



BRIDGE-TUTUWA PROGRAMME

Learning the Lessons 2018-2020



The BRIDGE-Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation School Leadership Programme seeks to improve learner outcomes by empowering school leaders – principals, heads of departments and teachers – to implement quality educational practices and processes. This is done through a combination of mentorship, professional learning communities (PLCs) and peer review.

The Programme targets nine primary schools in the Ekurhuleni North District. It began in 2018 and is designed to run over 5 years. Midway through Year 3 of the Programme, this is an opportunity to pause and reflect on the lessons we are currently learning about different aspects of the Programme. At the end of the five-year period we will review and update these lessons.

Lessons have been drawn from insights from project managers, mentors and beneficiaries, as well as Programme reports. Collated at the end of 2020, these learnings take into account pre-Covid-19 implementation as well as some of the unforeseen impacts of Covid-19 on schooling (and thus on Programme implementation) during different lockdown and school closure phases. This overview summarises major learning themes in different areas from both pre-Covid and Covid implementation contexts.

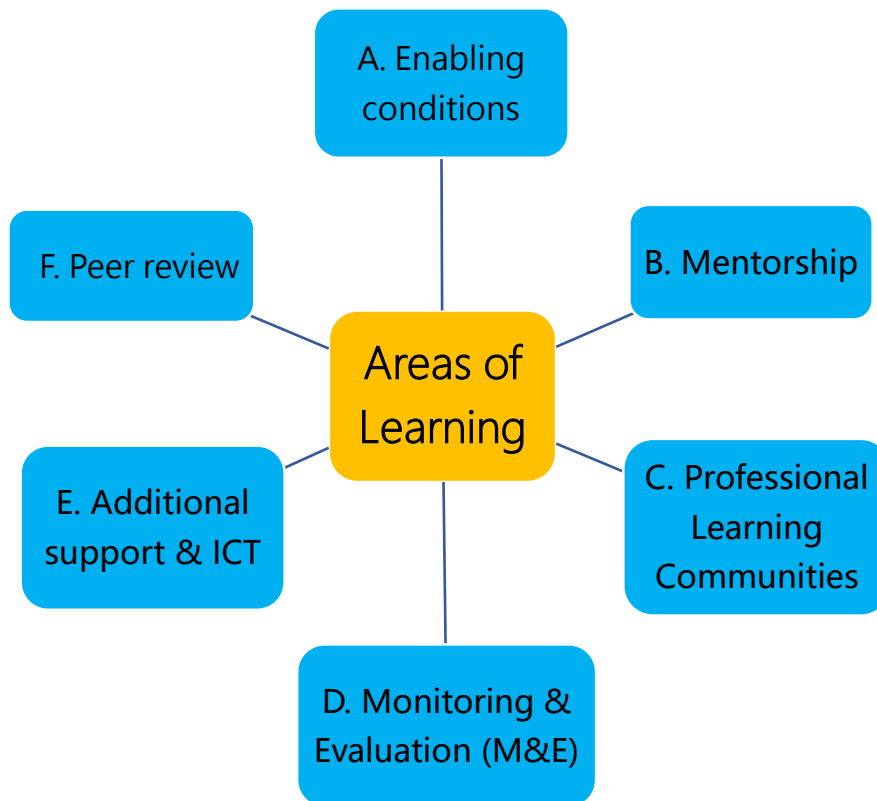
WE CAPTURE LESSONS LEARNED IN ORDER TO:

- Promote continuous improvement in the implementation of the Programme.
- Record barriers to success and ways of mitigating their effects.
- Allow for aspects of the Programme to be adjusted to optimise the outcomes.
- Capture challenges, successes and good work practices, to inform subsequent implementation more broadly in the Ekurhuleni North District, or in other Districts.



AREAS OF LEARNING

Lessons learned have been organised into the six areas illustrated below.



These areas will be explored in relation to:

- Different Programme stakeholder and target groups as relevant (GDE officials, district officials, principals, HoDs, teachers, mentors).
- Different stages of the Programme (inception, implementation, reflection).

The advent and impact of Covid-19 factors will be discussed where these apply.

LESSONS LEARNED

A. ENABLING CONDITIONS

1. Prior experience and familiar contexts

BRIDGE has managed communities of practice, set up professional learning communities in other projects, and participated in a number of School Peer Reviews (SPRs) over a number of years. These experiences informed the design of the Tutuwa Programme, as well as enabling the strategic choice of a cluster of schools that had been members of a BRIDGE Principals' Community of Practice. This meant that principals of these schools were familiar with the benefits of collaborating and sharing knowledge, practices and resources between schools.

Key Learnings

- Draw on prior grounded and documented experience as a vital conceptualising tool for planning; consider how to use previously field-tested tools in this new context.
- Strengthen any existing relationships and contacts amongst the principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) of the schools, as well as with district officials in areas where you have worked.
- Identify any unique features of the Programme context which differ from your previous experiences, and plan for possible adaptations. This is discussed in more detail in relation to the School Peer Review Process below.

2. School Functionality

Clearly it is easier to implement successful interventions in functional schools as opposed to dysfunctional schools. Seriously dysfunctional schools require very specific types of interventions.

Key Learnings

- Use a profiling tool that can be self-reported as a baseline at the start of intervention; if time and circumstances allow, verify conditions through a site visit. See the BRIDGE School Profile tool on <https://www.bridge.org.za/knowledgehub/bridges-school-profile-guide/>.
- Use these results to identify potential risks and plan for mitigation.

3. Advocacy strategies

It is often said that ‘buy in’ by all those involved in an intervention is a necessary condition for success, but sometimes not enough time is allocated to an advocacy process before implementation of the Programme. Advocacy has to start at district level, as support from the district is essential to school interventions; and other beneficiaries such as teachers must also be convinced of the benefits of the Programme if they are to commit time and energy. BRIDGE dedicated the first three months to extensive advocacy meetings to inform critical stakeholders at all levels of government (national, provincial and district) and get their buy-in to the details of the Programme and the proposed activities, as well as to gain their trust and support. There was a formal event to launch the Programme (July 2018), and a brochure describing the key elements of the Programme was widely shared.

Key Learnings

- Use the launch of the Programme as an exciting and motivational advocacy event; ensure that there is budget available, and that it is scheduled at a time when you will get maximum attendance (e.g. not in the school holidays).
- Initially, meet separately with each set of stakeholders – district officials, principals and Heads of Department (HoDs) – to introduce the project, as this allows the presentations and interactions to be shaped as needed to target the particular concerns of each set of stakeholders. The meeting with principals should take place before the meeting with the

HoDs. At the same time, however, draw the higher-level personnel into the ongoing advocacy processes with those who report to them.

- Have detailed but easy to read presentations/ information packs readily available for advocacy. Be ready to repeat and explain Programme details as often as needed.
- Collect the names, positions and contact details of stakeholders early in the process.
- Set up a Steering Committee (SC) early in the implementation process. The Steering Committee should include representatives of all the stakeholder groupings – district officials, principals and HoDs – as well as the mentors. Early establishment is vital as members can help to sell the programme to colleagues and assist in practical ways, e.g. by advising on favourable dates to hold meetings to avoid clashing with DBE requirements. Make sure that the SC includes high-level decision makers who will champion the Programme.
- Listen to any fears or concerns expressed, and emphasise the developmental approach that will avoid overwhelming schools with too many Programme activities or demands.

4. Communications and community-building strategies

One of the long-term aims of this Programme is to build up sustainable relationships between teachers in schools, and, crucially, between schools themselves, so that they continue to share practices and offer each other mutual support. The Programme can lay the foundation for an interactive community of educators and institutions.

Key Learnings

- Build your community: share all readings and information packs collectively so that all participants have access to each other's contact details.
- Hold joint update meetings with all stakeholders present at key points in the project so that collaboration can be emphasised, and a sense of belonging built up.
- Strengthen the sense of community by stressing participants' roles in the bigger picture, and encouraging discussion of longer-term impacts: changes in the classroom link to changes in the school, community and ultimately the system as a whole.
- While the programme implementers will be the main drivers of relationships, try and find champions in schools who maintain relationships with key officials and subject advisors.
- Use any opportunity to illustrate what you are doing at all levels.
- If possible, facilitate or conduct Socio Emotional Learning (SEL) workshops at schools. BRIDGE was able to do this for principals, HoDs, teachers and grades 6 and 7 in two schools. SEL builds the school community as a whole, changes the culture slowly, and reduces bullying and violence. These types of programmes need to be known throughout the school by being talked about at assemblies, SGB meetings and staff meetings. If your specific intervention does not include an SEL element, try to bring in or partner with another organisation that works in this field.

B. MENTORSHIP

Design of the Programme mentorship model was informed by BRIDGE's involvement in the School Peer Review (SPR) Process as developed and implemented by the schools of the South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition (SAESC), a BRIDGE community of practice. The model also drew on research and collated source information on mentorship models and practices, as shared and documented in various BRIDGE communities of practice. The model envisaged a mentor/mentee relationship with school principals, who in turn would use their own learnings from the process to mentor their Heads of Departments (HoDs) and School Management Teams (SMTs).

We are continuously learning new lessons about mentorship in this Programme. The onset of Covid-19 and school closures required a change in the way in which mentoring was conducted, necessitating a move away from face-to-face to online interactions, and in some cases a move away from one-on-one sessions to group mentorship. The changed circumstances brought about by Covid-19 had unexpected outcomes, both positive and negative.

1. Selection, appointment and training of mentors

Because of the proposed School Peer Review element in the Programme, selection and appointment of mentors was simply done on the basis of experience in the SPR process: the two appointees were part of the SAESC and were themselves experienced principals whose schools had undertaken peer review processes. Explicit criteria for selection and appointment were not drawn up. Subsequently these mentors have left the project and have been replaced by another two educators experienced in the SPR process. Mentors undertook a training session and were provided with resources such as BRIDGE's *Practical Guide for Mentors* (including various tools and guidelines) and a number of reporting templates.

Key Learnings

- Rather than basing selection and appointment on experience only, draw up an explicit set of criteria for appointment.
- Revisit these criteria in response to any changing circumstances.
- To facilitate scheduling of face-to-face sessions, it is important to have local mentors (or for mentors to be in the same province, at least). This is more important than trying to match the demographics of mentor and mentee.
- In the context of school closures, make sure that mentors have the resources and capacity to carry out online mentoring.
- While good interpersonal skills and sensitive communication skills are probably the major attributes in a good mentor, other factors may also need to be taken into account: for example, does the mentor have an understanding of the mentee's context, or any experience in a similar position? Does she or he have the time to do this properly? Is there travel involved for in-person engagements, which may become difficult to take on in relation to their own school responsibilities?
- Make sufficient funding provision for the design and implementation of mentor training.

- Make sure that mentors are provided with common guidelines, resources and reporting templates.

2. Drawing on mentor insights

Mentors are generally experienced and thoughtful educators, and it is important to include their feedback and insights into any reflections.

Key Learnings

- Get feedback from mentors at key stages in the Programme in order to adapt the mentor training and resources. The quarterly reflection sessions with mentors provide an opportunity for this.
- Include mentors in brainstorming any Programme process or resource adaptations.
- Set up a preparation session for principals before the first mentoring session: principals benefit from knowing they are not just recipients but have agency and can express their expectations for mentoring. In addition, they need to be aware of long-term aims such as realising the leadership component through being able to mentor their own staff.
- Establish relationships of trust: these are key to growth and progress. The move to group mentorship sessions due to Covid-19 was only successful because trust had been grown previously through one-on-one sessions.
- Ensure that mentors, principals and SMTs can engage periodically in mutual reflection in a joint session and not only be limited to their own sessions. If possible, hold reflection meetings every quarter as these provide far more value overall than an annual symposium would. They serve to deepen the mentoring element, to reflect on what has been done or not done (and devise ways to address these omissions), to update principals on progress, and to apprise principals of activities relating to HoDs (e.g. PLCs held, or giving principals reports on testing so they can have conversations with the HoDs). These sessions require session leaders to practice active listening and to ask open-ended questions to deepen participant reflection. Reflective sessions benefit from having smaller, more intimate groups where issues can be targeted more effectively.
- Link the quarterly reflection meetings to mentoring and push harder to get principals and mentors to reflect on what has been happening in the mentoring sessions.
- Don't take for granted that people know how to ask the questions – many educators need help with formulating reflective questions to address their needs.
- Pay attention to the social and emotional needs of mentees and other beneficiaries. Include topics around Socio Emotional Learning (SEL) and psychosocial support in the mentoring approaches; experience has shown that mentees are more responsive when they feel that their mentors care about them on a personal and individual level.
- Support the improvement on online skills sets, as with the onset of Covid-19 all meetings moved online. For example:

- When the mentoring sessions started, it was not easy for the mentees to use online platforms, but now they can use Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meets. Now they can attend GDE video conferences with ease and they are enjoying these platforms.
- Encourage mentees to present at joint sessions, so that they can improve their skills and talk to presentations in online meetings with their staff.
- Work with principals and schools to make sure that technical issues can be addressed.
- Encourage principals (and their staff) to communicate through a range of mediums, from SMS and WhatsApp for parents and learners, to Zoom or Microsoft Teams for teachers.

C. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were included in the Tutuwa Programme with the aim of developing and sharing pedagogical and targeted subject knowledge, methodologies and good practices to improve learner performance. The focus was on the Tutuwa schools Heads of Department (HoDs), in order to equip them to cascade learnings to their peers and the teachers in their departments. In addition, inter-school PLCs aimed at strengthening ties between schools in order to promote a broader learning community.

The nature and activities of the PLCs changed over the course of the Programme in response to teacher needs. While BRIDGE was prepared to move PLCs online due to Covid-19 from the second quarter of 2020, these were de-prioritised as schools battled with school closures, their own moves to ‘at home’ support, and, subsequently, the demands of re-opening, rotational instruction and curriculum catch-up. Many of the lessons learned, therefore, apply to in-person PLC events.

Key Learnings

- Adopt a developmental approach to implementing PLCs. The purpose and the needs may change, and the PLC should serve as a support to teachers rather than overwhelming them with demands.
- Use small intra-school PLCs when dealing with ICT-related content and activities. In small groups from the same school, people are more comfortable with one another, and consequently less reluctant to acknowledge gaps in their knowledge.
- Use inter-school PLCs when dealing with more generic issues, to promote a richer sharing of ideas and experiences. It is still advisable to restrict the number of schools as large numbers limit the depth of engagement and hence the effectiveness of the PLC. At face-to-face events, encourage inter-school interaction by seating participants from different schools together.
- Schedule dates early in the year, avoiding those periods when schools will be particularly busy with responding to provincial or national demands.
- Make sure that the PLC models inclusive facilitation, recognising everyone’s inputs and promoting constructive sharing and feedback, the development of trust, and critical reflection.

- Plan for PLCs to have tangible outcomes that provide participants with practical benefits, and encourage participants to share useful resources.
- Find out what each participant can bring to the PLC, and draw on these strengths.
- Where the long-term aim is for PLCs to become self-managed, provide direction, content and support in order to build participants' capacity to take responsibility for the different roles within in the PLC, as well as an active part in their own learning. Share guidelines on planning, facilitating and managing PLCs.
- Find out what other sources and resources the PLC can draw on to enrich and strengthen its activities (e.g. subject advisors, project implementers, colleagues from other schools, subject associations).
- Follow up after PLC sessions to strengthen positive influences. For example, participants could commit to follow up tasks for the next session, or report back on key issues. The intention in the Tutuwa Programme was to follow up the PLC events dealing with literacy acquisition by observing implementation in the classroom, but this was not possible due to Covid-19.
- Send all participants the PLC register after each session, to enable them to report their participation and claim informal SACE CPTD points for attendance and activities within the PLC.
- Encourage PLC members to take part in other useful forums; since the onset of Covid-19, for example, there are online educator PLCs such as Zibuza.net and the South Africa Learning Collaborative (ZALC).

D. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The M&E Framework was developed at the start of the Programme in 2018. BRIDGE worked with M&E experts (Data Innovators) to draw up the Framework and conduct the baseline studies. The approach included the following: Theory of Change framework; a set of baseline evaluation questions for each school (academic performance, practices, attitudes, barriers and enablers); a report on baseline conditions drawn from interviews and observations at the schools; provision of a set of tracking and monitoring tools to be used throughout the Programme; learner assessments; a set of indicators for success with evidence sources.

The learner assessments are the key baseline tool, using performance in literacy and numeracy/ mathematics as proxies to measure learning outcomes pre-Programme implementation, and then at specified intervals throughout the Programme with learner cohorts in Grades 3 and 6.

Key Learnings

- Make sure that there is sufficient budget for planning and running assessment events, and for taking unexpected factors into account. BRIDGE was faced with issues such as the following: requests for versions in more languages than originally anticipated; additional grade assessments; absenteeism; and last-minute requests for date changes and timing due to conflicting priorities, which impacted on logistics such as invigilation and marking schedules.

- Appoint educator champions based at schools to do the organising at class level, and make sure their roles and responsibilities are clear.
- Draw up a detailed written list of actions for the assessment procedures at school level, as well as guidelines for project implementers, educator champions, invigilators and markers.
- Make sure that all communication with each school is channelled through one person, such as the Deputy Head, rather than HODs, so that there is a consistent point of contact.
- Future planning should include provision for more formal appointments of all markers, and specifically for experienced African language markers.
- Explain to learners what the assessments are for.

E. ADDITIONAL SUPPORT AND ICT

In response to certain needs identified in the first two years of the Programme, BRIDGE introduced two new elements.

1. The Data Driven Districts (DDD) Dashboard

This DBE initiative is implemented nationally by New Leaders Foundation, with BRIDGE becoming a delivery partner through its principals' communities of practice in 2017. The aim of the DDD Dashboard is to display education-related data at various levels for the purpose of analysis and decision-making. Principals are able to access the DDD Dashboard at the level of their own schools, and view (and create reports on) a range of data in categories such as subject-specific and grade specific-performance, as well as tracking individual learner performance. From this data analysis, principals and their School Management Teams (SMTS) can begin to plan for school improvement as a whole, and specific interventions as required. In addition, the Dashboard tracks statistics such as educator and learner attendance. Due to the central role that effective data analysis can play in school improvement efforts, BRIDGE decided to integrate DDD Dashboard training into the Tutuwa Programme, including both principals and school management teams in this training, and using some of the PLC sessions to induct teachers into understanding and using the DDD Dashboard.

Key Learnings

- Don't make assumptions about educator proficiency in relation to ICT. Many educators don't know how to work with online technology effectively, and may lack knowledge of even basic operations such as scrolling or copying. It is useful to start every DDD Dashboard session with some basic reminders about navigation.
- Conduct computer proficiency assessments at the start of an intervention, and don't rely on self-reporting.
- Use peer pairing once you have an understanding of the different levels of competence in a group.
- Convene smaller groups for ICT-based training such as DDD Dashboard, preferably with teachers from the same school. These have been shown to be more effective in that participants are more at ease with each other, and more willing to acknowledge skills gaps.

- Follow up after each session through setting tasks to bring to the next session, as this will help with monitoring whether the training has been effective.
- Use unexpected beneficial outcomes to reinforce the value of the training: for example, using the DDD Dashboard requires using Excel spreadsheets, and those involved in the training improved their skills in this regard. This makes it easier and quicker for them to carry out their reporting responsibilities to DBE.
- This ICT learning can be lost as easily as it is acquired, therefore training should be held regularly until learning is embedded.

The DDD Dashboard has proved an effective vehicle for working towards project objectives. It caters to real and immediate needs, and sessions work well because the training is tangible. This Programme's experience has been that teachers become defensive if direct efforts are made to influence their teaching practices. The DDD Dashboard, however, provides a means to address teacher development without provoking a negative response. Using ICT as an enabler to create efficiencies in teaching has been well received. This illustrates the fact that any opportunities to influence teaching practice and support teacher development need to be harnessed as fully as possible.



Engaging with the DDD Dashboard has added life to the concept of Instructional Leadership, which is core to the Tutuwa Programme.

[Patience Voller, BRIDGE School Leadership Project Manager]



2. Literacy Acquisition

BRIDGE project managers on the Tutuwa Programme took part in training conducted by Readucate in strategies for teaching reading. In response to an articulated need by schools to improve literacy levels, and in response to the weaknesses identified in the comprehension sections of the language assessments, BRIDGE shared some of its own learnings about literacy acquisition.

Key Learnings

- Include add-ons which have come about in response to need as topics in PLCs. BRIDGE staff held two reading-focussed PLCs in January and February 2020. Teachers from five schools

participated, ranging from Grade R to Grade 4. BRIDGE shared various techniques relating to sounding out words and recognising and building up sounds to form words, using Readucate’s multi-sensory approach to integrate and strengthen the learning. A number of innovative generic classroom methodologies were also built into the PLC activities. Participants were very appreciative and rated the intervention highly.

- Through the introduction of focused discussion on the add-on topic of literacy acquisition, teachers were able to share strategies which they had previously used successfully in their lessons, and explore how their own methods can be built on and enriched with new learning.
- Presenting ourselves as fellow learners sharing a methodology rather than as experts prompted a good response to this add-on. While there was good uptake during the PLCs, due to Covid-19 there has not yet been an opportunity for on-site monitoring of implementation of any new strategies learned.
- Strengthen these kinds of add-ons by providing relevant resources, such as information on teaching reading resources.

Covid-19 affected both the DDD Dashboard and the Literacy Acquisition add-ons in that sessions had to move online, or were cancelled due to other pressures. A general lesson learned regarding communication in a context where site visits could not take place is the importance of agreeing on a communication protocol: WhatsApp has proved to be the best tool for keeping in touch, and helps to hold principals to account, as it creates an accessible record of previous communication and people can easily refer to earlier messages. BRIDGE also shared information on other apps that schools can use for their own home/school nexus, such as the Mzali App (a GDE approved parent communication tool).

F. SCHOOL PEER REVIEW

The School Peer Review (SPR) was developed by BRIDGE’s longest-running CoP, the South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition. The SPR is a methodology underpinned by tools and activities which enable leaders and staff from different schools to observe each other in action in non-judgemental ways, establishing a collaborative process of continuous learning and self-reflection, and addressing instructional leadership and teaching culture. The SPR Tools address four domains:



The Tutuwa Programme aimed to use a revised version of this mechanism, based on input from the schools and adapted to their needs. The first peer reviews were scheduled for 2019 but had to be delayed, as it proved to be too early in the process for this kind of intervention. A major factor is the resistance shown by teachers to external classroom observation, which is attributable to historical perceptions of punitive teacher inspections, and the strong labour influence amongst teachers.

In 2020 the Programme team continued to engage principals, HoDs and district officials on the issue, and was making some headway until Covid-19 brought in a new set of dynamics. The learnings given below, therefore, apply only to the initial stages of advocacy for peer review rather than implementation, as this has not happened in the context of this Programme.

Key Learnings

- Follow a cautious process of advocacy, with a gradual introduction of various elements of the peer review process. For example, mentors began making brief, non-intimidating visits to classrooms while at the schools, to enable teachers to become comfortable with admitting a stranger into their classes, and have encouraged principals to do the same.
- Link to a practical initiative that has already gained traction, such as the literacy support intervention. If this had not been delayed by Covid-19, this would have involved BRIDGE making follow-up visits to teachers in their classrooms to assist them in applying methodologies introduced during the literacy PLC.
- Consider options such as mini peer reviews where the SMT of one school visits the SMT of another school.
- Introduce SMTs and teachers to some of the peer review tools in mentoring sessions or PLCs.
- Extend Programme school visits to include some elements of peer review, such as asking for volunteers willing to have the BRIDGE project manager sit in on lessons as a way of providing more direct support.
- Align participation to Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) points as a way forward.
- Focus on the 'softer' domains of the peer review, such as *Culture and Climate* and *School and Community*, especially in the context of Covid-19. These domains may be helpful in relation to psychosocial needs engendered by the pandemic.

Many of these key learnings have involved 'thinking on our feet' in order to respond to unexpected barriers to planned activities, our own growth in understanding the motivations and challenges of our target groups, and the changing conditions brought about by Covid-19. In the light of the ongoing nature of the pandemic, it is difficult to predict how the next stage of this Programme will unfold; BRIDGE will however continue to monitor, document and reflect on key learnings in different Programme elements.

