

Success can be a matter of principal

In other countries the focus is on the teachers and their work ethic, not the delivery of textbooks.

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Tyler Smalls and Sekou Cisse are grade 3 pupils at Harlem Success Academy, a charter school in New York City. (Hondros/Getty Images/AFP and AP)

In June, a group of teachers from the South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition partnered with an international organisation called EdVillage to visit schools in socioeconomically deprived sections of Newark, New Jersey, in the United States. Our task was to develop a peer review instrument to aid our collaboration on starting and supporting high-quality schools for poor children.

Whether it is a drive to maintain one's global competitiveness or a desire to catch up, there is an ongoing international move to modernise national education systems. Unsurprisingly, many of these initiatives do not focus on the challenges of getting textbooks to the right places at the right time; they are prioritising the development of far more effective agents of innovation —

the teacher.

Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University in the US, spoke strongly in a radio interview earlier this year about the positive correlation between quality learning for students and educational policies that foster innovative pre-service and in-service teacher development. She criticised the narrow view of some commentators, who "have this idea that if we just give them the textbooks to follow and the test to give and the procedures" to pursue, students "will just magically get taught adequately, without realising that teaching, when it's good teaching", brings radically better results.

How can we get the best trained, most energetic and competent teachers working in the neediest South African contexts? Given our endemic failure to improve the lot of our poorest children, should we resign ourselves to the permanence of a tragic and immutable achievement gap?

Redesigning schools for disadvantaged communities is, to my knowledge, a topic only recently entering the South African discourse. Perhaps the pain of our own separate pasts has made the proposal of different types of schools for different socioeconomic groups seem like an implausible option. Some will wince. However, the intract-

able and regressive challenges facing our most marginalised communities require brave inventions.

Don't reinvent the wheel

Like so many other examples of the social transformation that follows a political transition, we need not reinvent the wheel. The charter school movement in the US sits at the forefront of a raft of educational reforms specifically designed to close the achievement gap between middle-class and poorer communities.

The schools we visited in June were charter schools. They are publicly funded institutions that have signed a contract (charter) with their equivalent of South Africa's department of basic education and are held accountable for improving student achievement.

But they are free to innovate across a number of operational issues. They may offer longer school days, provide more time for core subjects or even specialise in terms of high-priority national development goals such as "Stem" education (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Critically, they have lots of autonomy on the employment of teachers.

Similarly, a number of publicly funded, sensibly regulated, yet largely autonomous academies have been established in Britain in rough working-class neighbourhoods. These charter-like schools are bringing tangible schooling gains.

These schools typically attract bright, self-reflective and high-impact young graduates through nationally motivated programmes such as Teach for America or Teach First. Teacher selection

is highly competitive and the schools often accept only one out of every 10 applicants for their two-year programme.

These young role models usually have a strong university degree but no formal study of teaching or education. Instead, they are trained through a combination of intensive six-week, pre-service holiday teacher-training sessions, a sustained on-the-job apprenticeship, collaborative lesson planning with instructional coaches who require an astonishing anticipation of the micro moves of learning alongside detailed lesson plans, endless videoing of actual teaching and a strong commitment to sharing best practices through a network of "teaching schools" that operate on the model of teaching hospitals.

The leadership of these schools is another striking feature. The North Star charter school network in and around Newark incorporates 13 schools, each relatively small, usually between 300 and 400 students, in either a primary, middle school or high school structure. There is a chief operating officer for the group who is a non-teacher, and a number of other back-office systems thinkers, data crunchers and performance enhancers who take care of every conceivable logistical detail outside of instructional delivery.

Walk-throughs and coaching conversations

The principal plays the leading role in continually assessing the quality of teaching and learning in the school with regular walk-throughs and coaching conversations with every teacher. Principals work with a fair set of guidelines and are mandated to deal with underperforming teachers.

Everyone, including the principal, signs a voluntary annual contract. The best guarantor of job security for individual teachers is their performance every day in front of their class and how successful they are in closing the achievement gap. Principals are not deployed based on political credentials or perceived seniority. Unusually, they are chosen for their proven effectiveness in front of children and move to this role by their early 30s.

The most recent round of South African curriculum review and retraining through the new curriculum, Caps, certainly has its place. The teachers who are not confident about their content knowledge will no doubt benefit from accurately published textbooks that hold to an objective standard for each age and subject.

However, I believe we need a young cohort of social entrepreneurs who will give their time to teach in innovative school start-ups. Even if they opt not to pursue a long-term teaching career, the fact that young people across the world are giving a chunk of their early professional lives to grand projects for national development speaks volumes about their social conscience. A social movement of this scale creates advocates for education reform when these Teach First ambassadors move into other areas of employment across a wide range of secondary professions.

When I spoke with Julie Jackson, founding principal of North Star Elementary in Vailsburg, New Jersey, she described how the groundswell of educational reform in the most impoverished and least-functional communities of the US was her generation's contribution towards a second transition after the civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

Who holds the answers

She believes that, with sufficient effort, we too can mobilise a belief among entrepreneurial South African youth that they hold the answers to our educational ills. Better this than incite anger and contempt for the systemic non-delivery of quality education.

Together we must design schools that can educate substantial numbers of our youth out of poverty. Significant enabling legislation would ease the process and create a scale of sustainable public-private school partnerships that could substantially shift the educational landscape among the neediest sections of South Africa. Local private sector interests could leverage their corporate social investments by identifying educational entrepreneurs or networks, such as the Leap maths and science schools, with a proven ability to close the achievement gap. Provincial education department initiatives such as the Westerford High School start-up of Claremont High in the Western Cape are bold, promising and scaleable examples.

Working with our existing teachers is possible, but the inertia of the average mindset suggests our uphill struggle for the past 18 years is unlikely to end if we apply curriculum-heavy reform inputs. Instead, we should anticipate laying the foundation and supporting the energy and radical engineering that comes from entrepreneurial teachers entering the profession en masse, and enabling them to move into school start-ups that are designed to close the achievement gap in a manner that is relevant to our needier contexts. We may also wish to borrow lessons and expertise from the US charter schools and British academies, which are clearly ahead of the curve on these educational innovations.

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