

Working together: strengthening school leadership-teacher-parent relationships to achieve positive education outcomes for learners

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Abstract

This paper is based on research intended to identify system levers that will strengthen 'school leadership-teacher-parent relationships to achieve positive education outcomes for learners in South Africa' for Tshikululu Social Investments². The research is focused on mapping the school governance systems to define boundaries and identify 'to scale' innovation possibilities. This initial mapping process will be followed by scenario planning with school communities exploring different future paths to better learning for all in South Africa. It is assumed that re-perceiving the system through this process will identify the innovations that will enable school governance systems to influence teaching and learning more effectively. This research will only be concluded in May 2016, so this draft provides the assumptions, understanding of system change and approach to the research. While some provisional insights are offered here, these will be updated in a final paper once the research results have been analysed and finalised.

Introduction

A massive overhaul of the South African education system followed the first democratic elections in 1994. The reforms were comprehensive and directed towards building a more equitable, relevant and integrated post-apartheid education system. Change interventions focused on curriculum, teacher development, funding, schooling and governance. These changes were directed towards building a basic education delivery system that would redress unequal provision, improve the quality of learning, build democratic culture and contribute to social and economic development.

Despite substantial public and private investment in education, consistent policy change, and large scale interventions, many schools underperform in terms of learning outcomes,

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²Tshikululu Social Investments (TSI) provides a social investment service for the private sector in South Africa. This research was commissioned by TSI on behalf of the FirstRand Foundation (FRF) and the FirstRand Empowerment Fund (FREF) to find ways to maximise the impact of social investment in education in South Africa. FRF and FREF have adopted a systemic social investment (SSI) strategy to guide their social investments based on the realisation a different approach is needed to 'shift the system'.

therefore minimising the potential impact of teaching and learning on economic growth and social development. Established systems, structures and processes have proved difficult to change into democratic and learning-focused practices with a corresponding impact on learning outcomes and socio-economic development. The result is that many young people are unable to access further learning or work opportunities, or engage as productive citizens.

Education system challenges are well-documented and complex, and are exacerbated by South Africa's legacy of authoritarian, hierarchical, non-consultative and non-participative institutional relationships. Established systems, structures and processes have proved difficult to change into democratic and learning-focused practices with a corresponding impact on learning outcomes and socio-economic development.

The reasons for poor quality teaching and learning outcomes are complex and varied. A large range of interventions in teacher development, curriculum change and classroom practice have been initiated. In addition, a number of whole school change projects exist. While the challenges seem clear and perhaps over-researched, interventions in education improvement seem to have limited, or localised, effect. Global research on education systems change suggests that established relationships are difficult to shift and that more targeted, society-driven interventions are required.

School leadership, teacher, community relationships are seen as a critical part of school change. This is the reasoning behind the commitment to school governing bodies (SGBs) and attempts to improve the quality of education delivery through structured democratic organisation and development. However, in South Africa, due to structured socio-economic inequality, school community relationships are often disorganised and divided. Achieving quality development in vastly unequal contexts requires more than policy implementation.

There is a need to re-perceive the problems in order to better understand why there is such a large gap between transformative intentions and initiatives and how things turn out in practice. The root problems are not clear and are inherited, or established institutional relationships define the boundaries of change. Understanding the trade-offs and challenges implicit in the effort to improve teaching and learning in contexts where patronage, past privilege and the promise of future opportunity collide is daunting.

This study works from the premise that substantial research has been undertaken into education system reform and performance over the past 20 years in South Africa and a myriad of support projects have been undertaken. There have been studies into the economics of education change, teacher development, maths and science curricula, school management and leadership and many support projects have been carried out in tandem or as a consequence. However, despite multiple interventions (some of them excellent), there

has been limited impact in terms of quality learning and system improvement, and we are no closer to finding the lever of change that will help build a better life for the poor. There is an acknowledged crisis in South African education.

We suggest that this is due, in part, to what we see when implementing policy reform. There is a tendency to assume that compliance, up and down the system, implies consent and accountability. There is therefore a tendency to focus on the instruction, rather than the operational processes or systems that connect delivery to development. School stakeholders, including officials, educators, principals, learners, parents and communities, define the routines (and quality) of education delivery. However, institutionalised daily routines and interactions between stakeholders in schools can inhibit the networks that empower the excluded and entrench (historically) unequal power relations and privilege³. It is also partly due to there being widely differing theoretical starting points for conceptualising interventions, varied commitment to being explicit about theories of change and inconsistent approaches to evaluation and limited uptake of the knowledge generated by evaluations and research. There are a number of perverse incentives in the system which limit the sharing of knowledge and resources and encourage activity in silos.

The purpose of this research is to map and analyse school stakeholder relationships to identify levers for system change that move beyond compliance. This requires finding the system pathologies (such as structural inequality) and possibilities (communities of practice that support learning against the odds). This initial mapping process will be followed by scenario planning with school communities exploring different future paths to better learning for all in South Africa. It is assumed that re-perceiving through this process will enable people within the system to see beyond.

Some of the questions to be explored include:

- How can parents be supported to play a more effective role in promoting the home and community as a third site of learning?
- How can principal recruitment, development and support be improved?
- How can the relationships between principals and School Governing Bodies; school teachers and parents; and School Management Teams and district offices be strengthened?
- How can teachers be supported to develop adequate classroom competencies?
- How can a positive culture and values be infused in the school system to improve performance?

³ Iris Marion Young (1990, p.22) defines institutional context as “any structures or practices, the rules and norms which guide them, and the language and symbols which mediate social interaction within them, in institutions of state, family, and civil society, as well as the workplace. These are relevant ...insofar as they condition people's ability to participate in determining their actions and their ability to develop and exercise their capacities.”

From there to here

On the 27th of April 1994, South Africans queued in their millions to vote in the first democratic government. The new governance system comprised three spheres - national, provincial and local. National government developed policies, standards and regulations. Nine provinces were established with legislative and executive authority to implement social policy. Local governments were responsible for services and infrastructure. The principles of democratic participation, equity and accountability were institutionalised in the 1996 Constitution.

By 1999, when the second democratic elections were held, the national social services departments had put in place the policy and systems which would deal with the inequalities of the apartheid past, and define the new processes of a democratic future. Many of these new frameworks were consistent with global trends in change and innovation. There was a strong emphasis on equity, decentralisation of decision-making, decentralisation, professionalism and quality assurance. These changes were driven by a commitment to citizen participation to enhance legitimacy and quality given a legacy of poor delivery, fractured social relationships, limited resources, high poverty and unemployment. Education was not different in this regard, implementing the South African Schools Act (SASA, 1996), which restructured schooling and introduced SGBs (as isomorphic mimicry).

In 1999, the inability of government to fundamentally shift patterns of unequal delivery was acknowledged by a new Minister of Education, Kader Asmal:

Our people have rights to education that the state is not upholding. They have put their confidence in the democratic process, and returned their government with an overwhelming mandate. After five years of democratic reconstruction and development, the people are entitled to a better education service and they must have it (Asmal, 1999).

His call to action, *Tirisano* (work together), was an attempt to mobilise actors to make schools work as sites of development and democracy. The *Tirisano* process focused on delivery through partnership – working together. This led to the emergence of a range of improvement programmes aimed at providing focused and sustained support to the schools and communities.

Five elections and countless *Tirisano*-equivalent strategies later, South Africa struggles to provide good quality education in functioning schools, with engaged school communities and active governing bodies. Despite symbolic innovations and focused interventions, education continues to be characterised by racial and increasingly class inequality, evident in the recent *#feesmustfall* campaign at universities. Racially integrated privileged schools and school communities are able to provide, in most cases, better educational experiences than black township schools.

Many schools, principals, school management teams (SMTs), educators and SGBs continue to deal with poor resources, an absence of the culture of teaching and learning, and school communities which, even if they were willing to make a contribution, are themselves the victims of poor education, unemployment and general poverty. Education policy requires officials, educators and managers to work in professional, democratic and participatory ways to build relationships and ensure efficient and effective delivery, but many schools struggle to translate policy into practice.

Three legacies continue to disrupt school stakeholder engagements, which impacts on their ability to support learning quality. Firstly, the illegitimacy of apartheid education gave rise to a culture of mobilisation and resistance which continues to characterise relationships. A second and related issue is inequality in terms of access, provision and learning outcomes. Finally, there is a tendency to reduce schooling problems to issues of representation, access and provision, while the effects of apartheid on society are ignored.

A tension between legitimate and democratic education authorities (with their corresponding inherited bureaucracies) and other social groups (teachers, parents, unions, students) continues to pattern distribution in favour of established and vested interests in the system. There is also a constant tension between the need to use resources efficiently given fiscal constraints and the need to improve the quality and relevance of education outcomes.

Education (in and of itself, as well as in relation to its contribution to development) is central to South Africa's Vision 2030 and to the implementation of South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP)⁴. Structures and processes to transform schools into new democratic frameworks and practices have been difficult to implement. Despite attempts to legitimise and improve the quality of education delivery through structured democratic organisation, school communities remain disorganised and divided.

"We know how important basic education is to a nation's current and future prosperity, development and growth." Minister Angie Motshekga: Basic Education Budget Vote 2015/16, 6 May 2015

Education has a key role in achieving the NDP's overarching goals of eliminating poverty, reducing inequality and creating employable people. Education universally is perceived as "a powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Mandela) and to build and sustain development and democracy. However, much improvement is needed and few would claim that education in South Africa is in a good state. The opening statement of Chapter 9 of the NDP is that the "education system needs urgent action". No matter how you read the statistics – quantitatively or qualitatively – South Africa performs poorly in

⁴ The NDP is a 30-year national plan for South Africa which includes a vision for what the future South African education system should be.

terms of efficiency (getting learners through the system) and effectiveness (enabling learners to be socially engaged and productive adults)⁵.

The NDP's diagnosis of the successes and challenges facing education is on point. Successes include the integration of an apartheid education system comprising 27 different education departments, organisational systems and regulations into one national and nine provincial departments. Add to this universal access, resource allocations that favour poor schools, free education for those who cannot pay, and expanded school nutrition schemes. In addition, performance and retention improve in small increments.

The fundamental challenge is that, despite these positive changes, many children continue to drop out of basic schooling or 'graduate' without the necessary knowledge or skill foundations to lead socially active and productive lives. The NDP suggests that this is due to limitations in human capacity (teaching, management and school support), learner language skills and a lack of cooperation among key stakeholders. The question is how to change (and build) these framing relationships so that the education system enables young citizens to change their world.

The NDP is instructive in this regard, focusing on the roles and accountabilities that will ensure that all stakeholders interests are *"aligned to support the common goal of achieving good educational outcomes that are responsive to community needs and economic development"* (NDP, Chapter 9, p. 302). In this regard, the NDP strategy maps out the roles and responsibilities of schools (to implement policy); educators (to be professional and improve learning); principals (to lead and manage the curriculum and the school); districts (to support schools) and parents (to be informed).

Recent writing on South African education has indicated that the government has failed to improve education delivery significantly, despite a sustained focus on changing governing and managing structures and education practices. The tendency for education delivery to remain static or, in some cases, to deteriorate has been perceived as a consequence of poor implementation, inappropriate management, bad planning, limited resources and deep-rooted inequality.

While the research results confirm that the lack of education change is indeed a consequence of all these more commonly given reasons, they also indicate that the social relationships which characterise the education arena are a key and unacknowledged determinant of education transformation in South Africa. Few researchers and commentators have considered the impact of the inherited institutional context on education delivery. This is due to a tendency to conceptualise governance and management

⁵ See, for example, Taylor, van der berg and Mabogoane (2013); Reddy, Zuze, Visser, Winnaar, Juan, Prinsloo, Arends and Rogers (2015) or any of the many presentations and analyses on Nic Spaull's website (<http://nicspaull.com>).

in structural rather than relational terms. Many roles formed during the apartheid period continue to exist in school communities by re-articulating current change discourses as strategies to sustain survival in increasingly impoverished contexts.

The frame

The analytical approach to the research is embedded in understandings of system innovation and change. The school stakeholder interface is a challenging space for exploring the institutional arrangements, forms of engagement and modes of delivery (system) that build public value and deliver results. It is a contested space in which school stakeholders negotiate the distribution of public and private resources and services.

Systems comprise the interactions, pathologies and pathways of various formal and informal institutions operating in a particular context. Institutions shape the patterns and pathways of school leadership-teacher-parent relationships by establishing boundaries for acceptable practice and action. Innovations in these contexts are socially constructed, disputed and creative solutions to intractable problems, but are difficult to sustain and institutionalise. Interventions for system change need to disrupt established practices and institutionalise new ones in order to shift patterns of privilege, access and distribution. This is what the research needs to identify.

While there is no guarantee that an intervention will lead to improvement, there is, at a minimum, some likelihood that it will interrupt or shift established relations. Often, innovations focus on the outcomes, and there is limited engagement with institutionalised practices or patterns of interaction. Innovations with impact would need to push established boundaries. Innovation must disrupt established practices and institutionalise new ones to shift patterns of privilege, access and distribution.

System characteristics include distributed control, connectivity (change based on interaction), co-evolution, dependence on initial conditions (changes in rules don't correlate to outcomes) and emergent order (action and reaction causes patterns to emerge). The research needs to identify the innovations that will produce a different emergent order. Such innovations will disrupt established practices and institutionalise new ones to shift patterns of privilege, access and distribution.

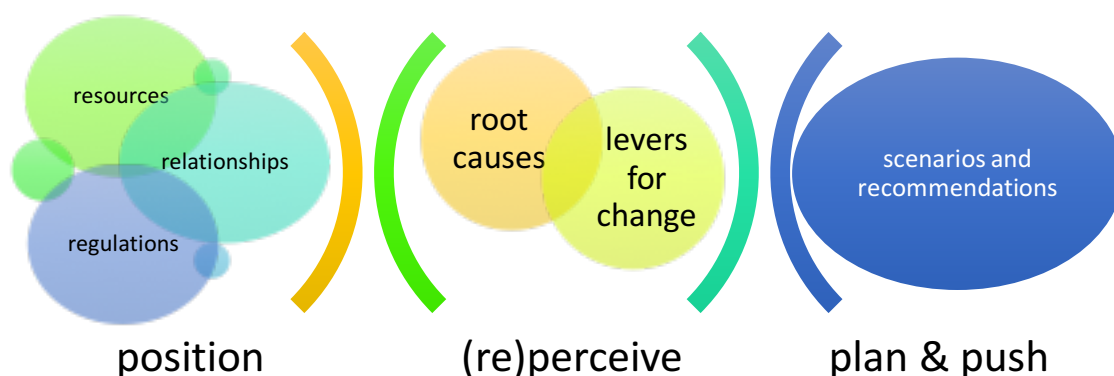
Luis Crouch and Joe DeStefano (2015: 9) suggests that the challenge of change is to “replace what have become overly bureaucratic, administrative structures intent on isomorphic mimicry with an explicit management imperative to achieve results and equity.” However, a limitation of even this compelling approach in which systems set expectations, hold schools accountable and support strugglers, is that organisational forms and social relationships tend to remain intact and affect resource (broadly defined as political, economic and social) distribution.

This paper suggests that governance and management discourses form agency through processes of normalisation (Mc Lennan, 2000). Governance is a process of constituting and re-constituting the various social and institutional relations which legitimate the distribution of resources. Management similarly, although ostensibly neutral, generates social and organisational compliance. Through these processes, stakeholders come to accept institutionalised routines as the norm and fail to recognise the extent to which these mediate their ability to participate in social processes, public decision-making and development. This suggests that, despite formal access, institutionalised practice patterns social relationships, participation and achievement.

The model of school governance adopted by government was informed by the values of the struggle against apartheid education, as well as global frameworks of governance and management. While the former were directed towards nation building as a moral purpose, the latter were aimed at reducing government investment and responsibility in a context of low economic growth. In adopting this approach, South Africa failed to recognise the extent to which these strategies assumed particular types of institutional and social relationships affect redress in innovative or disruptive ways.

Given this analytical frame, the research process, represented in Figure 1, is shaped into three iterative processes. The first is to map the institutions and pathways that restrict or enable change. This analysis of existing research, regulatory frameworks and knowledge, will enable the identification of system change filters and drivers which can be used to frame systemic social investment (SSI) in context. In other words, what is the governance system supposed to do to support positive learning outcomes? What does the system actually do to support positive learning outcomes in schools? All aspects outlined in Figures 2 will be explored in this phase.

Figure 1: Deep dive process

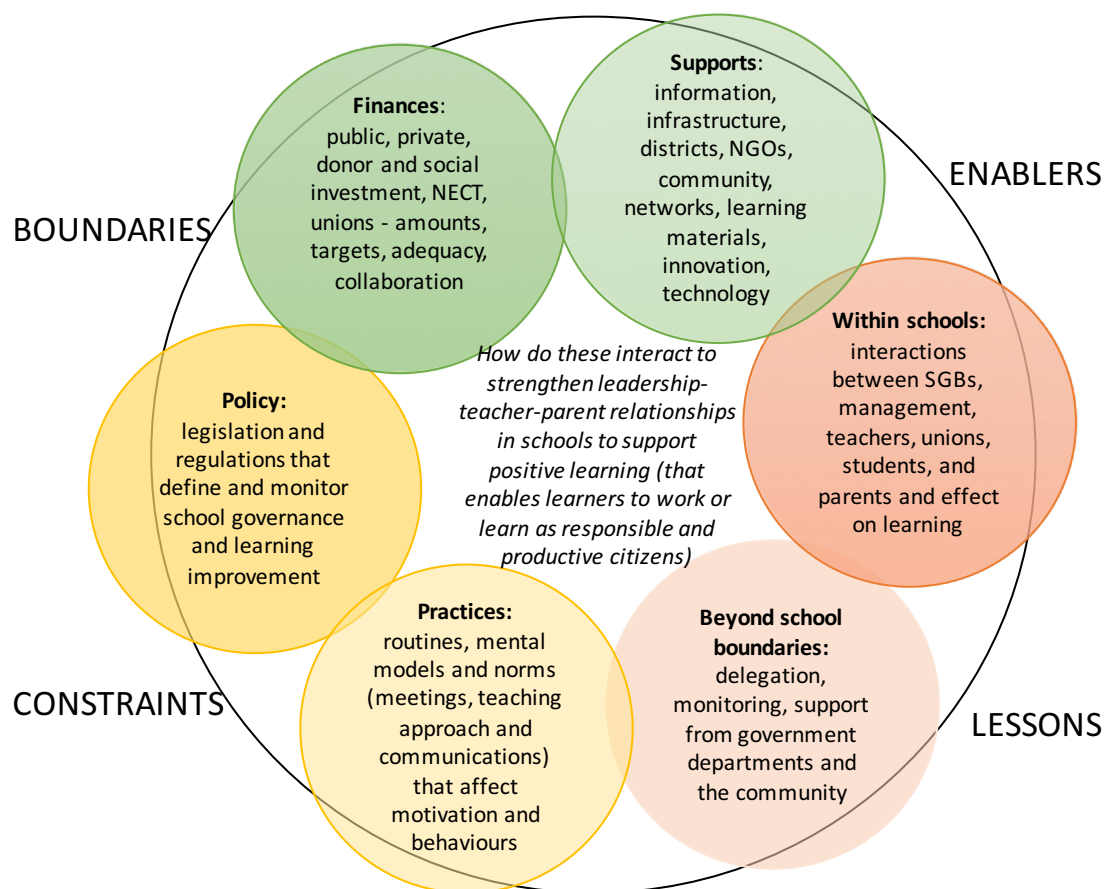


In the second phase, a facilitated scenario-planning exercise with multi-stakeholder communities of practice will provide a space to identify root causes by enabling participants to re-perceive the challenges and then to identify different possible futures as a basis for finding levers of change. Scenario planning is a disciplined method for imagining possible changes. It enables a reframing of thinking.

Key questions guiding this phase of the research will be focused on how the system actually works, the constraints and enablers, the boundaries and lessons and the possibilities. The planning will review the data to identify key stakeholders, trends, uncertainties and causes; construct initial 'stories' and test for plausibility; develop and test these to develop consensus on the most strategic root cause and related levers; and identify and describe the levers.

In the third phase of the research, the identified levers will be worked through to find one (or two) likely to have the most consistent impact on system change (improved teaching and learning). This process will involve further testing with core teams, finalisation of scenarios and the development and assessment of recommendations.

Figure 2: Systems elements and processes



Pathologies and possibilities

This research aims to deep dive into these inter-relationships to identify and test the extent to which a combination of facilitated reflection through communities of practice (CoPs) and monitored compliance to daily routines will shift established patterns of behaviour towards more productive learning cultures. CoPs enable the spreading and sharing of working practice and resources. BRIDGE's facilitation of the CoPs makes certain that resources and knowledge are not only shared but also that knowledge and innovative ideas are generated through joint problem-solving activity.

An independent evaluation of BRIDGE's CoP programme for school principals notes that "CoPs seem most frequently to lead to impacts in terms of leadership, management and communication. Over sixty percent of the [impact] stories attribute the changes they have noticed directly to the CoP. These stories indicate that the CoP has a more significant impact on teaching than on school resources the CoPs are delivering value... principals have been able to recognise a variety of impacts – particularly in relation to leadership, management and communication in schools as a direct or partial consequence of participating in the CoPs." (Benita Williams and Associates, 2015)

As a result of BRIDGE's intervention and the activities undertaken by its CoPs, the following outcomes occur:

1. fewer resources are wasted and there is a reduction in duplication;
2. there is a quicker uptake of effective solutions and fewer isolated duplicated efforts;
3. effective practice is spread more widely in the system;
4. more innovations are created to address education problems; and
5. there is a stronger linkage between policy and practice whereby government adopts programmes or adjusts existing programmes and new policies are created/ or old policies are amended for the better.

Impact is evident when, for example, a policy is changed, greater numbers of learners perform well in maths and science, a stronger pipeline of learners to tertiary studies is created, peer learning occurs, or when the morale of beneficiaries is increased, and so on. A well-functioning CoP's activities ensure activity among members is catalysed for greater impact on the system as well as increased co-ordination, collaboration and alignment are ensured, which results in improved system performance, and improved learner performance.

Some possible conclusions

The literature on education governance, management and change indicates that there has been a global shift from hierarchical forms of organisation to more collaborative ones. In the game of mutual accountability, the question is, how do we really invert the triangle of

bureaucracy to ensure that schools and their related support systems are able to do what needs to be done, in context, to expand and enhance the life chances of children?

If we set the standards too high, or make assumptions about types of social organisation, then we run the risk of further demoralising school communities. Their survival will then depend upon using the system to eke whatever scarce resources are available in the system through whatever means. If these resourceful, survival relationships are labelled as deviant, simply because they do not fit the standard (or the expectations of provincial and school management structures), they will go underground, but they will continue to adapt to the changing local school conditions.

There are two important points to make in this regard. The first is that, while it is not possible to sanction any behaviour in the name of enabling school development, we do need to be open to the possibilities that these relationships present. The second is to highlight the fact that the routines of education delivery are often so embedded that they appear immobile. This means that, as schools try their best to follow the correct path, they will feel defeated by their inability to change things. Fullan (1991) argues that most changes do not substantially alter fundamental ways of doing things in schools. Substantial changes "that affect the culture and structure of schools, restructuring roles and reorganising responsibilities, including those of student and parents" have largely failed, been adapted to fit current systems or discarded (Fullan, 1991, p.29).

Defining roles and responsibilities, and results, requires an understanding of the routine work processes which form and norm social relations and agency. This requires formal changes in authority, structures, decision-making and participation (as outlined in the NDP and other strategies) as well as a disruption of established practices to shift patterns of privilege, access and distribution. This implies paying attention to the daily routines that structure interactions among stakeholder in education. It also means reflecting on roles and responsibilities in context and without labelling.

At the heart of this debate are the formal and informal allocations of voice, authority and responsibility. So, for example, principals are responsible for school performance but lack the authority to implement. Districts are required to provide support but are locked into a system of perverse bureaucracy, which limits their voice and authority. Unions have voice and authority in a system of collective bargaining, which impacts on delivery but does not hold them accountable. Educators are considered professional but within a system that dictates practice. So where do we start given the complexity of the challenge? **We start with where we are, we recognise what we have (pathologies and opportunities), and we move on steadily, keeping Vision 2030 in sight.**

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