

Dialogue 15: Schools as places of safety and hope

Virtual meeting held on 14 October 2020

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01 Setting the Scene

Violence and abuse are prevalent in many school environments. This leads to feelings of anxiety and fear, which adversely affect both teaching and learning –inhibiting the quality of educational experiences and hampering learners’ academic, emotional and psycho-social development.

Covid-19 has heightened the levels of anxiety in schools. Principals carry a particular burden at this time, as schools are under pressure to recover lost teaching and learning time and to carry out assessments. The additional stress Covid-19 is placing on school communities is likely to exacerbate existing problems.

So how do we turn our schools into places of peace and fairness? How do we bring hope? How do we make schools safe places where all learners and teachers thrive?

To help answer these questions, the dialogue explored aspects of school safety and strategies to develop a caring and peaceful climate based on respectful relationships and restorative practices. The programme included:

- The *National School Safety Framework*
- Managing a school safety committee
- Child safeguarding – the Catholic Institute of Education’s *Building Peaceful Schools* programme
- Change conversations – the role of data-driven climate surveys in developing safer school environments

This overview highlights key themes and issues discussed.

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

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

Principals Upfront gives principals a platform to share working practice and information about different facets of school leadership. The dialogues also enable those involved in supporting school leadership to develop a deeper understanding of the roles that principals play.

02 Jamboard Activity

Participants were invited to check-in with a word or phrase expressing their idea of a safe school:



03 Presentations

School safety and the National School Safety Framework – Anne Baker, Deputy Director responsible for operations, policy and advocacy at the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE)

Anne began with a brief introduction to the concept of school safety. She noted that schools have been greatly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has added a health imperative on top of the many other issues that schools have to deal with in keeping their communities safe. Covid-19 has placed a new and very detailed obligation on schools to protect the health of all members of the school community.

School safety is complex and multi-dimensional, and in this time of social media has become a highly emotive issue (e.g. through online videos of learners abusing learners, teachers abusing learners, and learners abusing teachers). It is also not only Covid-19 that has changed our world, as this quote¹ expresses:

You cannot raise your children as your parents raised you because your parents raised you for a world which no longer exists.

You cannot teach children as you were taught because you were taught in a world that no longer exists.

It is also important to be aware that while some instances of abuse and negligence are highly visible as they are featured in the media, similar things happen in many other schools but remain invisible because they are not brought into the open.

To view Anne's presentation, click [here](#)

¹ Attributed to globally influential Islamic scholar Ismail ibn Musa Menk, also known as Mufti Menk, who was born and raised in Zimbabwe. The second part of the quote has been added by Anne Baker.

School safety has three dimensions:

- *Physical* – a safe and secure physical environment, where children are supervised, do not harm one another, and there is no bullying, sexual harassment or gender-based violence.
- *Emotional* – an environment where children feel they belong, that is free of racism, other forms of discrimination, and the use of methods such as sarcasm to criticise, mock and belittle.
- *Intellectual* – an environment where children are respected for what they know and what they are trying to discover.

The National School Safety Framework (NSSF)

The *National School Safety Framework* (NSSF) is a comprehensive document designed to guide the Department of Basic Education (DBE), schools, districts and provinces on a common approach to achieving a safe and violence-free learning environment. It aims to (i) create an understanding of the nature of violence as it affects learners; (ii) spell out the legal obligations for school safety; and (iii) assist schools to identify and respond to safety issues and threats, create reporting systems and manage reported incidents appropriately, as well as monitor progress over time.

Published in 2015, the NSSF is available from www.education.gov.za

“For many children, the biggest threat to their right to education is not discrimination or lack of access to schools, but violence within or near their schools that undermines their ability to learn, puts their physical and psychological well-being at risk, and often causes them to drop out of school entirely. Children’s right to education entails not only the presence of schools and teachers, but also an environment that allows them to learn in safety.” (Human Rights Watch, as quoted in the NSSF)

A **National School Safety Steering Committee** was set up in 2018. It includes representatives from:

- DBE
- NECT (the secretariat)
- SGB Associations
- SACE
- SAPS
- Unions

“If our schools are strong, our country will be strong; if our schools are places of peace, peace will permeate into the community; and if our schools are just, that will also help, especially if we teach children what it means to be fair and just.” (Anne Baker)

Anne also observed that:

- While each of these role players plays an integral part in ensuring school safety, schools and school communities need to be vigilant and to speak out on safety issues;
 - for e.g. to prevent situations where individuals who have been dismissed by one provincial department are employed by another, because the information has not reached SACE.
- The SAPS provides good support to schools in most areas.
- All members of the school community need to understand their role with regard to school safety – and it is leadership’s responsibility to help them with that.



These Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are directly relevant to the topic of school safety.

School Safety Committees – Angela Pienaar, Deputy Principal at St Augustine’s Catholic Primary School, Greyville, Durban

Angela described the roles and functioning of the Child Safeguarding Committee at St Augustine’s, and the safety practices and processes (shaped to suit the context) that the school has put in place.

The Child Safeguarding Committee includes:

- Principal and Deputy Principal
- SAPS official
- School Governing Body member (parent)
- School lay counsellor and educator
- Educator
- Support staff member
- Security officer

To view Angela’s presentation, click [here](#)

“Our child safeguarding policy has brought a greater awareness to the various issues which our learners face daily – and has given us better insight into their various struggles.” (Angela Pienaar)

- Many members of the school community were keen to serve on the Committee, but numbers were restricted in the interests of effectiveness. The Committee meets at the end of every term, when it focuses on identifying areas for improvement.
- Many learners reside in outlying townships, and travel by taxi or by bus into the inner city where the school is situated. Some are as young as six years old, so it is important for there to be someone to receive them in the mornings when they arrive at school. The principal therefore arrives at 6 every morning, to be present for the children, and to give them, especially the younger ones, a sense of safety.
- The school has identified certain areas of concern that lie outside the school; for example, children are vulnerable to abuse both at home and when using public transport. To address these issues, the children are encouraged to speak to one of the school’s many lay counsellors, either in the morning before school, or during break. Some learners choose instead to write notes or letters to the principal, or to one of the teachers or lay counsellors, and to ‘post’ these under their doors (and they then follow up appropriately). The school places great importance on encouraging learners to communicate freely in this way, either in person or in writing. Angela noted that many learners had reported not being able to speak to their parents about the issues that trouble them, so it is particularly important for the adults at school to be available to them.
- The child safeguarding policy has resulted in the school looking more closely at learners’ transport arrangements. This led to the creation of a checklist of safety features and the recording of telephone and registration numbers of all drivers and taxis which transport children from the school. Parents are required to fill in a special form concerning their transport arrangements.
- Leaving times are staggered, and the school has demarcated a special ‘protection area’ near the gate where children wait for their transport or parents. Teachers are on duty in this area, so children are safe and cared for while waiting, as well as at the buses and taxis to make sure children board safely. In addition, prefects travel on the buses and taxis. Children who are picked up late are supervised by teachers until 5 pm, and thereafter by the security officer.
- The school community has a strong relationship with their assigned SAPS official. In addition to serving on the Committee, she provides guidance when needed, assists when problems arise, and has facilitated workshops on topics such as driver awareness, human trafficking and gender-based violence. She visits the school on a regular basis and interacts well with the children and staff.

Building peaceful schools and focussing on social and emotional learning (SEL) – Mduduzi Qwabe, Manager: Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations at the CIE National Office

Mduduzi provided details of the CIE’s *Building Peaceful Schools (BPS) Programme*. It was introduced in 2011 to help schools become safe places for learners, provide an alternative to corporal punishment, and encourage more caring and peaceful communities.

To view Mduduzi’s presentation, click [here](#)

The BPS programme is based on:

- *Peacebuilding* – this calls for school leaders and teachers to examine their attitudes (and develop more positive approaches) to learners, their relationships, and how they affect others in the school community
- *Conflict resolution/management* – finding creative and positive ways to deal with conflict
- *Restorative justice* – an approach to justice and discipline that seeks to repair the harm caused by wrongdoing, encourage positive relationships, and build a sense of community. This approach is particularly relevant in this time of increasing disconnectedness.

“Conflict itself is not always only negative – it can sometimes be a catalyst for better things in the future.”
(Mduduzi Qwabe)

The BPS programme encourages schools and teachers to move away from a punitive approach and towards a restorative approach to discipline:

Punitive Discipline	Restorative Discipline
Fear Teachers command respect through warnings and threats.	Respect Teachers gain respect by modelling it for their learners.
Rules Teachers enforce rules to keep learners quiet and working.	Engagement Classes are engaging so learners want to work. Conversations are allowed.
Control Teachers tell learners when they are doing something wrong.	Support Learners reflect on their behaviour and consider changes they can make.
Public Teachers use loud, strict voices to call out learners who are misbehaving.	Private Teachers speak privately to learners who need reminders in order to behave.
Anger Teachers seem angry and blame students when they misbehave.	Understanding Teachers use a gentle tone and show understanding when learners misbehave.
Punishment Good behaviour is based on fear of punishment.	Reflection Good behaviour is based on an internal desire to do well.

The meeting highlights of previous *Principals Upfront* dialogues dealing with restorative discipline and safe, supportive learning environments can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Social-emotional learning (SEL)

Mduduzi also stressed the need for schools to be ‘providers of hope’ during uncertain times, and to attend to the emotional and spiritual well-being of learners. The Covid-19 pandemic has had severe emotional consequences for learners, who have had to deal with feelings of isolation, anxiety, frustration and hopelessness.

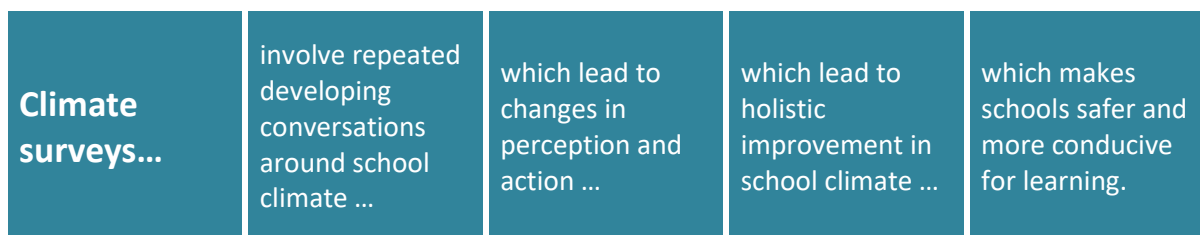
Social-emotional learning, a process which helps children acquire and apply skills to manage their emotions and achieve positive goals, offers a way forward.

The CIE’s school climate surveys (see below) have proved to be effective in fostering social-emotional learning within participating school communities. The surveys and the conversations they give rise to provide a window into the perceptions, emotions and experiences of learners and teachers within participating schools – allowing schools to celebrate the positives and work towards improvements where these are needed, while developing social-emotional awareness and skills within their communities.

Change conversations using data from climate surveys – Cullen MacKenzie, Knowledge and Research Manager at the CIE

Cullen MacKenzie shared information on what the CIE’s climate surveys are, and how they influence positive change in school environments. The climate surveys were introduced primarily as a way of monitoring change in school climates.

There is a clear Theory of Change underlying the way the climate surveys work to bring about this change:



The survey instrument consists of 25 items which provide a frequency rating – 15 of these items measure negative experiences, and 10 measure positive experiences. To date, the survey has yielded four years of rich data from 65 participating schools, in the form of a series of percentages showing the prevalence of certain occurrences in schools (such as hitting).

Within the range of the learners’ experience, the survey focusses on 3 main areas:

- How learners interact with other learners
- How learners interact with teachers
- Learners’ general experience of the school environment.

“For principals, the key idea to take from this is that practical data-driven change is possible.” (Cullen MacKenzie)

It is this lived experience of learners in a specific context that informs the way that the survey is used. The survey makes no assumption of either violence or peace; instead, the positives are aspirational, and the negatives raise red flags – meaning that there is hope for change in both positive and negative results.

The key to change is that repeated administration of the survey yields longitudinal data, which allows schools to identify their own specific climate trends over a period of years.

The surveys also enable the CIE to correlate data for each school, each region, and for the whole network of schools, and to work with trends over time.

Case study illustrating the survey process, and the role of school leaders

To view a summary of survey findings, click [here](#)

The climate survey process has 3 steps and 3 levels of conversation:

1. Using the survey instrument to gather the learner voice
2. Giving feedback on the learners' inputs to the teachers, to elicit further responses and descriptions of the climate
3. Taking the overall input to the school leaders, to develop actions that might change the situation.

Example of data collected:

	Learners hitting other learners	Teachers hitting learners
2016	23%	21%
2017	16%	17%
2018	11%	12%
2019	10%	9%
2020	8%	8%

These results show a clear correlation between the two measures – and a ‘phenomenal change’ in the way that learners treat each other. Crucially, this change mirrors what happens with the way teachers treat learners. **This shows that teachers have agency to change learner behaviour – because the teachers are models for the way learners behave with each other.**

When the survey was first administered at this school in 2016 and the teachers were given feedback on what the learners said in the initial conversation, they made a decision to be more caring and watchful. They were also able to relate to the issues raised by learners (e.g. that they did not feel safe when going to the toilets) and took action to address these potentially risky aspects.

“The support of the school leaders, the teachers and the learners created an interlocking response through conversation that enabled child safeguarding to be a reality at this school.” (Cullen MacKenzie)

Facilitator's comment:

Facilitator Victor Ngubane of the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) drew attention to:

- the importance of using data to back the argument and decisions around school safety
- the value of the learning being revealed by the data.

He added that as tools and devices that enable data to be collected, analysed and interpreted become more prevalent in schools, this would present a great opportunity to use data to improve school safety.

04 Breakaway sessions

Principals Upfront featured breakaway rooms for the first time during this dialogue. Participants were assigned to different groups and took part in facilitator-led discussions in response to particular questions. These group sessions are intended to involve participants more closely, and to enable their voices to be heard. The chat feature also provides opportunities for participants to interact, ask questions and express their views.

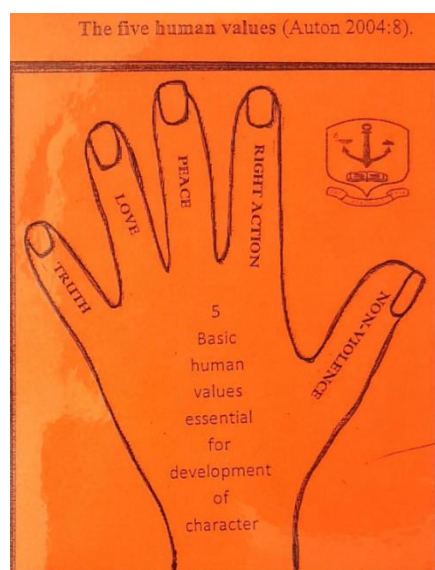
Plenary: report back

This consolidation gives an indication of the main ideas that emerged as participants shared the practical approaches they are using in their schools:

How do we turn schools into places of peace and fairness?

- *By putting the ethos of the school front and centre* – this involves having a distinct set of values and making them clear for the learners and staff. Knowing these values enables learners to self-correct, and teachers to call learners to order by referring to the ethos.
- *By holding ongoing conversations* – with children, teachers, school leadership and parents – about creating a peaceful and fair school. This conversation should not just be a once-off event, but rather an ongoing process that finds out what the needs are, and changes the climate.
- *By modelling positive behaviour* (such as gentleness, care, kindness, and peacefulness) – this can essentially change the personality of the school, because it brings about changes in the way that teachers and learners react.

“Schools take on the personalities of the leaders and teachers within that school, and learners learn from what is modelled to them by the people in charge. If you have a leader who is mean-spirited, you’ll find a school that is mean-spirited – and if there is gentleness and kindness from the leader, you’ll find that the children follow this to a large extent.”



This practical example of foregrounding values was shared by Venessa Moodley, principal of Actonville Primary School. She described how the school’s values of truth, love, peace, right action and non-violence have enabled the creation of a safe, supportive environment.

“All the children know the values, and when they come to the office (for e.g. if there has been any misdemeanour, if they have violated another child’s rights, or have been irresponsible), I only have to ask, “What did you do wrong?” and they will hold up their hand and tell me, “I was not peaceful”, or “I was not loving”, or “I did not apply right conduct” ... and then they self-correct. Children must realise that they have made a mistake, and then you move on immediately to how they will correct that behaviour. I believe that is the way to go in these times.”

The children use a ‘shoutout’ if they feel that someone is intruding into their space or they need to protect themselves – this involves raising their hand, palm outward, and saying “No!” in a firm tone. Venessa also noted the importance of sharing the school’s values with parents. “We want these school values to penetrate the homes and families of our children as well, so there is a continuation.”

How do we bring hope during a pandemic?

- By getting the whole school community to understand that the pandemic was affecting everyone, made it easier for people to empathise with one another's concerns and fears, and to work together to implement protocols and systems effectively.
- By making sure that teachers are confident and calm in dealing with the disruptions to teaching and learning, and that they know how to deal with the challenges that arise in a positive way.
- By reaching out online to learners at home, and giving them whatever support is possible, for e.g. by providing them with data to increase the amount of contact.
- Being open and providing teachers and learners with accurate information on how to prevent the spread of the pandemic and deal with issues that arise.

How do we make our schools safe places for all where learners and teachers thrive?

- By having the proper protocols in place and making sure all stakeholders understand what they are – for example, by using WhatsApp groups to communicate, and providing informative videos and messaging to keep the school community updated.
- The principal of an LSEN school commented that the children themselves are part of the safety process as they help to determine what should be in place to keep them safe – either through what they get up to, or by informing staff about possible threats to safety. For e.g., learners are not allowed to have any instruments or devices that could be dangerous, such as scissors; they are handed out only when needed and collected immediately afterwards, and learners are quick to inform teachers if any slip through the system.
- This group also emphasised the importance of positive role modelling by teachers, especially for children who lack positive role models in their community or family environment – and particularly, positive male role models. Positive role modelling plays a prominent role in discipline, particularly self-discipline; it is vital from a socio-emotional perspective but also carries through to academic work. Teachers need to ensure they always model caring behaviour, so they can in turn expect this from the learners.

“If you are disrespectful towards a child you will get animosity right back at you – so it is about our body language and the way we speak, that makes a difference.”

Choose from your group a story of hope and change

Several stories highlighted community involvement or constructive relationships with the local SAPS branch.

- An example from the Cape Flats described the ‘walking bus’ concept. In an area which is beset by ongoing violence, where children are very unsafe, and where law enforcement has broken down, parents made a concerted effort through community forums and SGBs to get the community involved in looking after its own children. As a result, community members (who are largely unemployed) have formed themselves into groups, and collect children from various points – e.g. street corners, traffic lights, bus stops and taxi ranks – and walk them to school in a ‘walking bus’. They also patrol the school vicinity during breaks and after school. Relationships have been strengthened, and the school communities regularly host ‘little functions’ to express their appreciation. “It has made a world of difference.”

What have you done to make your school a safer place?

- Consistently ensured that everyone employed by the school, or by the Department of Education to work in the school, has a police clearance certificate.
- In addition to requiring a police clearance certificate, conducted a reference check before employing anyone. This is advisable because it often happens that people accused of abuse are not prosecuted, and the National Register for Sex Offenders (NRSO) is not updated frequently enough.
- Invited principals of our different affiliated schools to attend webinars on equity, belonging and anti-racism, to further broaden awareness and dialogue around these issues.

05 Questions and comments

Question: What does the safety policy say about nutrition and food poisoning?

- There are guidelines on the National School Feeding Scheme and how to manage it. If the school provides feeding, it would need to have in place a set of guidelines and rules relating to food safety and hygiene. Boarding schools should also have clear protocols for food handling and hygiene. Supervision within schools, and the allocation of responsibility for school feeding on the school safety committee would also have to be considered.

The CIE undertook to find out if specific guidelines were available and would offer them to participants.

Question: How can we prevent weapons entering the school?

This a particularly challenging question. One way would be to use metal detectors, as described in overseas literature.

- The CIE's stance is that schools have to build relationships so that weapons aren't brought to school. This approach is about taking away the enmity between people. At the same time, teachers need to be hyper-vigilant around possible weapons. They have the right to search learners and their belongings (this is gazetted), but unless there is a dangerous situation, this could be seen as intruding on the learners' privacy. Are there gangs in the school? How are we identifying and working with at-risk learners to influence them to change? Often the kinds of people who are attracted to gangs become extremely positive when they are given responsibility. Conversely, schools have an obligation to keep people safe, and because having weapons at school is a criminal offence, would obviously have to take action if weapons were present. In this case, the school's SAPS officer should be able to provide advice and assistance.

Comments: These participant comments were shared using the chat feature:

- Fear destroys hope. Hope can be brought about by emphasising agency - the fact that learners and teachers have the ability to a large extent to keep themselves safe by keeping **physical distance** (not social distance!), wearing masks and sanitizing hands regularly. (Arista Bouwer)

- The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity and gifts, rather than one of problem solving, fear and retribution. A new context acknowledges that we all have the capacity, expertise and resources that an alternative future requires. Communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness.” (Peter Block, from his book *Community*)
- I recently did research on the topic of police clearance certificates for people who work with children and people who face mental or severe physical disabilities. It is a national law, not just provincial. The provincial education departments have limited capacity, so action by the school is needed to get the clearance certificates. I think the thorough reference checks are a great idea. (Breggie Hoffman)

06 Closing

The dialogue ended with a vote of thanks by Patience Voller of BRIDGE to all involved in organising and presenting the event. Several participants used the chat function to express their appreciation.

The next *Principals Upfront* dialogue will be held during the first quarter of 2021.

Dialogue participants are reminded of BRIDGE’s knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE’s Knowledge Hub. To access the Knowledge Hub, click [here](#).

Principals Upfront welcomes your input for planning future seminars. If there are any burning issues you would like to have addressed, or if you would like more information on this dialogue series, contact Patience Voller at patience@BRIDGE.org.za



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