

Working together will help beat crisis in schools

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SOUTH Africans are numbed to headlines about the crisis in education. At the recent African Education Week, Dr Mamphele Ramphela repeated oft-voiced concerns that the government is mismanaging the education system and failing SA's youth — which the government has, also somewhat on cue, hotly denied.

It's a familiar refrain that risks taking our focus away from what is important. A crisis in education is not a good thing. It has real economic and human costs. A 2012 report by the World Literacy Foundation, for example, estimated that illiteracy costs the UK 3.75% of its gross domestic product each year. Considering that last year's Annual National Assessments of grades 2 to 10 in SA revealed an average literacy and numeracy level of 30%, this does not bode well.

The education sector is largely failing to find solutions that work. So where to from here? There are many things those working within the education sector can be doing. And it involves taking a step beyond pointing fingers towards greater collaboration — across all sectors.

Collaboration is a word that is thrown around a lot. Many talk about it, but few manage to do it successfully and meaningfully. The problem is that the entire system of western democracy is premised on a model of competition and rugged individualism that secretly thinks collaboration is for sissies. Even within the NGO sector we compete for scarce funding. We become arrogant, convinced that we see solutions where others don't and worse, disregard the solutions of others because we do not have the wisdom or humility to appreciate them. Meantime, the crisis deepens around us. And as funding around the world dries up and economies shrivel under the weight of the slow global recovery, competing for limited resources does not make sense.

The task — educating the youth — is overwhelmingly large and we need to work together to address it. We urgently need to find new structures that enable effective collaboration. The old ways have failed us. Taking steps towards real collaboration involves building social capital and trust, understanding the obstacles to collaboration (fear, insecurity, lack of effective structures and so on) and lowering these barriers so people are freed to work together towards a common goal.

It is easier said than done. Fortunately, the world of business provides some pointers. Writing in *Harvard Business Review*, Gary Pisano and Roberto Verganti say, "In an era when great ideas can sprout from any corner of the world and IT has dramatically reduced the cost of accessing them, it's now conventional wisdom that virtually no company should innovate on its own." The key point here is that collaboration leads to innovation and innovation is what is needed to get ourselves out of the crisis.

There are plenty of examples where collaboration among citizens, civil society, business and government has delivered results that far surpass what could have been achieved from working alone. Wikipedia is perhaps one of the best.

In the domestic education landscape, the Bridge initiative and more recently the Extraordinary Schools Coalition are taking crucial first steps towards greater collaboration. The newly launched Centre for Education Innovations is hoping to take this further and coalesce these "drops in the ocean" into a current of new energy. The centre is a global initiative that will showcase nonstate innovations in education (programmes implemented by NGOs, social enterprises, government partnerships and private companies) across the developing world, hoping to understand, quantify and scale up effective models already working.

In the words of Joy Olivier, founder of the highly innovative IkamvaYouth programme, which through extensive collaboration helps countless young South Africans beat the statistics and achieve a matric pass: "Collaboration brings real learning and this can be frustrating and uncomfortable, but that is where innovation happens. We may not have it all together, but together we have it all."

The narrative about education in SA is negative — filled with "shock statistics" and "crises" and "fault". Collaboration offers us an opportunity to turn this around. If all sectors worked together we could achieve extraordinary things. Rather than just fixing education we have the opportunity to reimagine it.

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