

Dialogue 16: Fostering a more meaningful learning environment from the lessons and challenges of 2020

Virtual meeting – 14 April 2021

01 Setting the Scene

The first part of the dialogue explored the challenges and achievements of 2020 and how to use the lessons from these experiences to foster a more meaningful learning environment for South Africa's learners. Prof Mary Metcalfe (Director: Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes) gave an analysis and commentary from a broader perspective, while Mr Rejoice Matlhola (Chief Education Specialist, Tshwane South District) spoke from the perspective of practitioners.

These key questions created a framework for the discussion:

- What were some of the most significant adjustments to the delivery of the curriculum – what were some of the successes and challenges?
- How did schools respond to supporting matriculants and other learners in 2020?
- Did we indeed save the school year of 2020?

In the second part of the dialogue, Prof Rouaan Maarman of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) shifted and enlarged the focus to examine how the lessons from the pandemic, as well as from research conducted by UWC, can be applied to re-imagine our education system and address the challenges it faces.

All three speakers stressed the importance of recognising the profound impact of the inequalities that have shaped South Africans' different experiences of learning during the pandemic, and of education in general.

These *Meeting Highlights* provide an overview of the main themes and issues discussed, and should be viewed together with the speakers' presentations. Links to the presentations are provided in the text.

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Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

Presented by the Catholic Institute of Education, the LRS Academy, 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 Welcome with Jamboard Activity

Participants were invited to check-in with a comment on challenges or successes experienced. These are some of the thoughts expressed:

- Rotation of learners created gaps in learning content and breaks in learning rhythm.
- Remote teaching and learning skills were explored and upgraded with time.
- The pandemic showed clearly how big the gap between the haves and the have nots is.
- Restrictions on face-to-face meant having to think about how to deliver the same lessons virtually.
- Schools have mentioned better learner openness/behaviour due to smaller class numbers.

03 Presentations 1 & 2

Introduction

In introducing this part of the dialogue, Mduduzi Qwabe of the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) observed that the education sector had faced unprecedented challenges during 2020. Schools, learners, parents and education departments had been propelled to a rapid transition to distance learning, a mode which did not translate equitably across the country. Although schools and education departments managed to save the school year, the challenges of the pandemic exacerbated the social and educational inequalities – based on race, class and economic conditions – which beset South African society.

This part of the dialogue sought to identify significant adjustments, challenges and successes in the delivery of the curriculum, how schools responded to supporting matriculants and other learners, and whether the 2020 school year was indeed saved.

PRESENTATION 1:

Click [here](#) to view this presentation.

Analysis and commentary on achievements and challenges of 2020 – Prof Mary Metcalfe, Director for Education and Change at the Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes (PILO)



Prof Metcalfe framed her response in terms of six key areas of challenge and three key assets that impacted on teaching and learning during 2020 – and emphasised the importance of viewing both challenges and assets through the lens of the wide-ranging and severe inequalities that determine South African children’s vastly different levels of access to learning (slide 3).

“These inequalities are important because as we’ll see, the importance of learning at home during the pandemic, in this year as well as last year, and going forward, is crucial, and is one of the biggest contributors to whether or not learning happens at all.” (Prof Mary Metcalfe)

Key challenges that impacted on the provision of schooling in 2020:

Safe schools

Prof Metcalfe argues for schools to be open, provided they are properly resourced with the necessary Covid-19 non-pharmaceutical interventions and have the systems to effectively manage the protocols.

- Children living in disadvantaged areas are more vulnerable to a variety of risks when not in school.
- Schools do much more than simply transmit knowledge, so much more than learning time is lost when children do not attend school. This includes loss of participation in a structured environment where children learn appropriate social mores and develop routines of systematic learning; and the loss of access to essential school-based services such as school feeding schemes. In this respect, it is the most disadvantaged children that suffer the most from prolonged closure (slides 5 - 7).

In order to make their schools safe, principals need optimum levels of information. With teachers being the most at-risk group in schools, it is important to understand the science and link it to teacher wellbeing. It is also crucial for both teacher and public confidence that SMTs, SGBs and the community understand the risks and how to mitigate them.

“Looking back, what we understand now is very different to what we understood this time last year. One of the biggest challenges that we have all experienced in following the science is having the correct information on which to make our best judgement call about what to do.” (Prof Mary Metcalfe)

Loss of learning time

Prof Metcalfe believes that the challenge of lost learning time is being significantly underestimated. For e.g., an analysis of the **phased-in reopening** dates shows that the grade 9s of 2020, who in 2021 are having to slot into the FET component, did not return to school until mid-August (slide 9).

She also argues that society lacks understanding of the huge challenges of **rotational attendance**: what it means to try and maintain focus, keep institutional routines and cover the curriculum, when learners are attending only 50% of the time. Rotational attendance is also likely to be a factor in the high levels of absenteeism (slide 9).

Psycho-social consequences

Based on a survey conducted in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) schools, Prof Metcalfe showed that the provision of psycho-social support to learners, teachers and district officials is limited and poorly coordinated, especially in relation to schools in the lower socio-economic quintiles (slides 10 & 11). The survey conclusions flagged the provision of psycho-social support as urgent, and recommended a community-based approach that would prioritise establishing and maintaining caring communities amongst office- and school-based educators.

Readiness

This relates to readiness across a range of issues, including:

- **readiness to be safe**, which means having the material resources as well as the systems and management routines to apply them (e.g., managing the logistics of sanitising between rotating classes using the same spaces, which can be a huge burden for schools already struggling with normal school routines).
- **readiness to teach**, which is about timetabling that (i) aligns with CAPS goals, (ii) is implementable within the available physical space, and (iii) requires having suitably ready teachers who are able to plan what to teach (slide 12).

Curriculum scope

This challenge encompasses both the overloaded curriculum and the extensive learning backlogs that make every class effectively a multigrade class (Dr Eric Schollar, 2008).

Against this background and under pressure of time lost through school closures and rotational learning, teachers are faced with having to work out what foundational building blocks learners require for success in the current and following years. These kinds of decisions imply a need to allow teachers to exercise professional judgement – and for them to do this in collaboration with colleagues.

Building on these ideas, and citing a survey conducted with KZN schools in November 2020, Prof Metcalfe showed that most responding schools had covered between 50 - 79% of the 'trimmed ATP' for EFAL and Maths in grades 7, 9 and 11, and that they would require a further four weeks or more to catch up (slide 13).

"It is unrealistic to think that learners arrived at the beginning of 2021 with the trimmed ATP for 2020 covered, ready for the recovery ATP, and that that can be mechanically followed. What we need are teachers who can confidently assess learners and plan teaching – and they need to do this in groups." (Prof Mary Metcalfe)

A further survey of KZN principals in January 2021 indicated low levels of confidence in teachers' capacity to use assessment to plan teaching, as well as a low incidence of teachers working in teams to plan their teaching (slide 14).

"The only way we are going to get through the curriculum coverage challenges of Covid-19 is to have teachers supporting each other, and using assessment to plan teaching – not just teaching something because it is in the ATP for a particular week." (Prof Mary Metcalfe)

Budget issues

Meeting the unanticipated requirements for Covid-19 safety interventions was immensely challenging. The fact that this money came from within the education budgets, and especially from within infrastructure budgets, means that there will be long-term consequences for educational provisioning (slides 16 & 17).

Assets that impacted on the provision of schooling during 2020:

"I am completely blown away with admiration for the agency and commitment of school leaders across the country who were solving quite unprecedented challenges that nobody had ever imagined before – they demonstrated their ability to lead, to respond to uncertainty, and their determination to serve their communities." (Prof Metcalfe)

As assets to be celebrated, Prof Metcalfe highlighted (i) the agency and commitment of school leaders to solving problems, (ii) government responsiveness in terms of providing reliable information to inform decision-making, regular and timeous guidelines and curriculum guidance, and (iii) civil society vigilance.

Responses to the questions posed:

- We (as the country, as educators, and as department officials) are still under-estimating the impact of lost time, and of the ongoing interruption to routine, on learning.
- Schools responded to supporting learners with remarkable professional commitment and resilience. However, we need to be vigilant in terms of educator exhaustion, as 2021 will be challenging as well.
- The 2020 school year was indeed saved in that learners have been able to proceed to the next year. At the same time, inequalities have been exacerbated, and the opportunity to learn equitably across the system has been seriously reduced.

"We face the reality of a multi-year catch-up under difficult budgetary conditions – but our assets must keep us positive." (Prof Mary Metcalfe)

Questions and Comments

In response to a question on what she felt needed to be done to recover curriculum not covered in 2020, Prof Metcalfe highlighted these issues:

- Getting back to regular school attendance as soon as possible -- physical distancing requirements had been reduced from 1.5 to 1 metre, opening up possibilities to significantly increase available daily schooling.
- Growing teachers' confidence to work with their colleagues to (i) really understand what learners have learnt and what they need to learn to progress through the next grades, and (ii) plan their teaching for the different subjects and phases very carefully.
- Providing support to enable learners to work and learn effectively at home.

PRESENTATION 2

Click [here](#) to view the presentation.

Key indicators of the interventions and support provided to top achieving District – Mr Rejoice Matlhola, Chief Education Specialist in the Curriculum Delivery Sub-directorate (CLI), Tshwane South District of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE)



This presentation described the immense effort made by Tshwane South District officials, teachers and learners to salvage the 2020 school year. While this summary concentrates on the period between 24 August and the exams in late November, the interventions included provision of materials and support for learning at home. The District anticipated many of the challenges identified by Prof Metcalfe and took steps to mitigate them, wherever possible.

Speaking from the perspective of the practitioner engaged in implementation on-the-ground, Mr Matlhola provided insights into the steps taken by the District that led to it achieving good results, despite the challenges. Key to the District's success was its commitment to dealing effectively and timeously with new requirements and situations that arose during the year. In many instances this meant adopting differentiated approaches to overcome inequalities.

Some significant adjustments and challenges addressed in this presentation (slides 3 &4):

Significant adjustments	Challenges
▪ Lockdown learning	▪ Extremely reduced contact time
▪ Revised ATPs	▪ Less resourced schools hardest hit
▪ Rotational timetabling	▪ Unequal access to virtual modes of learning
▪ Revised assessment weightings	▪ Impact of existing learning gaps
▪ Virtual vs face-to-face modes of learning	▪ Intensified need for self-study through new modes of learning
▪ Learning losses audit	▪ Transition to online/remote learning and teaching

Key interventions by the Tshwane South District:

Mediating the revised ATPs

After receiving the revised ATPs from the department, the District's role was to mediate them to SMTs and teachers, to enable effective implementation of the trimmed curriculum. Because of the short timeframes, the District further customised the already-revised ATPs to enable schools to cover what was needed before the end of year exams. This required subject specialists to adjust the subject planning to prioritise the content, concepts and skills to be covered during terms 3 and 4 of 2020, while identifying those elements that would have to be carried over to 2021 (slides 6 & 7). Material was also summarised to reduce the volume.

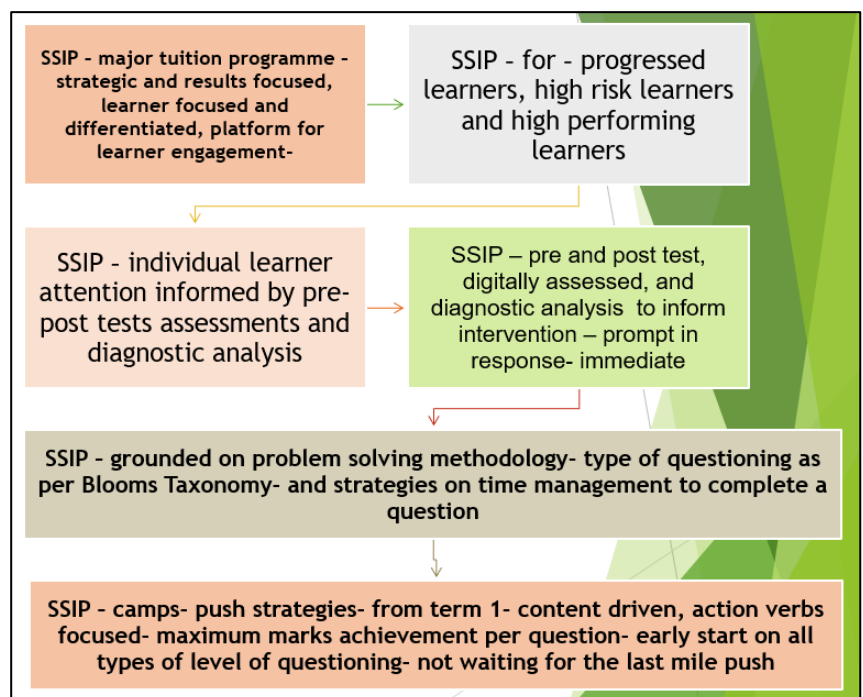
Support for curriculum implementation

The District initiated a range of additional measures to support curriculum implementation, address learning challenges and make effective use of time. These included:

- **Managing and closely monitoring curriculum coverage** in priority schools, to ensure they covered the revised ATPs within the short amount of time available. This comprised a two-week cycle of using multimedia to engage teachers intensively on specific topics, followed by District facilitators visiting schools to verify the extent of learning and, where necessary, providing more support to teachers and the learners. A positive spinoff of this approach was that most teachers and learners were constantly motivated to use available time to cover as much work as possible (slides 8 & 14).
- Assisting schools with **customised timetabling** to optimise contact time.
- Providing teachers and learners with **support for different modes of teaching and learning**, both face-to-face and remote. For learners in less privileged communities this included structuring learning activities and resources that learners would be able to use while at home. To ensure that all learners were catered for, psychologists were involved at District level to work with subject advisors in addressing different school and learner needs (slide 10).
- Subject advisors using a **variety of digital platforms** (e.g., WhatsApp) to engage teachers.

Prioritising support for Grade 12s

The strategy of prioritising Grade 12 for intensive support succeeded in maximising teaching and learning for this cohort. Key to this approach was using the GDE's Secondary Schools Improvement Programme (SSIP) materials – normally used for additional tuition during weekends and holidays – more widely and intensively to engage learners. High performing learners and learners from better-resourced schools were assisted through online learning (e-SIPP). Progressed and high-risk learners were accommodated in face-to-face classes, where the materials could be mediated (slide 11).



Detail from slide 11 giving an indication of the kinds of subject specific extra support the SSIP materials provided.

Providing support for learners in other grades

Providing support for other grades was more challenging due to rotational timetabling; the District therefore focussed on increasing access to learning by supplying (or facilitating access to) a variety of resources for use by schools and learners. This included (i) making sure learners listened to/watched content broadcast on radio and TV, and (ii) sourcing (or creating) and making available subject support resource packs, exemplar papers, SIPP material together with guidelines for its use, lesson plans and content, Siyavula programmes, study guides and video clips (slide 12). The aim was particularly to ensure that public ordinary schools were catered for, while better-resourced schools were able to deal with the material online.

Impact of adjusted assessment weightings – the revised assessment weightings increased the role of teachers' ongoing classroom assessment for grades 4 - 9 to 80% of the final progression mark, which was significant in determining whether learners were promoted. While this strategy "saved the 2020 school year", Mr Matlhola noted that many learners can be expected to have large learning deficits, which will be a challenge to remedy in 2021 and the years to come (slide 15).

Pointers for the future

Tshwane South District is moving ahead with efforts to recover learning lost to Covid-19. This work is being guided by the DBE's Circular S13 of 2020 and is informed by findings from the learning losses audit completed during January. The work includes:

- Providing clear direction to support the implementation of recovery ATPs.
- The entrenchment of assessment for learning as a pedagogical approach.
- Various strategies and resources to address the negative effects of rotational attendance – including measures to realistically support learning at home (slide 17).
- Encouraging schools to add additional time specifically to deal with learning losses carried forward from 2020.

"Going forward, these are the assets that we believe will assist us as we work to recover as much lost ground as we possibly can – because we can't afford to have a situation where the next cohort of learners also goes into another year with learning losses." (Mr Rejoice Matlhola)

04 Presentation 3

Introduction

Dr Anusha Naidu of the LRS Academy introduced the second part of the programme, which enlarged and shifted the focus to look at what the lessons from the pandemic reveal about the bigger challenges within South Africa's education system, and how these lessons can assist in addressing the challenges. Rather than reacting in a piecemeal way, Dr Naidu urged the country to view this as an opportunity to transform the education system itself – and to start by interrogating the relevance of our education for South Africa's learners.

"It will be a lost opportunity if we don't use these learnings to build a reimagined education system." (Dr Anusha Naidu)

In this part of the dialogue, Prof Rouaan Marmaan advocated "six moves" that would (i) keep the existing good practices, (ii) stop the debilitating practices and (iii) start new practices in education.

PRESENTATION 3:

Click [here](#) to view the presentation.

The context of schooling in South Africa: Six moves to unmask Basic Education – Prof Rouaan Maarman, Deputy Dean for Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Western Cape (UWC)



Prof Maarman commenced his presentation by sharing the background to his thinking on education in South Africa. He outlined the way his ideas have been informed by research conducted at UWC, drew links from this research to the impact of the pandemic on education during 2020, and shared ideas on ways of addressing existing system challenges to improve the quality and relevance of South African education.

“Without detracting from the achievements of learners, teachers and school leaders in response to the pandemic, it is important to recognise the many problems that existed long before Covid-19. We have let many opportunities pass by. There is a lot of unmasking that needs to be done so we can reimagine a schooling system to really change the lives of learners – while they are in school and after completion of Grade 12.” (Prof Rouaan Maarman)

Prof Maarman’s research uses the capability approach as a lens to deconstruct understandings of freedoms and constraints in the schooling sector, and has focussed particularly on how poverty affects the capability of communities to participate in and benefit from education.

Six big questions about Basic Education

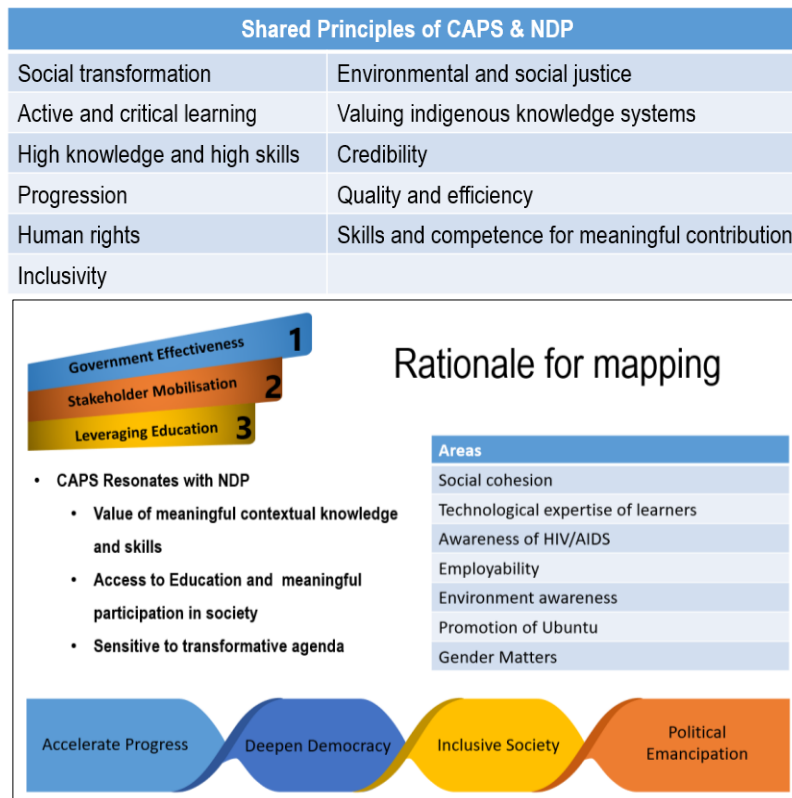
Prof Maarman provided further context by highlighting six issues which impact on the provision or experience of Basic Education in South Africa. He emphasised that all these issues contain elements that are controllable – and that they can therefore be improved:

- Persistent racialized school performance – the “unhealthy” effects of which play out in our education, in the economy, and in our families.
- Lived experiences of learners and teachers – this relates to “how free” teachers are to teach what they value (and is particularly relevant in terms of the positive response by teachers during 2020).
- Two public systems within ‘one’ system – while this relates to the persistence of racialized school performance, there are various heritage systems issues that could be addressed.
- Life-worthiness of schooling – this aspect is especially significant.
- A system that stumbles along, with knee-jerk responses – while particular challenges are prioritised, many of the more obvious issues tend to be missed (this point goes well beyond the pandemic).
- Alignment between systems – for example, how Basic Education aligns with Higher Education, and how that configuration aligns with different sectors of the economy.

Significance of the National Development Plan (NDP) – the NEXUS Project (2018-2019)

Prof Maarman also described how his thinking had been shaped by UWC research relating to the NDP as a mechanism for bringing about impactful change in education. This project created a platform for engaging the National Planning Commission, strengthening the nexus between Basic and Higher Education, and raising youth awareness and understanding of the NDP and its significance for their own lives (slides 4 - 9).

- The work included mapping the NDP onto the CAPS curriculum, which highlighted areas of resonance and shared principles (slides 7 - 8). Prof Maarman observed that there would be value in using the existing resonance between the NDP and CAPS to build learners' understanding of both the NDP and the wider meaning of their school subjects. This approach would increase government effectiveness and support stakeholder mobilisation and the leveraging of education. It would also pave the way toward accelerated progress, a deepening of democracy, a more inclusive society and greater political emancipation.



Detail from slides 7 and 8, showing (i) shared CAPS and the NDP principles and (ii) the mapping of the NDP onto the CAPS curriculum.

Taking stock in 2020

Participants were invited to view these posts on the UWC website which are pertinent to the conversation: *Time to reset schooling for the poor amidst COVID-19*, and *Matric exams and the pandemic: a lost generation?*

Six moves to unmask Basic Education

Prof Maarman used the metaphor of unmasking to emphasise the need to restructure the education system towards life-worthiness, and proposed these “6 moves” to lead the education system forward (slides 11 - 13).

- Revisit the **policy, administration, teaching structure and support services** of the education system – this is overdue in view of the societal changes that have occurred since the development of the goal statements for 2030.
- Develop a **shared understanding of quality education** in the schooling system.
- Strike a healthy **balance between tried and tested best practices in education and educational advancement** in the schooling system – e.g., the futility of giving learners tablets when their schools lack internet access.
- Encourage **authentic innovation in leadership and management** of the system on various levels –e.g., innovative timetabling coupled with extra teacher appointments in key subjects to reduce class size.
- Stop the obtrusive **debilitating practices** that emanate from outdated policy directives – e.g., the Grade 4 switch from mother tongue to English as the language of teaching and learning; this should take place when learners are older, or be phased in¹.

“Currently we are shooting ourselves in the foot with this practice – it is a big one for us as a country because it affects learners through to matric and beyond.” (Prof Rouann Maarman)

¹ This assertion is based on a 10-year project completed by UWC involving South Africa, Kenya and Norway, which found that in terms of the teaching and learning of language, switching at the age of 9/10 was too early.

- Strengthen national and provincial directorates in order to lead the schooling system into the future – e.g., enable **research to lead** the way by establishing provincial research advisory boards to create a shared space for Basic and Higher Education to think deeply and share information about the way forward.

Questions and Comments

It seems a challenging conversation needs to take place between HEIs, researchers like yourself and the Department of Basic Education – is this on the cards?

In response Prof Maarman indicated that the UWC team had engaged the National Planning and the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and started conversations on what could be done and explored. This took place shortly before lockdown, and momentum would need to be rebuilt. However, all four universities in the Western Cape (WC) are represented on the advisory council to the provincial minister and on the Teachers Forum of the WCED. There is thus potential for those conversations to really grow and for Higher and Basic Education to share and work closely together, because they have the same objectives.

05 Closure and Vote of Thanks

In thanking the speakers, participants, organisers, hosts and partners, Victor Ngobeni of the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) noted the wide range of perspectives and experiences shared during this dialogue, and expressed appreciation for the way technology enabled participants to gain access to the knowledge and expertise of the speakers.

The date of the next *Principals Upfront* dialogue will be communicated as soon as information is available.

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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