and to go through a process of onboarding. This includes training on how to use the App to communicate with parents and to upload and manage learner data. Each parent is given a password which links to their child's profile. Parents download the App and register using their child's unique details.

The App uses SA-SAMS data to display information about learner performance. Schools post news and notices to parents, and upload information on learner attendance, homework and assignments.

The application's main interface shows the following four functions: News, Subjects (i.e., learner performance), Attendance and Resources (i.e., educational content). Parents log in to their child's profile and navigate as required. The information displayed is relevant to that particular child, so parents with more than one child at the school log in separately for each child.

Features / functionality of the Mzali App

News/ notifications:

This feature displays communication sent by the school to parents. Schools can post messages at any time, and have the option of directing messages to the entire school, to a grade, or to a class. A popup appears on the parent's cellphone to alert the parent to the new post. This helps to avoid miscommunication or communication breakdown between school and parent. Documents or pictures (up to 10 MB) can be attached to messages.

Communication is one-way; parents contact the school via the normal channels if they wish to respond/ interact with the school (the functionality enabling parents to respond to the school has been developed, but is dormant unless specifically activated).

Subjects/ learner performance:

- Performance is displayed per subject, as captured on SA-SAMS. Schools are responsible for sending their SA-SAMS data through to Mzali. Themba noted the importance of providing this data timeously, so there is time to intervene, if necessary, to minimize the risk of failure or dropout.
- Schools post homework and assignments. The App shows when tasks are due, whether they have been completed, and the results achieved. This allows parents to effectively monitor their child's behaviour and performance in terms of schoolwork.
- Results can be compared across terms.
- The App identifies the class teacher, which promotes efficient communication when a parent contacts the school.
- The App supports the management of textbooks and devices issued to learners and assists schools with retrieval.

Attendance:

This feature allows parents to monitor their child's attendance (which is a key early warning indicator of potential dropout). The App uses colour coding to show absence, late arrival and early leaving across a month. Parents can scroll between months for comparison. For this feature to be effective, schools need to upload attendance data frequently.

Resources/ educational content:

With a view to supporting transformation in education, the App provides links to partner-provided educational content. Currently content is available from BCX Learn and Lightbulb Education.

Mzali is looking to integrate content from other content providers, and particularly, to include career guidance.

Benefits of the Mzali App

Mzali means 'parent' in Setswana. As the name indicates, the application foregrounds parental needs, while also benefitting learners, teachers and schools by bridging the gap between the two cultures of home and school.

- Schools share information with parents directly.
- The application is easy to navigate. The latest news appears first, and parents do not need to scroll though information that is not relevant to their child.
- Communication is paperless, which reduces time and cost.
- The App is not linked to a cellphone number, so the school's ability to contact parents is not disrupted if phones are lost, stolen or changed, or if parents change their numbers.
- Schools avoid spending money on SMSs, especially to numbers that are no longer in use.
- The App complies with the POPI Act and does not share personal information.
- Parents have immediate access to their child's information [NB: provided that it has been uploaded/ sent to Mzali by the school].

What are the elements of active Mzali App use?

To unlock the full benefits of the App as a communication and monitoring tool, schools and parents need to achieve a certain level of use.

For a school to be considered active, it needs, for example, to upload homework tasks and assignments at least once a week across all grades, post news across all grades five times a week, and update learner attendance at least every week.

For parents to be considered active users, they have to access the App at least five times every week to check on their child's performance and attendance, and to engage with the online educational content at least three times every week. Mzali can report to the school how much time individual parents spend on the App.

Questions and Comments

Several participants congratulated Themba on the development of this App. Other questions/ comments were:

Do schools require Wi-Fi / internet access to use the Mzali system?

Response: We have reached a stage where schools need to embrace technology. If there are still schools without internet access and data, there isn't much hope for education in South Africa. To assist parents who can't afford Wi-Fi and data, Mzali has developed a web application (accessible from the website https://mzali.co.za) that facilitates access.

> **"I am so glad that Themba spoke about parent involvement – because getting parents involved as active participants in their children's education plays a crucial role in reducing dropout. The Yethu Clubs are integral to how the Zero Dropout Campaign brings parents in. I am excited by the kind of innovation that Mzali App is bringing to the party."** (Rahima Essop)

It is concerning that the App relies on data from SA-SAMs. Based on reports from GDE, it appears that SA-SAMs is not being regularly updated. Considering that the App relies on getting this data, is Mzali making any efforts to encourage schools to use SA-SAMs?

Response: Mzali only depends on SA-SAMS for learner performance data. Each term, teachers are required to give their marksheets to school administrators for capturing on SA-SAMS. This is done one-by-one and takes time. Mzali only comes into play once the school has submitted the results on SA-SAMS. We then request an update from the school, which typically takes several weeks to arrive. Uploading the same data to Mzali only takes a few minutes. There are no delays in relation to displaying news, schoolwork, learner attendance or online learning.

What is being done to help less-resourced schools adopt usage of the App?

Response: The App was initially developed for public schools and is being supplied at no cost. The main issue is whether schools are willing to evolve and to adopt the technology. It happens that parents show interest and want the App, but that usage is slowed by the school. The App can only be effective if the school uses it actively to post messages and learner information – without this, parents cannot be active users.

Does the App allow the school to communicate directly to individual parents? Does it allow parents to respond to the school? Are there group forums?

Response: The Mzali App has the functionality to enable parents to interact with schools but this feature is currently dormant. It is only enabled to schools that specifically request this functionality, as it requires the school to dedicate resources to managing this aspect of the App.

There are other features – such as the generation of downloadable quarterly reports for parents – that have similarly not been generally activated, but can be made available to committed schools. In this sense, usage depends on the school. Themba noted that Mzali requires support to increase awareness and uptake of the App.

BRIDGE Innovation in Learning Organisation Retweeted
Zero Dropout Campaign @ZeroXdropout · Apr 12
The Yethu Hub supports school communities to focus their attention on simple intervention. You can find out more about Yethu here:
zerodropout.co.za/network-of-sch…

Principal **Nozuko Gloria Vuba** of Monde Primary School believes that for schools to flourish, stakeholder collaboration and a willingness to embrace technology are essential. Without easy access to communication tools, individuals are limited to their own perspectives. The Covid-19 lockdown increased the challenges for non-fee paying schools and necessitated a rapid adaptation to the 'new normal'. In this situation the Mzali App proved to be an opportune tool for enabling collaboration with parents.
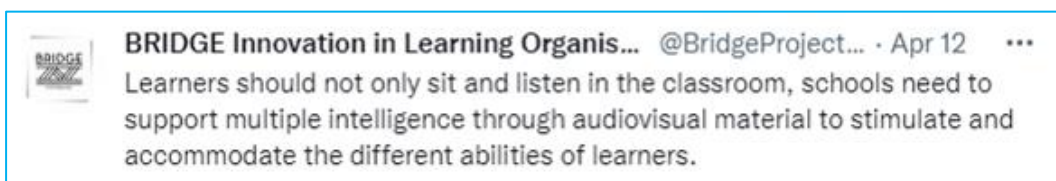
Jabulile Mazibuko is a Child and Youth Care Worker employed by the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) as a senior mentor. Through her years of experience in the field she has built up an extensive understanding of what is needed to support at-risk children in a variety of contexts. She is motivated by a desire for every child in the country to have equal access to education.

The panelists discussed questions relating to dropout posed by facilitator Mduduzi Qwabe.

1. What can schools do to identify and retain at risk learners?

Nozuko's response was wide-ranging and inspiring. She emphasised the importance of/ need for:

- Good working relationships amongst school stakeholders – this is what makes everything else possible.
- Fostering an environment where children feel safe to participate and learn without fear of failing or being ridiculed by their peers or teachers. *"When the right atmosphere is there, communication flows easily and children feel able to ask questions and to say they don't understand."*
- Encouraging children who have learning challenges to do the best they can, building their confidence, and showing them alternative ways of achieving – both in school and in their later career choices. *"Our curriculum emphasizes content, and when children in this position fail academically, they feel there is nothing else they can do. Schools need to offer lots of activities, so every child can find a space at school where they can achieve."*
- Timeously identifying and appropriately referring children with severe learning challenges, if the school is unable to help them.
- Making learning relevant and stimulating by accommodating different learning styles. *"Through our association with the Mzali App, we have been able to access interactive boards from Telkom, which is making it possible to accommodate children's different learning styles."*

> **BRIDGE Innovation in Learning Organis...** @BridgeProject... · Apr 12   ...
> Learners should not only sit and listen in the classroom, schools need to support multiple intelligence through audiovisual material to stimulate and accommodate the different abilities of learners.

- Teaching attitudes and values that build the whole person and enable children to believe in themselves, become more resilient, and develop the ability to work hard and keep going until they complete the task. Nozuko believes that primary schools have a high responsibility to prepare children for high school.
- When giving awards, not focusing only on excellence in terms of quality, but also recognising that children have worked hard until completion. *"It is important for children to grow up knowing that when they start something, they can finish it."*

> **"It is such a pity that our system places so much emphasis on testing, and puts values and attitudes aside."** (Nozuko Vuba)

In her response to the question, **Jabulile** emphasised that responsibility for preventing dropout lies with stakeholders at all levels – and that it is important to invest in models and practices that work.

Schools should not be expected to shoulder all the responsibility for keeping learners in school, as teachers are focused on teaching and administrative responsibilities, and do not have the time or capacity to deal with the psychosocial issues that young people experience. Jabulile recommends using a multisectoral approach in which professionals such as child and youth care workers are deployed to assist schools in monitoring and supporting at-risk learners. Child and youth care workers are trained to 'meet children in their own space', and to resolve the kinds of psychosocial issues that lead to disengagement. They would be able to work together with schools to address some of the challenges learners experience, for example, in the home environment.

Jabulile also drew attention to the need to direct investment towards supporting the wider dissemination and implementation of tools and solutions geared towards prevention (such as those shared by the speakers).

2. What can schools do to strengthen the parental link and maximise parental involvement?

Jabulile stressed the importance of first analysing the school and community environments, to gain a full understanding of the influences that can affect or prevent parental involvement. For example, it has been found that:

- Many parents have not been through the system of education and consequently have no frame of reference for the learner going to school.
- Many parents are themselves facing the same issues that their children are facing (such as abuse), and have never learned to deal with them. As a result, they are in no position to help their children to do so.

An effective approach is to bring in parents who are engaging with the school to interact with those who are not (for example, in a one-on-one conversation). The 'engaging parent' would need to understand the causes of the lack of involvement, and be able to interact at the level of the 'non-engaging parent' to help them see the value of participating.

- Jabulile noted that child and youth care workers are well equipped to play this kind of mediating role, as they are able to support all three parties in the triangle – the school, the parent and the child.

In **Nozuko's** view, the SGB is the first platform that the school can use to involve parents, so it is vital to ensure that the SGB understands its role and responsibilities correctly.

- SGBs have an obligation to proactively put plans in place to address problems that might arise in the school, such as dropout, criminal tendencies and substance abuse. The process starts with an analysis of the school and community environments to identify the issues that affect the learners and parents of the school. The next step is strategic planning, followed by the development of multidisciplinary programmes (which can involve parents) to address the various problems.
- It is important to educate parents so they know why and how they can contribute to their children's education. Parents often do not understand that while the education their children receive is free, it is limited to a particular level – and that they can play a role in elevating this level of experience. Schools are advised to compile a list of parents' specialties and the ways in which parents can add value and know-how to school undertakings – and to involve them wherever they can contribute.

> **"Schools do not have the resources to make it on their own. We need to reach out to parents and to help them understand the expectations and what they can do, so they can play their role."** (Nozuko Vuba)

- Tools such as the Mzali App are crucial to keeping parents informed, and Yethu Clubs can be used effectively to involve parents.

3. Can you suggest any other interventions to address problems leading to drop out?

Nozuko believes that schools should make optimal use of people and programmes that can offer additional value to learners – such as extra reading or ICT. Schools need to make available a range of activities and experiences, so children can find out what interests them. If school is interesting, children will be able see the reasons why they should be at school – and will grow into lifelong learners.

In this regard, **Jabulile** emphasised the need for accountability in relation to any programmes and activities that are brought into the school. It is critically important for all such programmes and activities to be monitored and mentored, to ensure that they are being implemented as intended, and for people who are brought into the school space to be trained to work with children. In addition, SGBs should be orientated to the different programmes that are available, so they are able to advocate for a better environment for the children.

Jabulile noted the importance of including young people when considering issues that affect them.

- To illustrate the reality that confronts some learners, Jabulile gave the example of a committed learner who relies on a 'blesser' for basic necessities such as food, and who may have no option but to stop attending school if he (the blesser) does not want her to.
- It is crucial that all those who work with young people fully understand, for example, the issue of statutory rape, and are able to recognise when it occurs.

> **"We tend to talk about young people in their absence, but it is important to include them in the conversation. It is vital that we bring learners in to speak about their reality, if we are to fully understand what they are experiencing and what is causing them to disengage."** (Jabulile Mazibuko)

> **"We all need to start being accountable so as to make dropout interventions work."** (Jabulile Mazibuko)

Questions and Comments

Nozuko was asked to expand on her experiences during the initial Covid-19 lockdown and the insights she gained during this time – and how these led her to make changes to support communication and learning in her school.

In response, Nozuko shared the following:

"When we went on lockdown, we (the school community) had no system to communicate amongst ourselves – not even WhatsApp to communicate with the staff. I was living with my grandchildren who were in private schools, and saw how they were continuing their schooling and talking with their teachers, while I had no way of knowing what was happening with my learners and staff.

It was my wish, when we returned to school after lockdown, to put in a system that would enable communication with children, parents and teachers. This lead us to the Mzali App. As a school we quickly became active on the App. This took place during the period when we had alternate weekly rotational timetabling. We made sure that we posted work so that the children at home had something to do every day. The children and parents responded so well. We included a literacy programme, with children reading for 2 hours a day, and a maths programme – and did it all through the Mzali App. The parents were involved, and our children worked well. Some children even preferred to work at home – they owned their learning, and developed skills. They were so motivated – some even came to the school gate to ask their teachers for help and explanations."

05 Closure & Vote of Thanks

In presenting the vote of thanks, Annacletta Koloko of the Sasol Foundation expressed appreciation for the work being done to develop solutions to the problem of dropout, and the hope that the benefits would be extended to learners and schools throughout the country.

Annacletta closed the session with thanks to the Dialogue partners and participants for their contributions and involvement. She encouraged participants to find out more about the Zero Dropout Campaign and the Mzali App, and invited members of the in-person audience to help themselves to the booklets provided by Dialogue partners and the Zero Dropout Campaign.

Next meeting

The date of the next Principals Upfront dialogue will be communicated as soon as information is available.

Dialogue participants are 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