Mediating a paradigm shift: Five strategies to enable under-resourced and under-performing schools to become achieving schools

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Introduction

This presentation follows on from previous papers that have explored why many disadvantaged rural schools have not engaged with any version of the post-1994 curriculum.

It reflects on key aspects of a school support model that have enabled six former Homeland primary schools to shift from apparent resistance to the post-1994 policy guidelines, to engagement with them within one year, and to producing consistently improving Literacy and Numeracy results between 2008 and 2011.

First the impact of the model and its strategies is reviewed in terms of improved school functionality, teaching practices and learner results; and in terms of increased agency in school management teams. This is followed by a brief discussion of the necessary pre-conditions for the successful implementation of the strategies.

The paper then explains five (familiar but under-valued and apparently forgotten) strategies that have proven to be effective in enabling schools to shift out of resistance and under-performance, to engagement and steady improvement within two years. They are:

1) Mediate experiential learning

2) Teach for conceptual understanding

3) Teach for conceptual change

4) Mediate changes in mental maps

5) Foster empowerment to develop agency

These interdependent strategies form the core of the school development and support model's approach to mediating the paradigm shift required for the 'educational emancipation' of schools still locked into pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices.

Finally, recommendations are provided to assist the Department of Basic Education to focus its resources on mediating the required paradigm shift at national, provincial and district levels, in order to enable the same in schools.

The school development and support model

Since 2008, the Pearson Marang Education Trust has been involved in a long-term school and district development initiative in the rural districts of Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga, Umzinyathi in KwaZulu/Natal and Libode and Qumbu in the Eastern Cape.

Operating to support the implementation of post-1994 curriculum and related policies, the initiative aims to understand the policy implementation challenges faced by under-resourced and under-performing districts and schools; and to develop strategies to enable them to engage constructively with their meaningful implementation. The diagram below illustrates the first necessary steps towards basic curriculum functionality that the initiative seeks to enable in struggling schools[1].

The School Development & Support Model
Enabling officials & teachers to engage meaningfully with curriculum implementation
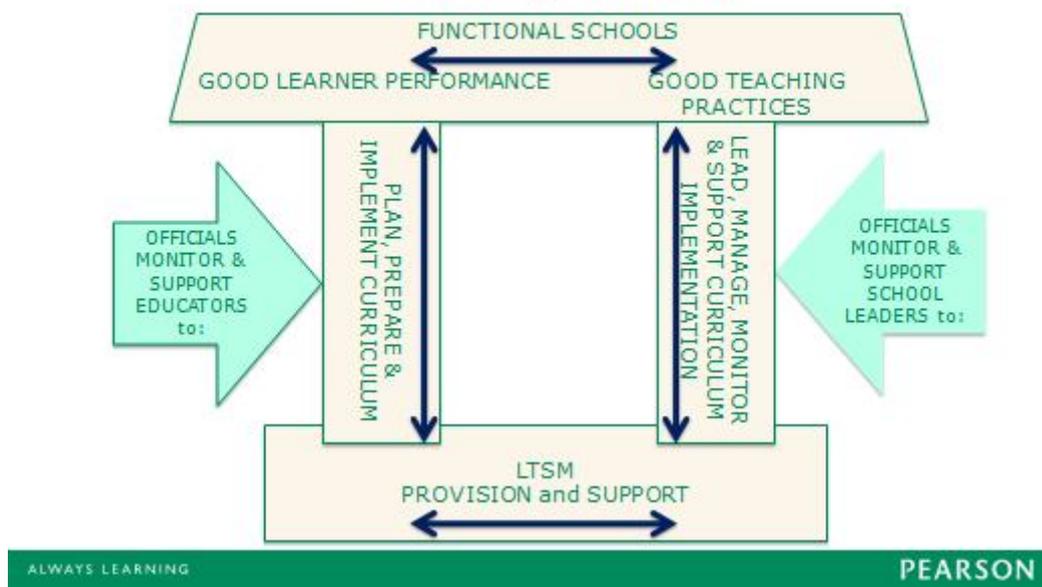
(Kariem, Langhan & Velensky, April, 2012: 19)

In the process of implementation, we have:

1) Explored why many disadvantaged districts and schools have not engaged meaningfully with any version of the post-1994 curriculum; why pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices still prevail at every level of the education system; and why it is that learners are in effect, being 'taught to fail'[2]

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[1] The Trust intends to partner with Miet Africa whose Care and Support through a Human Rights Approach programme addresses socio-economic factors that undermine basic curriculum functionality on a daily basis.

[2] See: Kariem & Langhan, April & October, 2009; Kariem, Langhan & Mpofu, February, 2010; and Kariem, Langhan & Velensky, April, 2012.

2) Been confronted by the realization that the paradigm shift necessary to facilitate the emancipation of provincial departments, districts and schools from pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices, has not yet taken place[3].

3) Drawn on theories of learning that under-pin the post-1994 curriculum, to develop strategies to mediate the required paradigm shift[4].

4) Drawn on the post-1994 values expressed in the South African Constitution[5] and embodied in the Batho Pele Principles; and the skills and characteristics outlined in the Department of Education's 1996 critical cross-field education and training outcomes[6]

5) Integrated 3) and 4) above into strategies intended to mediate the sort of paradigm shift required to enable teachers to embrace post-1994 curriculum values, attitudes and practices[7]

6) Implemented these strategies as part of the school development and support model with considerable success[8].

This paper provides:

- A brief review of the impact of the model in practice;

- Summarizes key pre-conditions to facilitate implementation;

- Explains the strategies that helped to enable the improvements; and

- Provides recommendations for how the DBE could enable its officials to mediate similar improvements in other struggling schools.

Impact of the model: 2008 - 2011
In spite of a slower than expected pace of change, after just three years of implementation, the following progress has been recorded in twelve former Homeland primary schools.

All twelve schools have shifted from apparent resistance to new policy requirements, to constructive engagement with them. This has been reflected in shifts from passive resistance, administrative compliance and under-performance; to increased agency; improved basic school functionality; improved curriculum management; and improved curriculum implementation. The cumulative impact of these improvements has led to consistently improving learner results, with the most significant improvements achieved by the primary schools.

The following is a brief summary of improvements recorded (Kariem et al, April & October 2009; February 2010; March & May 2011; February, March, April and May 2012).

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[3] See Ramphele, 2012: 148
[4] See Rodseth, 1996: 6 - 12
[5] See Constitutional Assembly (1996)
[6] See Department of Education (1996)
[7] See Langhan, Kariem & Velensky (April 2012) and pages 8 – 15 of this paper.
[8] See Kariem, Langhan & Velensky (February 2012)

Increased agency

Prior to implementing the model, almost all of the schools were characterised by a pervasive sense of despondency, de-motivation and helplessness (Clarke and Linder, 2006: 62 in Du Plooy, 2010; Kariem et al, 2009; Langhan, Kariem & Velensky, April, 2012: 10; Xhalisa, 2011: 63). Drawing on Lazarus's argument that 'emancipation is only enabling when it helps people to understand what they can do differently' (1988: 121), the following examples of initiatives undertaken by the previously 'dysfunctional, uncooperative and non-compliant' school management teams at these schools since 2010, suggest a significant increase in their sense of emancipation and agency.

- Inviting District Officials to come and monitor their portfolios

- Liaising with local authorities, District Directors, School Governing Bodies, NGOs, local communities and so on, to successfully:

    - Connect a school to the electricity grid

    - Secure a water connection to a school

    - Arrange busses to transport learners

    - Build three new classrooms to replace mud classrooms

    - Erect a new kitchen area for a school feeding programme

    - Secure funds for school renovations such as:

        ➢ Converting unused space into a reception area for parents

        ➢ Converting an unused classroom into a library

        ➢ Providing secure cupboards for staff in a staff room

        ➢ Employing unemployed ex-learners to repair desks and chairs

Improved basic school functionality

Similarly, continuing improvements have been recorded in the following areas in all of the schools:

- Curriculum leadership and management

- Administration

- Curriculum implementation, including:
    - Lesson planning

    - Use of LTSMs

    - Teaching practices

    - More frequent use of English as LOLT

- Broader range of teaching methods and strategies

- Broader range of learning opportunities and assessment activities

- More learner participation in speaking, reading and writing

Improved learner results

The following trends have also been recorded in 30 of the 35 participating primary school classes between 2008 and 2011:

- Significantly fewer learners scoring zero

- Significantly more learners scoring over 35%

- Significantly improved grade averages

- Worst performing schools achieving the greatest improvements
- Levelling out of disparities between worst and best performing schools

The following Numeracy and Literacy results - achieved by the two worst performing schools on the project in 2008 - illustrate the cumulative impact of the above improvements on learner results in general.
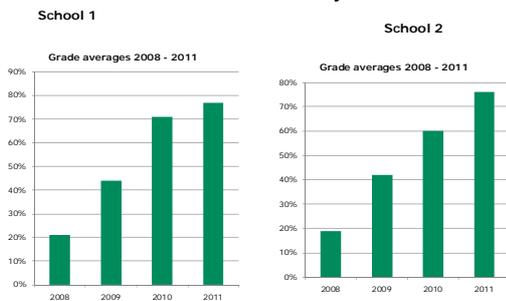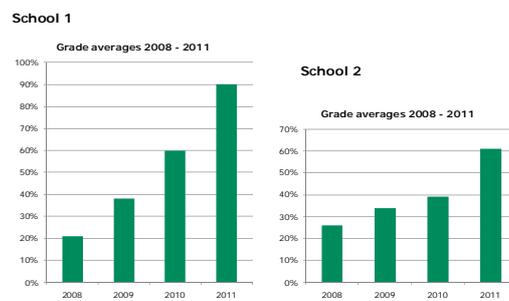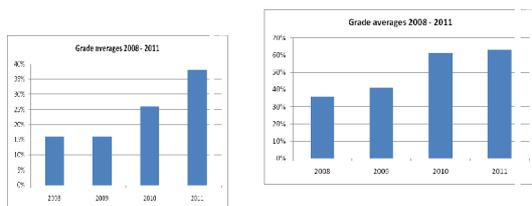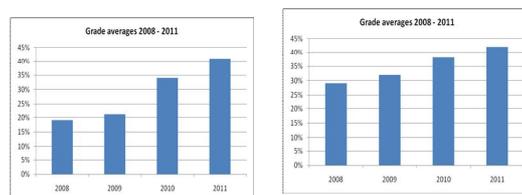
Together, these changes demonstrate the enormous possibility for improvement in our worst performing schools within just three years. This evidence provides real hope that with appropriate strategies, implemented in the right kinds of ways, many of the desired improvements can be achieved in our under-performing school system far more quickly than has been the case since 1994. The rest of this paper focuses on what these strategies are, and the key pre-conditions for their meaningful implementation.

Creating a conducive environment for change

Creating an enabling learning environment applies as much to district and school development activities as to classroom teaching. From our experience, the following four pre-conditions have emerged as necessary for the successful implementation of the strategies discussed in the next section (Rogers, 1972[9]; Johnson, 2003, and Johnson and Johnson, 2003 in Langhan, Kariem Velensky, April, 2012: 15).

Pre-condition 1: The right kind of mediators

The project managers who enabled the successful implementation of the model had the following key qualities.

1) They were external change agents (Zimmerman, 1998; Neisser, 1967 and Duncan, 2010; in Kariem, in progress).

2) They embraced and sought to model:
   - The values, attitudes and practices outlined in the Constitution, the Batho Pele Principles and in all post-1994 curriculum guideline documents

   - A needs-driven approach to capacity building on both professional and personal development levels

3) They took personal responsibility for:
   - Understanding the requirements of the post-1994 curriculum and related policy guideline and roles and responsibilities documents impacting on schools

   - Understanding the day-to-day realities and challenges of under-resourced schools and how these impact on their attitude towards new policies

   - Understanding the dynamics of change management and how to mediate it

This combination of qualities proved to be essential in enabling the creation of:
   - The other three necessary pre-conditions outlined below; and

   - The meaningful implementation of the five strategies discussed in the main body of this paper.

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[9] Rogers (1972) addresses person-centred communication.

Pre-condition 2: Build trusting relationships
Realizing this condition involved three critical elements:

- Getting to know each other: clarifying the values, attitudes and practices of the partnership; non-judgemental observation to properly understand how schools actually did things; ongoing reflection on current versus expected practices and the disparities between them; and identifying the support required to facilitate necessary changes.

- Developing mutually respectful relationships: treating each other as equal partners; negotiating and working towards common goals; negotiating mutually agreed tasks for each school visit, and for the periods between visits; ensuring that the parameters of mutual responsibilities are clear; and agreeing on how to hold each other accountable for responsibilities.

- Building trust: fulfilling commitments to each other; and focussing on the support required to improve current practices rather than on criticising inappropriate practices.

Pre-condition 3: Develop a shared vision for a supportive partnership
Realizing this condition involved negotiating the project's role in supporting each school to understand the requirements of post-1994 curriculum policies, and then to engage meaningfully with implementing them through on-going cycles of collaborative planning, supported implementation, independent implementation and reflection.

It was significant to discover that once this vision has been agreed to – generally by the end of the 6-month baseline study period – the staff at all of these 'apparently resistant schools' were very keen to engage with the new curriculum and related policies. This suggests that their resistance was not to the policies themselves, but rather to the way in which the DBE and its officials had 'delivered' them to the schools.

Pre-condition 4: Negotiate a clear, explicit partnership agreement
Realizing this condition in practice meant ensuring that:

- All relevant stakeholders were involved in the decision to become partners in the initiative. These included: district officials, community leaders and community members, the school governing body, teachers unions, all staff and the learner representative council.

- The partner's respective roles, responsibilities and expectations were made explicit; and that initiatives to be implemented were negotiated and prioritized according to each school's needs.

- The partnership would be reviewed annually, and that either partner was free to withdraw if they were not satisfied with the other's performance.

Once a safe and supportive environment has been created by establishing these pre-conditions, it is possible to begin to implement strategies to mediate the shifts necessary to begin to engage meaningfully with new policy guidelines and associated teacher and learner support materials[10] and

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[10] One dimension of the School Development and Support Model was to ensure that every SMT member and teacher had copies of the relevant new policy guideline documents, and that every teacher and every learner had all of the teaching and learning support materials required (Kariem & Langhan October, 2009)

their implementation requirements. The following section briefly reviews these strategies and provides examples of them in practice.

Five strategies to mediate the required paradigm shift

According to Moolla (2011:310) 'the reason why policy guidelines that appear to provide all the answers to the challenges faced by practitioners are not being successfully implemented, is because they only go as far as conceptual framing, but do not engage with the practical implications thereof.'

So, while it may be assumed that the in-service training of curriculum officials and teachers embodies the theories of learning that inform the curriculum and model the practices they imply, this is not generally the case. Similarly, complementary theories of change and the practices they imply are not generally applied or modelled in the training of circuit managers and school management teams (Kariem, Langhan and Velensky, August 2012: 5, 9 & 10 - 11). These educational policy/practice gaps mirror the 'large gaps' between 'the values of our national constitution' and practice in the 'political, economic and institutional dimensions' of post-1994 South Africa (Ramphele, 2012: 2 – 11).

Not surprisingly, national and provincial in-service curriculum training workshops confirm that most education officials have not yet been enabled to make the necessary shift from pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices, to those enshrined in the national constitution (Constitutional Assembly, 1996), and reflected in all post-1994 education policy guideline documents. So for example, it is not uncommon to note 'paradigm-clashing' training practices such as once-off, centralized, prescriptive crash courses on outcomes-based curriculum requirements via authoritarian, fundamental pedagogics-style lectures (Kariem, Langhan & Velensky, August 2012, 9 & 11).

As a consequence, few 'educators'[11] have had meaningful personal experiences of the values, attitudes or practices embodied in post-1994 policies. This insight goes some way towards explaining why most educators have not yet been able to visualize or realize the intended new district support, school management and classroom practices outlined in policy guidelines (Du Plooy,2010; Kariem and Langhan, April & October 2009; Langhan, Kariem & Velensky, April 2012: 21; Ralphs, 2009; Xhalisa, 2011). It also explains why most continue to employ what Fleisch (2011) refers to as 'residual practices'.

This understanding justifies the need to implement strategies intended to mediate the sort of paradigm shift that results in 'a change from one way of thinking to another' (Kuhn, 1970: 10) that can lead to changes in the 'socially constituted dispositions' that inform the 'ways of being' and 'habitual acts' (Du Plooy, 2010: 13 - 18) of officials and teachers who are still functioning in ways consistent with pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices. According to Zimmerman, 1998; Neisser, 1967 and Duncan, 2010 (in Kariem, in progress: 8) this kind of paradigm shift is normally 'driven by external agents of change' who are able to implement strategies that model and provide successful experiences of the intended/target practices.

The five inter-dependent strategies outlined below have proven, through four years of implementation, to be successful in achieving the desired shifts.

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[11] For the purposes of this paper, this refers to officials, school management teams and teachers.

NOTES:
1) Although the theories informing strategies 1 – 3 apply to the learning of children, our experience has demonstrated that it is essential that they are modelled for, and experienced by adult teachers who are unfamiliar with the teaching and learning experiences they are expected to provide for their learners (Kariem and Langhan, October 2009; Langhan, Kariem and Velensky, April 2012).

2) While many of the references cited in this paper might be considered to be 'dated', we have cited them deliberately because:

   - They informed the development of post-1994 education policies and still underpin the current CAPS version of the curriculum.
   - Since they express intentions that have still not been embraced or implemented by the majority of officials and teachers in the South African education system, they remain current and yet unfulfilled intentions.

Strategy 1: Mediate experiential learning processes

For optimal learning, it is helpful to mediate experiential learning processes that guide learners through successive zones of proximal development (Piaget, 1969 & 1977 and Vygotsky, 1978 & 1986 in Rodseth, 1996: 8 - 9). This means providing learning experiences that enable learners to develop from assisted learning to independent learning through successive cycles of:

- Engaging new learning with assistance
- Internalising new understandings through guided reflection
- Producing evidence of understanding through structured activities
- Reflecting on strategies to improve future efforts
- Performing tasks independently

The strategy in practice

This strategy applies equally to establishing understandings of new ideas as it does to establishing new practices.

In practice, it means modelling the required practices through hands-on, practical training (as opposed to lectures) and school-based mentoring that focuses on:

- Clarifying roles, responsibilities and policy expectations

- Training and coaching in how to implement these practically through explanation, conversation, demonstration, role play and reflection

- Guided experiences of successful implementation

- Negotiated tasks for independent implementation between school visits

- Supportive monitoring, reflection, feedback and mentoring of independently implemented tasks[12]

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[12] For details about the components of the School Development and Support Model, what they target, and how they addressed them, see Kariem et al, 2009.

Strategy 2: Teach conceptual understanding

The schema theory of learning (Piaget, 1977; & Ausubel, 1978, in Rodseth, 1996: 28 – 29), proposes that learners approach new knowledge within the framework of existing schemata or networks of knowledge and skills. In encountering new knowledge, they assimilate and accommodate new knowledge, thus altering and elaborating existing schemata. Applying this theory in a teaching and learning process involves:

1) Activating the learners' existing network of background knowledge

2) Correcting this if necessary

3) Preparing the learner to assimilate and accommodate new knowledge by:

    - Using concrete experience to establish basic concepts

    - Letting learners discuss and write about the concepts to construct better understanding

    - Question in ways that anticipate new knowledge

    - Facilitate the assimilation of new knowledge through explanation, modelling and mediation

    - Assist learners to produce evidence new knowledge or skills

In this process it is important to 'establish the nature and essential properties of unknown concepts in accessible terms' (Langhan, 1996: 32 – 36). This implies a process approach to teaching and learning that incorporates:
    - A reduction in the number of new concepts introduced in a given learning period

    - A realistic understanding of a learners existing knowledge

    - Definite strategies for relating new concepts to existing knowledge

    - A clear understanding of the new concepts to be introduced

    - A clear focus on the new concepts being introduced

    - Awareness of hidden levels of abstraction that need to be unpacked

    - A commitment to de-mystifying the abstractions by unpacking necessary layers of conceptual meaning

The strategy in practice:

This strategy applies to the teaching of new concepts that relate to and build on existing knowledge that is not sensitive in nature, contested, or that requires a possible paradigm shift.

As for strategy 1, it requires the modelling and mediation of experiences of the desired practices:
    - Demonstration lessons, role play, team teaching and guided first experiences are good ways to achieve this.

- Next steps should include cycles of independent implementation followed by classroom monitoring and supportive reflection.

Strategy 3: Teach for conceptual change

At a deeper level, to actually shift learners through zones of proximal development towards new conceptual understandings, mediation should include an element of conceptual conflict. In this regard Piaget's notions of 'disequilibration' and 'accommodation' are useful for understanding how to approach teaching for conceptual change (Kuhn, 1970; Hewson, 1992 in Velensky 2011):

Disequilibration involves:
- First, uncovering learners' preconceptions about a particular topic or phenomenon

- Then exposing them to alternative conceptions that create the possibility to become dissatisfied with their current conceptions

- Then creating conceptual conflict about their preconceptions that lead to the possibility of their accepting an alternative notion as intelligible, plausible, and fruitful

Accommodation involves:
- Mediating conceptual restructuring that results in the possibility of a changed conceptual framework

The strategy in practice:

This adaptation of strategy 2 is applicable when engaging with sensitive issues that require a paradigm shift and may cause participants to feel vulnerable or threatened such as:

- Shifting from teacher dominated to more participatory teaching styles

- Shifting from the relative safety of mindless transmission and memorization methods, to the more challenging and potentially 'exposing' space of teaching for conceptual understanding

Critical for this strategy is a strong emphasis on opportunities for discussion during which participants feel safe in sharing their viewpoints as they consider and evaluate other perspectives that may conflict with their own (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999; Scott, Asoko, & Driver, 1991 in Velensky, 2011).

Strategy 4: Mediate changes to mental maps

Kariem (in progress) explores a related educational change theory that applies strategies 2 and 3 to mediating organisational change at the level of leadership and management. In this case, the existing preconceptions of school management teams are referred to as mental maps. The aim is to mediate changes in the mental maps of the members of an organisation, in order to enable changes in organisational behaviour. Drawing on Zimmerman, 1998; Neisser, 1967 and Duncan, 2010, Kariem (in progress) proposes three stages of change:

First-order change
When an external agent enables the members of an organisation to recognise and acknowledge that current ways of thinking about and doing things may not serve the best interests of the organisation.

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Second-order change
This is the facilitation of reflexive processes that enable an organisation to consider more appropriate ways of doing things. As for teaching for conceptual change, this usually involves introducing a state of cognitive dissonance (conceptual conflict) that results in the modification of an existing mental map.

Third-order change
This involves enabling an organisation to re-align its practices with the modified mental map, so that new ways of thinking and doing begin to operate for the benefit of everyone in the organisation.

The strategy in practice:
This strategy (very similar to teaching strategies 2 and 3 above combined) is applied at the level of school leadership and management to effect organisational change.

As for strategy 3, it is also applicable when engaging with sensitive issues that require a paradigm shift. For example:
-   Shifting from pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices towards those embodied in post-1994 policies

-   Shifting from a centralized, authoritarian school leadership style to a more decentralized, democratic and participatory style

Strategy 5: Foster empowerment to develop agency
Fay (1987 in Lazarus, 1988: 122) confirms the notion of 'individuals as embodied, traditional, historical and embedded, and that there is a need to recognise the hold of ideology on human agency'. Drawing on critical social science[13], Lazarus (1988: 121) proposes that 'emancipation is only enabling when it helps people to understand how they are currently captured (deconstruction) ... and what they can do differently (reconstruction)'.

Deconstruction, Lazarus goes on to propose, can be achieved through engaging people in self-reflective critique of the 'distorted knowledge which conceals the interests of a dominant class in society' (Cochrane, 1987) – such as the disempowering effects of apartheid education; and that 'masks contradictions which are unreflectively accepted by society members' (Grundy, 1987) – such as districts and schools that continue to unquestioningly perpetuate pre-1994 values, attitudes and beliefs in 2012.

Similarly, the reconstruction necessary for the emancipation and empowerment that lead to increased agency can be facilitated by exposure to, and reflection on, 'the positive and enabling aspects of an alternative ideology' (Fay, 175 & 1987; Wexler, 1987; in Lazarus, 1988, 121). In this case, post-1994 values, attitudes and practices embodied in the Constitution, the Batho Pele Principles and the new curriculum.

This strategy applies to addressing the complex combination of issues that are at the heart of undermining both personal and organizational development. As proposed by Du Plooy, 2010 (in Langhan, Kariem & Velensky, April, 2012: 21) these are:

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[13] Critical social science explores the ideological forms which maintain social systems.

- Intrapersonal or incorporated structures such as existing mental models and associated ways of being such as poor self-esteem, helplessness, moral minimising, moral diffusion, lack of agency and low effort syndrome on the one hand; and

- Systemic or objective structures that may be oppressive in nature, such as: prevailing socio-economic conditions, the hierarchical structures and authoritarian procedures in the education system, and the restricted curriculum delivered by teachers.

The strategy in practice

In practice, deconstruction involves, for example:

- Reflecting on existing practices and what they reflect about the school and its expectations and aspirations

- Imagining what kind of future the school actually wants for itself and its learners

- Reflecting on how current values, attitudes and practices contribute towards this imagined future

- Reflecting on how post-1994 policies offer a future very similar to the one imagined by most schools

Reconstruction for emancipation requires, for example:

- The provision of LTSMs and supportive training and coaching that models and encourages the desired values, attitudes and practices

- Guided experiences of using/putting them into practice

- Affirmation of successful attempts to use/implement them

- Acknowledging and celebrating successes achieved

- Repeated experiences of success

These five interdependent strategies form the core of the school development and support model's approach to attempting to mediate the paradigm shift required for the 'educational emancipation' of schools still captured in pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices.

Conclusions

The impact of the model briefly described on pages 5 – 8 of this paper, provides strong evidence to suggest that this sort of approach to school development and support does address both intrapersonal and systemic structures in ways that result in the empowerment of individual teachers and their school management teams, and the improvement of learner results in a relatively short period of time.

However, to ensure the sustainability of these improvements, and to take them to scale in districts, it will be necessary for provinces and their districts to embrace and implement this kind of model themselves.

Recommendations

In order to realize the national vision of all schools meaningfully and successfully implementing post-1994 education policies, the DBE and its Provincial Departments need to address the embedded pre-1994 values, attitudes and practices that prevail at all levels of the education system. It can do this by:

- Mediating the paradigm shift and capacity building required to equip education officials to emancipate schools in similar ways

- Ensure that all school-visiting officials are required to:

  A) Adopt supportive rather than judgmental attitudes

  B) Enable schools to implement policy guidelines practically before monitoring their compliance with them

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