

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Creating Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

15 March 2018



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Principals Upfront Dialogue Series



A series of public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

Hosted by the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, Wits School of Governance, Catholic Institute of Education, Sasol Inzalo Foundation and BRIDGE

Principals Upfront is a platform where school leaders come together to share working practice and information about different facets of school leadership. Dialogue 9, which focussed on ways of creating safe and supportive school environments, was held on 15 March 2018 at the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance. This dialogue overview highlights the key themes and issues discussed, giving readers a taste of the perspectives and concerns of the keynote speaker, the panellists and the audience.



“School violence inhibits the ability of schools to deliver quality education ... and the incidence of violence seems to have escalated in recent years. Our world is changing, and schools are facing a confusing time. How do we ensure that learners grow up to be responsible adults in the future? The message we are hearing is that we need to respond, rather than react, to our children.”

Programme Director: Mduzuzi Qwabe, Catholic Institute of Education

Keynote Speaker

Mr Welcome Witbooi is a life skills programme specialist, motivational speaker and registered recovery coach who works with at-risk youth in programmes focussed on assisting youth caught up in gangsterism, substance abuse and addiction.

As a youth struggling with his identity, he made life-changing choices which soon saw him on the wrong side of the law. After a period of incarceration he turned his life around by recognising the value of education as a means to realising human potential.

Mr Witbooi has been involved with a number of influential organisations and is the founder of youth and community development NPO the Heart & Soul Foundation.



Welcome Witbooi drew several striking parallels between his early life and prison experiences, and the life and school experience of children in disadvantaged communities. He then used these parallels to illuminate why children engage in destructive behaviours and to show how schools and teachers can help their learners make positive life choices.

A key theme was the power of the messages that adults give to children. The words that educators and parents use can build or destroy. When teachers call children 'rubbish' or fathers say 'you will never amount to anything', children feel worthless – and become vulnerable to being drawn into risky and damaging behaviour in their search for ways to compensate. Conversely, words of motivation and approval from a primary school teacher can resonate well into one's adult years.

Unspoken messages are equally powerful. Much of the behaviour that is modelled for children in disadvantaged environments is destructive and carries the risk of violence. The lack of positive role models is a major challenge.

Children see gangsters projecting an appearance of status and material success, and want to be like them. If children in these circumstances feel insecure, 'small' or worthless, they could easily turn to gangs for the sense of belonging they offer.

Another major theme was the importance of really listening to children. Children do not feel heard, and are frustrated and discouraged by this. Although as adults we believe we have given our children a voice, for example, to tell us how they feel or to say they are being bullied, it is clear that we are not really listening to them. Too often parents simply hand responsibility for their children to the school, not accepting that a parent's role in a child's life is continuous. Principals and teachers are also under pressure and are often not equipped to deal with the issues.

Bullying is the chief form of violence in schools. Bullying happens both inside and outside the classroom and through social media – and in various combinations: learner-to-learner, teacher-to-learner, and learner-to-teacher. It has become so widespread and frequent that one can now speak of 'a culture of bullying'. Despite the harm bullying causes, from Mr Witbooi's perspective what is most shocking about this culture is the lack of compassion shown by those who witness acts of bullying. "We have to ask ourselves – how did it all go so wrong?"

Even when there is no deliberate intention to cause harm, learners might not experience their school environment as safe. To illustrate this, Mr Witbooi's compared his feelings of fear on entering a prison cell (at the age of 17) with those of a young child entering a crowded classroom. In this situation children who are anxious or fearful will 'put up walls' to defend themselves. It is impossible to reach a child in this condition, and therefore impossible for real learning to take place.

Mr Witbooi believed that it was essential for teachers, learners, parents and community leaders to work together to understand the issues and find workable solutions.

In his view, Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) had great potential to positively influence school environments. Schools that properly supported RCLs and had given learners the responsibilities of leadership, rather than the policing role of prefects, had seen benefits from these young leaders' engagements with other learners.

Adults would have to be more open to exploring ideas and areas that might be uncomfortable. Today's young people had a will of their own, and saw the world differently. It was crucial, when interacting with children, to understand the child's position (to 'meet a child where that child is at').

School leaders and teachers needed to be empowered to deal with issues of violence and to give learners the types of support that would enable them to feel secure at school. An essential element of this would be helping learners believe that their disadvantaged backgrounds need not determine their future achievements.

These themes and ideas were picked up and developed by the panellists, from their different perspectives.

Input from the Panellists

Panellists were asked to respond to the following questions, in terms of their own experience and knowledge:

- What forms of violence does your school community experience? What are the causes of this violence?
- What are the challenges, and what steps can school leaders take to create a safer environment?
- What is the school's role in respect of substance abuse and addiction? How can schools deal with the associated social ills?
- What advice would you give to school leaders working to reduce the level of violence in their schools?

ENCHOCOYENI PRIMARY SCHOOL

Sindiswa Maphoso, the principal of Enchocoyeni Primary school in Thokoza, Ekurhuleni, shared several valuable insights and approaches to the problem of school violence. Although one might expect a primary school to be spared severe forms of violence, the issues previously only seen in high schools were now appearing in primary schools.

Bullying is the chief form of violence. The environment in which the school is situated plays a major role. "Enchocoyeni was established in 1984 in an area that had been a battle field. Everybody who was part of that community was damaged by the constant struggle and extreme violence that occurred. Parents were killed in front of their children, and those who were children then have become the parents of our learners. Every trauma that was not attended to then is now playing back. Parents are unable to take care of their children because of what happened to them at that time."



Panellist Sindiswa Maphoso,
Principal: Enchocoyeni
Primary School

"At Enchocoyeni we consciously reduce any violence in teacher - learner interactions: for example, by not shouting. We have found this to be very effective. It doesn't help to shout."

Additional challenges

- School leaders, teachers, parents and community leaders are not sufficiently aware of what children are doing and being exposed to.
- Schools follow an agenda determined by the ATPs and curriculum schedules. Teachers are under pressure to focus on these instead of attending to learners' emotional needs.
- Many homes are without 'present' parents. While parents may be there physically, they are absent in terms of real parenting.
- Informal settlements do not have recreational facilities where learners can continue doing something positive with their lives after school closes for the day.

Helpful approaches

Start by acknowledging the issues and problems. Discuss them with the SMT, SGB, teachers and leaders in the community, and mediate them to the learners. "We have to be transparent about problems ... to face issues head on ... and work together to find solutions."

Stay alert, be attentive to new developments, and regularly review policies and codes of conduct. Put up signage so that rules are visible to all, and make sure that they are followed. "Now that we are seeing higher levels of violence in primary schools, it has become a serious offence for learners even to carry a pair of scissors!"

Place the school inside the community by letting community leaders know who you are and what you are about.

Teachers are not trained to deal with, or even to notice, the signs of dangerous behaviours. Recognise your limitations and open your school up to development by inviting organisations that can help you to empower yourselves. For example, Enchocoyeni has:

- established a beneficial relationship with AMCARE (a health and social development NGO). AMCARE has an office at the school and assists in several ways, for example, by empowering teachers to notice and respond to changes that signal behaviours not expected of young learners.
- infused SANCA's services into its Life Orientation programme. This has proved valuable as many learners speak more freely to people who are not in authority. SANCA also holds empowerment sessions for parents, and conducts drug searches and testing if problems are suspected.

CITY OF JOHANNESBURG EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Chris Viviets is the Emergency Management Services (EMS) Schools Interventions Coordinator for the City of Johannesburg.

The EMS is looking for ways to become more relevant to reducing violence in schools. Currently it provides children with community safety training which including basic first aid and firefighting courses. Besides building self-esteem, this training ensures that children aren't helpless in emergency situations. These interactions also help the EMS to better understand each area's issues.

EMS is keen to learn from communities and schools what their specific needs are and what kinds of assistance would be appropriate, so that imposed solutions can be avoided.



Panellist Chris Viviets, Coordinator:
City of Johannesburg, EMS Schools
Interventions

“When there are problems, it is not just up to the authorities ...we have to involve learners in coming up with plans and being part of the solution.”

DARLEEN VAN TONDER



Panellist Darleen van Tonder,
Founder and Director: Kutitiva
Foundation

Darleen van Tonder has worked extensively across cultural and socio-economic landscapes to develop communities and help individuals to realise their potential. Darleen is the founder and director of the Kutitiva Foundation, an NPO that helps underprivileged youth discover their strengths and talents, and shows them how to use this understanding for personal growth and future development.

Darleen's input focussed on what it means to provide physiologically and emotionally safe spaces for learning, and why this is important.

Children in disadvantaged communities experience high levels of stress on an ongoing basis, the effects of which spill over into the school environment. Under stress certain parts of the brain shut down, and the child reacts in 'flight or fight' mode. Very little real learning can take place in these conditions. Overcrowding is a major cause of stress and challenge to creating safe, secure learning environments. Learners 'get lost' in big classes – they feel insecure and have only limited contact with their teachers.

Teachers feel under pressure as they are not equipped with strategies to cope in these difficult circumstances. Empowering teachers to understand different personality types and learning styles and to use methods that develop social-emotional learning would help them to create more supportive environments. Teachers also need to know how to exert discipline in ways that are not abusive or violent. “Children can push your buttons, but adults have to be in control, in order to diffuse the violence.”

“Very often we look at the negatives, but if we want our schools to be safe environments for learning, we need to focus on children's strengths and talents rather than their weaknesses. If children feel small and useless, they are at much greater risk of becoming involved in gangsterism and other negative behaviours.”

WARREN HICKENBOTHAM



Panellist Warren
Hickenbotham

Warren Hickenbotham spoke about the possibilities for using app-based reporting systems to control bullying. While the internet has made bullying even easier in the form of cyber bullying, technology can also be harnessed to create anti-bullying tools that can help schools to deal with the issues.

These app-based reporting systems make it possible to report incidents anonymously and provide the help needed. In tools where the app links to a case management system, data collected over time enables schools to develop and put effective strategies in place.

App-based reporting systems help to overcome one of the key challenges in preventing bullying, which is that children fear further victimisation if they report incidents. These apps give a voice, not only to victims of bullying, but also to other learners, educators and parents who witness bullying.

Some key approaches to reducing violence:

- Involve educators, parents, the community – and especially, learners – in working together to unpack the issues and find workable solutions.
- Be transparent about problems, acknowledge the school's limitations in terms of dealing with them, and seek out and establish connections with organisations and individuals who can help.
- Reduce the level of violence in all teacher-learner interactions – avoid shouting, and implement a restorative system of discipline.
- Be alert to new developments and regularly review policies and codes of conduct. Make sure that school rules are visible to all, and that they are followed.
- Train and empower teachers to better understand their learners' emotional needs, and to be more attentive and responsive toward these needs.
- Find ways for the school to develop greater resilience to what is happening around it.
- Focus on learners' strengths and talents rather than their weaknesses, and help them believe that their disadvantaged social circumstances do not have to determine their futures.
- Engage with parents to develop greater consistency across school and home environments in terms of behaviour and expectations.
- Help learners to withstand people who seek to exploit them by giving them skills to deal with obstacles and problems.
- Recovery coaching is proving effective in dealing with substance abuse and addiction.
- Taking children out of their usual environment and giving them the experience of different places and activities brings a new dimension to their lives that can help to counter their negative circumstances.

Questions, Comments and Panel Responses

Members of the audience formed buzz groups to consider questions to pose to the panel.

Question/Comment	Response
<p><i>How can schools use Life Orientation periods to help learners deal with the socio-economic problems they face?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When teachers are not equipped to deal with a topic, schools should invite organisations with relevant expertise to provide the needed services. • Welcome Witbooi's team would follow the curriculum while delving more deeply into the topic and engaging learners more closely. • 'Circles of sharing' where learners interact with each other would also be effective. • It is important to help learners discover their own strengths and talents, and how to use these to live their lives with purpose.
<p><i>How can principals change mindsets and bring the two different groupings of home and school together so that they work together in the interests of the learners?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One would first need to work with each group separately to gain an understanding of the issues from that group's perspective, and then bring the two groups together. • The challenge would be to reconcile the different expectations and attitudes of blame regarding responsibility for the child. • The process of arriving at a single mindset would therefore need to involve the community at large, teachers, parents and learners.
<p><i>The issue of race worsens school environments in disadvantaged areas. There is animosity towards the school, and bullying and gangsterism run on racial lines. Working conditions are very difficult and teacher morale is low. What can schools in this situation do?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome Witbooi would like to visit the school. He would break the ice with his own story, told from an authentic point of view, because it is about the kinds of characters that these learners want to become. • He would then break the reality to them, talking about the choices and consequences. He would engage with the learners, meeting them 'where they are at'. • He would then meet with their families, visiting their homes in order to really understand what they are facing. • Based on this he would give the parents tools for dealing with the issues and broaden the context to make it a community responsibility, while keeping the focus on helping the children.
<p><i>What alternative ways of disciplining are there that are not simply forms of punishment, but that also help the child and benefit society?</i></p> <p><i>Corporal punishment was not replaced with an effective system. This allowed the issue of discipline to spiral out of control. Although there are policies and structures in place, they do not lead to real end results – we keep on 'recycling' the same problems until we eventually reach the last resort of expulsion. This solves the school's problem but it does not solve the issue for society – or for the child. We need alternatives that keep learners in school and ensure they become a benefit to society.</i></p>	
<p><i>My main concern is that so much responsibility is shifted onto the school – but the school is basically dealing with the symptoms. Especially in township and rural schools, parents are often absent and children are brought up by grandparents who don't understand how to deal with the issues.</i></p>	

CONCLUSION

Dr Anusha Naidu of MGSLG thanked the speaker, panellists, audience and the partners in the Principals Upfront collaboration for their contributions, and shared these reflections:

The audience's comments clearly underline the frustration many principals experience at being overrun by policies and demands that are difficult to implement in the face of societal issues over which they have no control.

- In this context, schools that succeed in developing resilience to what happens around them have shown that it is possible to provide a safe haven or safety net for their learners. "We can't solve all society's problems, but we can make our schools into places where learners can feel safe in a broken society." [If you would like to read more on building resilient schools, click [here](#).]
- Don't despair – start with small things (such as keeping the toilets clean), and build toward creating a culture of caring
- Reach out to experts – seek out and establish connections with organisations and individuals who are able to help.



Dr Anusha Naidu: Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance

Principals Upfront welcomes your input for planning future seminars. If you have any topic requests or suggestions, please send these to Patience Voller at patience@bridge.org.za



For more information on the **Principals Upfront Dialogue Series**, contact Patience Voller at Patience@BRIDGE.org.za



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