ZENEX
FOUNDATION

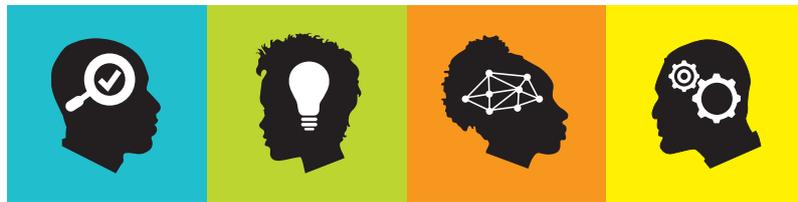## HIGH SCHOOL LEARNER SUPPORT PROJECT MINI-CONFERENCE

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Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

Theme Three:
Creative School Leadership Practices in the Current Policy Context

Acknowledgements

The Zenex Foundation collaborated with the following project team to produce the materials:

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New Forest High School

Ogwini Comprehensive Technical High School

Pinetown Girls' High School

Port Shepstone Secondary School

Ridge Park College

Umbilo Secondary School

ISASA M&E (independent schools)

Dominican Convent School

Felixton College

Inanda Seminary

Kearsney College

LEAP Science & Maths School

Prestige College

St Dominic's Academy

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Environmental Language Education Trust (ELET)

Donor partners

BANKSETA, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Transnet, Volkswagen South Africa and Rand Merchant Bank

Evaluators

Quality Projects in Education (QPIE)

Overview

Introduction

Background

This is a practical resource guide for school leaders, teachers and the broader school community. It was developed for a mini-conference (held on 19 August 2016) to share lessons from the Zenex Foundation High School Learner Support Project which was implemented in public (Inkanyezi Project) and independent (ISASA M&E Programme) schools for ten years between 2006 and 2016. Strategic donor partners like the BANKSETA and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation supported the project in public schools. Transnet, Volkswagen South Africa and Rand Merchant Bank (RMB) through Tshikululu aided the project in independent schools.

This guide was developed as a resource for the school community while bearing in mind the specific educational challenges we face in South African high schools: Firstly, South Africa has low participation rates in Maths and Science with too few Black learners taking these subjects. Secondly, the few learners who take up these subjects, struggle to achieve quality passes.

The guide contains tools and resources stemming from practical experiences and lessons learnt in the Learner Support Project over ten years. It focuses on three themes that were considered quick-win opportunities for schools to adopt creative ideas and apply them to contribute to educational change. The themes covered in this guide are:

1. Creative school leadership practices within the current policy context.

2. Creative models of academic support and mentorship at high school-level.

3. School clubs, and communities of practice in Maths, Science and English: 'benefits and tools'.

Each theme covers four sub-topics. The contents for each topic were presented at the mini-conference in KwaZulu-Natal attended by teachers, school leaders, learners and service providers that were involved and benefitted from the project over ten years. The Zenex Foundation hopes that the guide will aid it users to:

• utilise the resources and tools to support learners.

• increase the uptake in Maths and Science through academic support.

• establish and develop clubs to make Maths, Science and English fun.

• foster creative strategies for implementing language and admission policies.

• consider, develop and implement new methods to improve performance and become better schools.

The Zenex Foundation and its funding partners thank and acknowledge all the schools and service providers for their contributions towards educational change.

Advancing Mathematics, Science and Language education: Project Description

Background

The High School Learner Support Project provided support for learners to improve their academic performance and gain university access through placement and bridging models. The aim was to increase the number of Black (African, Indian and Coloured) school leavers that meet the requirements for university entrance with quality passes in Maths, Science and English in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination.

The Zenex Foundation funded the ISASA Mathematics & English (M&E) Programme in independent schools from 2006 and the Inkanyezi Project in public schools from 2009. The project also received funding from donor partners including BANKSETA, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Transnet, Volkswagen South Africa and Rand Merchant Bank.

The project selected and placed learners with potential from poor functioning public schools into high functioning independent and public schools. It was implemented in nine independent and nine public schools throughout the country. The High School Learner Support Project comprised several components which were common to both the ISASA M&E Programme and the Inkanyezi Project, albeit there was some variation in the forms of support provided to learners.

The components that were standard in both projects were:

- educationally disadvantaged learners from low socio-economic backgrounds were selected in Grade 9 to enter project schools in Grade 10.

- schools that could provide quality tuition in Maths, Science and English were chosen.

- bursaries were provided for learners to attend these schools.

The components that vary included:

- academic support in the form of extra tuition by external tutors or school teachers was provided.

- counselling and mentorship which take different forms were either undertaken by external counsellors or school principals or handled by the school coordinators or life orientation teachers.

- support for special needs in the form of transport for excursions was provided.

The **Tertiary Access Project** was initiated in 2010. The project assisted learners to access and obtain financial support for their tertiary studies. It did this by providing career assessment and guidance, life skills training, support for applications to tertiary institutions and for bursary applications, bridging finance for university application costs, assisting learners to register for the National Benchmark Test (NBT), and helping learners with university registration. The project also tracked students, maintained a database of students, and developed an alumni network through social media platforms like Facebook.

The Zenex Foundation supported additional activities to build communities of practice – including communities of practice for leadership, teachers and school clubs – and ensured learner participation in inter- and intra-school competitions and Olympiads. The project was evaluated and its lessons were documented from initiation to completion and the project continues to track learners at university. The evaluations were done by Quality Projects in Education (QPiE) led by Professor Paul Hobden. The evaluations took place between 2008 and 2013 and considered cohorts that completed the NSC between 2009 and 2013.

Key successes of the projects

The Foundation marked its 20th anniversary in 2015 and this afforded it an opportunity to reflect on its achievements and successes over the last 20 years.

Through the High School Learner Support Project, the Zenex Foundation made a significant contribution to growing the pool of quality passes in Maths, Science and English at Grade 12 (matric) level among Black (African, Coloured and Indian) learners with potential from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project prides itself on the following achievements:

- R120 million was invested between 2006 and 2016 to provide Maths, Science and English support to selected learners from Grades 8 to 12.

- a total of 1 615 learners were reached.

- 1 183 learners attained Bachelor passes (qualification for university entry) and achieved more than 60% in Maths, Science and English.

Lessons from the evaluation of the project informed the holistic approach of the project to provide additional academic support to learners with potential in the form of:

- mentorship and psycho-social support.

- support to schools (including school leadership and teacher support).

- tertiary access support to help successful learners enter tertiary education upon their exit from the project through the Tertiary Access Project which, since 2011, facilitated university admission (including securing financial support) for 828 learners.

Contents

Topic One:
Extending the benefits of a funded project to the whole school

Making projects work for schools – leveraging more from a project to the benefit of the school.

Background

One of the intentions of the Inkanyezi Project was to facilitate change within the school environment. Introducing Inkanyezi as a project to eleven schools, across KwaZulu-Natal, meant different things to the various schools. For some this was a first, never before had some of the schools implemented a project with external funding, while for other schools Inkanyezi was seen as a means of broadening their partnership base and they added Inkanyezi to their bouquet of other externally funded projects or initiatives. For some, initially introducing the project was quite a traumatic experience as the schools had to set up new reporting, monitoring and accountability structures. While for other schools, the introduction of Inkanyezi into the school was seamless and flowed, almost as a natural process. It quickly became apparent, schools included in the Project were very different, with diverse needs and priorities and that each school was going to make Inkanyezi their own, in their own particular, specific or individual way.

Umbilo Secondary, grabbed the opportunity afforded them under Inkanyezi to try new things, to stretch their boundaries of thinking and develop the school in different and various ways. The Principal of Umbilo Secondary, Mr Muller, is indeed a visionary leader and saw Inkanyezi not only as a change agent, but that it could be a vehicle to do more for the school, to do things differently, to try new approaches and further develop the school as a resource for the community.

What we did

Through their trust, Inkanyezi gave us confidence

Umbilo is the only Section 20 School (under the South African Schools Act) on the Inkanyezi Project, and one of the big changes that the project brought about was how the school would approach possible funders and donors in the future. The principal indicated that receiving a substantial amount of money provided under the Inkanyezi grant, directly into the school account, was an invaluable testament of faith, confidence and trust. This boosted the principal to approach other sponsors with a new found confidence and he could illustratively use the Inkanyezi experience to strengthen his "bargaining power". He indicated that as a result the school was able to fundraise substantial amounts for projects they had envisioned.

> *The faith that Zenex Foundation placed in our school, by paying us a generous grant in the first year of Inkanyezi, for the school to administer, manage and control, was invaluable. It gave the principal the confirmation and backing to approach other funders and sponsors for substantial amounts of money and provided evidence that the school could effectively manage and administer funds.*

Inkanyezi enabled us to develop our infrastructure

Within the first year of implementing Inkanyezi, Umbilo Secondary determined that it was critical that the school establish a multi-media centre with a computer laboratory for the learners. Through prudent measures of financial management, the school was able to optimise the funds they received, they approached other funders, sought matched funding where possible and over a few years, self-built a wonderful multi media centre, equipped with 20 computers, e-readers and other visual and audio equipment. Not only did this prove to be an invaluable resource to the learners of the school, but the broader community as well. With time the first floor development became a double-story building with a magnificent and fully equipped science laboratory above the media centre, and some extra ablution facilities. This building soon became the heart of Umbilo secondary, with learners and educators moving in and out making the most of the new structure, and also serving as a meeting and conference venue for the school and broader community.

> *We are so proud of our school. We love the new media centre and we can now go and use computers for our projects and research. Never before have we been able to do this at Umbilo (Learner)*

Inkanyezi inspired us to try different models and approaches

The Inkanyezi Project encouraged change within the school environment and urged schools to try things to strengthen the Mathematics and Sciences departments. Umbilo Secondary took up this challenge and tried various things to inspire and motivate the teaching staff.

- One approach was to take the struggling mathematics learners in the GET phase, and place them in a separate class group during the mathematics period, with a seasoned and experienced teacher who then took these learners back to the basics and tried to identify their learning gaps and address these before they were placed back in the mainstream class.

- Another approach was to employ additional teachers and ensure that the mathematics classes were small groups to allow learners more individualised support.

- Umbilo Secondary also found that additional classes, offered both by educators and external tutors, have assisted with curriculum coverage and supporting learners with individual challenges. The school offers a formal programme of extra tuition and motivational sessions in the senior grades across all subjects. Parents fundraise for this intervention and they are able to appoint excellent tutors to help the learners.

Schools within a school

Through Inkanyezi, the school was encouraged to reflect on practices and to analyse the achievements of learners with subjects and groups. This reflective process has led to the school developing a turnaround strategy and remodelling how the school is viewed and administered.

> *"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" – Albert Einstein*

The school has developed a "school within a school" model, where each grade is effectively their own school, with their own name and the grade controller is now an "internal principal". Educators within the internal school assume greater responsibility for certain aspects of their learners – such as late coming, uniform compliance, fund-raising and discipline. Each grade has developed a vision statement for their respective internal school. Even administrative support staff have been assigned to various internal schools.

While this is still a new initiative, introduced in 2016, the reports indicate that there is new energy within the school. Teachers are excited by this initiative and feel a greater sense of ownership and involvement.

What did we learn?

Projects have many unintended consequences...

All too often the success (or failure) and impact of a project is measured according to achievements aligned to the project objective/s or goal. Umbilo has shown, as have many other schools on the Inkanyezi Project, that projects, especially on a local level, have many unanticipated or unforeseen outcomes. Umbilo Secondary has taken the Inkanyezi project, implemented all the aspects as required to meet the intended goal, but has then gone further and used Inkanyezi and the opportunities provided to do more and to do different things. The school has developed its infrastructure, which will continue way beyond the life of Inkanyezi, to strengthen and support the efforts of learners and teachers at Umbilo. The school has tried, tested and attempted different things, approaches and practices. Some have been very effective and others less effective, but through this the school has been strengthened and moved forward.

Umbilo has always prided itself in being visionary and introducing change when necessary. As a school they strive to remain the "school of choice" in the Wentworth area.

Projects can create the space and much needed confidence for schools to effect change...

Although "the recipe for success" is known, the school recognises that some of the "ingredients" can and must be improved. (Mr Muller, Umbilo)

Functional schools are generally reflective spaces and a "good school knows it can't do it all, so seeks to do what's necessary exceptionally well." (http://www.teachthought.com/learning/the-characteristics-of-a-good-school-great-school/) Umbilo has shown how a school can take a project and "use the space" provided by the project to do more for the school and to try and test various things and approaches. Through trying different things changes can be made to strengthen the school and bring it closer to its own vision and goal.

Topic 2:
Creative ways of applying staff development policies in schools

Staff Development: Exploring opportunities within a learner support project

Background

Within the context of an education development initiative such as the Inkanyezi Project, staff development will necessarily focus on teachers, so our lessons from the project consequently draw attention to this aspect.

However, as we reflect, we acknowledge that schools are complex and dynamic environments with many role players converging to ensure their successful functioning. The professional development of school staff is an inclusive enterprise involving people from school management right through to administrative support staff. Some efforts of the project were of a formal nature, some arose out of communities of practice (see Theme 1 in this series), and others were simply as a response to the demands of managing and implementing a complex school-based development programme.

> *Staff development may be defined as the processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills or attitudes of employees. Participants in staff development activities may include governing board members, office administrators, principals and teachers.*

The Inkanyezi Project, formerly named the Learners in Public Schools Programme KwaZulu-Natal, was originally conceived as a five-year learner support programme, modelled on similar placement programmes operating largely in the independent school sector. The objective (in very simplified terms) was to identify and place learners from disadvantaged backgrounds into good performing public schools from which the academic and psychosocial benefits would flow.

> *Placement programmes take talented children from deprived backgrounds out of their schools, and often out of their homes and communities as well.*

The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) in its policy research summary, Options for Talented Learners from Disadvantaged Backgrounds (2010), reviewed ten placement programmes, all of which identify academic, social and emotional support as key components.

Significantly, none of the programmes surveyed by CDE specifically identified staff development as a necessary ingredient in the support mix. Placement programmes presume that host schools have pre-existing systems and the capacity to provide academic and other forms of support to ensure the success of beneficiary learners.

What we did – an evolving model

In keeping with established placement programme models, neither staff development nor teacher development were part of the original project design. However, schools selected to host learners

specifically requested the inclusion of a teacher support component.

The project started with a lean offering of a few professional seminars for mathematics and science teachers coupled with follow-up school support visits. This was quickly expanded in the second year of implementation to include English teachers in line with the core funder's (the Zenex Foundation) priorities and then further extended to included life orientation teachers, counsellors and mentors. These teacher development programmes mirrored the learner focus of the school-based programme by concentrating on mathematics, science, English and mentorship.

The project management component was designed as a technical support offering to participating schools to both manage and support project implementation at school level and to facilitate the provision of a range of additional activities. This approach provided the flexibility to adapt support as emergent needs were identified. For example, the Zenex Foundation and its partner funders made additional support mechanisms available over the course of the programme, including two of particular importance: the Tertiary Access Project and the Differentiated Academic Support Research Project.

In the project's final iteration another staff development opportunity was added in the form of bursaries for school and project-linked personnel. The bursaries provided opportunities for staff to pursue formal programmes linked to their role in the project and was sponsored by the BankSETA which had joined the Zenex Foundation and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation as funding partners.

In addition to these elements, specific activities offered by the project included:

- annual leadership seminars for school principals and key school-based project personnel such as the project coordinators.

- three teacher seminars each year over the eight-year period with a total of 21 seminars offered on the first or second Saturday of each term.

- tuition support workshops to build specific skills presented as an out-of-school-time tuition programme with a particular focus on implementing a differentiated teaching methodology, self-directed learning and metacognitive strategies.

- school-based support visits to reinforce and support the implementation of work covered at the seminars and workshops.

What did we learn?

Schools know …

The request from host schools to include teacher professional development as a collateral benefit of their involvement in the project demonstrated a depth of insight and foresight into their own capacity to manage and implement the programme. It also foregrounded a recognition by better performing schools of the importance of teacher development.

Schools were aware of the contractual requirement to offer academic, social and emotional support services to beneficiary learners. However, their requests for an expanded support programme that included teacher professional development, significantly enriched the model, notwithstanding the inherent complexities and demands of its incorporation.

One school in particular has established a culture of staff development well beyond the scope of support provided by the project. By networking with other schools and through formal networks, such as the South African Principals' Association, the schools were able to identify speakers and

trainers and share the cost of bringing them in to address staff.

Mind the gap(s) ...

Beneficiary learners joined their new schools from feeder schools where the quality of foundational conceptual knowledge in focus subjects was uncertain, and to some extent schools were aware of the academic bridges they would have to cross. The learner selection process was designed to identify potential, but the reality was that learners' knowledge gaps were sometimes vast.

The project responded by providing professional support in new techniques like diagnostic assessments, gap filling activities, metacognitive strategies and specific subject content, amongst others. The project initially gained support for the implementation of these strategies from a cohort of teachers engaged in the Differentiated Academic Support Action Research Project which culminated in the production of a facilitators' programme for out-of-school-time tutors. Following the first year of the Action Research Project, the approach was cascaded to the remaining schools, teachers and tutors. This presented its own challenges.

> *Given that most tutors are experienced teachers, we first need to convince them that there is a more effective way of providing support than they normally use. This is a big challenge and requires workshop facilitators with high levels of sensitivity to the complexity of professional development and teacher change. Only once you, the facilitator, 'believe' will support-tutors be motivated to change their way of providing 'extra lessons'. (QPiE 2015)*

The teacher development team was aware of the challenges of effecting teacher change. Achieving the significant shifts expected of participating teachers did not come easily, more especially so when it came to cascading this beyond the initial research group. Building 'belief' in the approach required more time.

Some schools within the programme have extended beyond the focus on identifying learner knowledge gaps by also engaging with teachers from learners' feeder primary schools, providing support, and sharing ideas for improving the quality of pipeline learners.

Shifting mindsets ...

The project was not specifically designed as a content-driven professional development programme, but feedback from participating teachers revealed a demand for support in this area. This provided the space for the project to explore other areas of instructional support and stimulated new research into learning, mindsets, developing data-analysis skills, gamification of learning, and ICT skills, amongst others. The professional development programme stimulated some teachers and schools to shift their approaches to teaching. However, this depended on their individual motivation and the presence of supportive school leadership. At its most successful some school management teams lead the charge by providing ongoing staff development opportunities and implementing simple zero costs ideas like eliminating ability grouping, focussing on learner feedback techniques, and strengthening staff networks.

Depth versus breadth ...

Schools reported that while some of the teacher development activities provided breadth of exposure to a wide range of innovations and ideas, there were missed opportunities to develop a deep competence to take these from theories to practical classroom applications. An improved approach would be to focus on fewer ideas and develop these over consecutive sessions. Furthermore the invitational approach resulted in inconsistent attendance at development

seminars. School leadership in particular felt that mandatory participation would allow for more lasting skills development and professional networks.

From staff development to communities of practice …

We reflected on the emergence of communities of practice in Theme 1. It is impossible to disentangle the impact of these professional learning networks from the developmental role they played for staff members at schools that embraced them. We also witnessed innovations such as staff exchanges, and in some cases saw school leadership taking bold, research-supported decisions to tackle issues around assessment and classroom practice in general.

The long haul …

Research and practice in education development posits that teacher development is not a one-off event. Our experience in the Inkanyezi Project emphatically supports this view that teachers need to be engaged on a journey of learning.

For the teachers in the programme our destination was not always clear and the route therefore was at risk of becoming a meandering one. Fortunately our goal was always to improve performance in mathematics, science and English for a selected group of learners, which served as an important guiding light.

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Topic 3:
Operationalising the language policy within the context of a KwaZulu-Natal school

Language Policies at Inanda Seminary: Changing with the times

Background

Inanda Seminary used to offer five languages prior to the National Curriculum Statement coming into effect in Further Education and Training in 2006: English as the medium of instruction, isiZulu, Afrikaans, German and French. Every learner in the school was required to take three languages. However, when the new curriculum required learners to take seven compulsory subjects, it was no longer financially viable for the school to continue offering three languages to learners.

What policies were adopted?

The following policies/protocols were instituted:

- The school offers two languages at two different levels: English Home and First Additional and isiZulu Home and First Additional. Learners choose one language at Home Language-level and a different language at First Additional Language-level.
- In the General Education and Training phase (Grades 8 and 9) both languages are taught at a Home Language-level.
- Learners who struggle in the General Education and Training phase are offered interventions: isiZulu classes are presented after hours and there are book clubs, teacher assistants, and an English remedial programme for learners who need help with English.
- For assessment/promotion purposes in the General Education and Training phase, the subject in which a learner scores the highest marks in is considered to be their Home Language and the other their First Additional Language. (Promotion requires 50% in Home Language and 40% in First Additional Language.)
- If a learner scores high in both English and isiZulu, the learner selects which subject he/she would like to take in Grade 10 at Home Language-level.
- If a learner scores poorly in both languages, it is strongly recommended that he/she takes their mother tongue at Home Language-level.
- If the learner is not isiZulu, it is recommended that the learner takes English at Home Language-level.

Why are these policies needed?

- English has been the medium of instruction at the school since its inception 147 years ago.
- Inanda Seminary is a proudly South African school with African learners. The mission

statement of the Seminary declares that: "Inanda Seminary provides a Christian educational environment with an African ethos for its members to develop holistically in leadership, life skills, integrated technology, critical thinking, social development and sport."

- We frequently have children from isiZulu families who have attended schools where isiZulu is offered only at a Second Additional Language-level and while they can speak their mother tongue well, they frequently are not as adept at reading and writing in it. This is of grave concern to us.

- As a school for African children it was decided that one of the official languages had to be an African language. The school is situated in KwaZulu-Natal and the majority of learners attending the school are isiZulu speakers, so it was the language chosen alongside English as the medium of instruction.

- Parents often want to select subjects for their children and are not fully aware of the differences in taking a subject at Home- or First Additional Language-level.

- If a learner is truly disadvantaged (the Maths & English Programme was designed to identify and support such learners), their English language skills are often not strong.

- There was a perception, which is fading now, that tertiary institutions favoured learners who had English at Home Language-level.

How were these policies implemented?

- We host a parent information meeting in Grade 9 to assist parents to better understand subject choices, including language choices.

- We interview every applicant wishing to come to the Seminary by having a simple conversation in English so we can understand whether the applicant can have a conversation in English and can read.

- Letters of recommendation about Home Language and First Additional Language subject choices are included in the Grade 9 report at the end of the third and fourth terms. Parents still have the final word about the subject chosen for Home Language and First Additional Language.

- If a learner in the Further Education and Training phase continues to struggle in Home Language, parents are involved in subject change decisions after Terms 1 and 2 in Grade 10 and even in Term 1 of Grade 11.

What lessons did we learn?

- When a learner struggles with English, that learner often struggles in all subjects as English is the medium of instruction.

- When a learner changes from English Home Language to English First Additional Language in Grade 10 or Grade 11, there is a marked improvement in all the subjects. The reason for this is that the Home Language-level is extensive – deep and interpretive as well as wide – and the teacher teaching at this level would assume that every learner has basic English acquisition and is ready to go deep into the language at this level. There is no time available in English (or isiZulu) Home Language classes for basic language acquisition or improvement.

- Contrary to that, teachers who teach English at First Additional Language-level have a very different approach. They are able to spend time developing a competence in the language which transfers across the curriculum. A noticeable improvement in results in all subjects is frequently apparent when a struggling Home Language learner changes to First Additional Language.

- When learners are allowed to take English at First Additional Language-level it benefits them enormously and lifts pressure off their total curriculum. We saw that this did not jeopardise their final achievement as they could still speak and write English very well and were sought after by tertiary institutions.

- A language subject change cannot be done at the end of Grade 11 going into Grade 12 as learners are only allowed to change ONE subject at this point. A change from Home Language to First Additional Language necessitates another subject being changed from First Additional Language to Home Language. This is construed as two subject changes and therefore not permitted.

- We seldom if ever get distinctions in English Home Language despite having very competent learners. They often just do not have the final edge because it is not their mother tongue.

What worked and what did not work?

- When learners heed the advice of teachers about the recommended language level, we noticed we had happy learners who achieved well.

- When learners insist on doing a particular subject at Home Language-level and they do not have enough mastery in the subject, such learners struggled and became reserved and afraid to bring their voices into the educational space in language classes.

- When a non-isiZulu learner is admitted to the school and lacks confidence in English, many interventions have to be put in place to assist the learner to get 50% in Home Language for their Bachelors pass.

- Non-isiZulu learners taking isiZulu at a First Additional Language-level acquire the language quickly as they are immersed in it through our boarding school. We frequently have non-isiZulu learners getting distinctions for isiZulu First Additional Language.

- Learners are still influenced in their choice of Home Language or First Additional Language by who teaches the subject.

- Learners are beginning to realise that if they are chasing distinctions, it is easier to get a Home Language distinction in your mother tongue than in another language. Since the universities have declared that they do not discriminate against learners without English at Home Language-level, more learners are choosing English as First Additional Language and isiZulu as Home Language.

- The single most important thing we need to do in schools is to develop reading competence. A reading student is a learning student and a growing student and a communicating student. Such students will become global students.

Topic 4:
Using a parent mentorship programme to improve school performance

We all need a champion or a mentor. What value do they bring and what do they offer?

Background

Inkanyezi Project schools employed mentoring, as a process, to provide additional support to participating learners. Mentoring was a critical tool that assisted learners to adjust to the new school environment, especially if they were 'outreach' learners. Mentors helped learners deal with the demands of the project.

Over the past eight years, the role and extent of mentoring within the Inkanyezi Project has evolved and has been strengthened, and some schools have taken this notion even further and adapted it to their circumstances.

Mentoring is an **intentional** activity, it is a **nurturing** process fostering the growth and development of the protégé toward full maturity. It is an insightful process where the wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied to the mentee. Most importantly, it is a **supportive** and **protective** process.

Studies have shown that mentoring can have a positive effect on learner (student) performance in the following 4 areas (King, Vidourek, Davis & McClellan 2002):

  1) relationship building

  2) self-esteem enhancement

  3) goal setting

  4) academic assistance.

> *Results showed significant improvement in mentored students' self-esteem levels and their relationship to school, peers, and family. Mentored students were also shown to be less likely to be depressed or involved in bullying and fighting.*

Further studies have shown that mentoring can make a significant impact on learner aspirations and career vision (King et al. 2002, Lee & Cramond 1999). The results of observations of learners, attending mentorship programmes over different timeframes, have indicated that the time spent in a mentorship programme affects the learners' progress. However, mentoring programmes cannot simply be based on short-term interventions, but should be part of a whole-school development plan.

The socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development benefits of mentorship have been identified in research (Rhodes 2005). Umbilo Secondary, one of the project schools in Wentworth, launched their own Champion Mentorship Programme in 2015. The school and learners have reaped

several benefits and continue to grow and strengthen this intervention.

What we did

The Umbilo Champion Mentorship Programme assigned a parent or guardian to a group of between six and ten learners from a Grade 12 class. The programme trained and supported mentors to prepare them to take on their role. The role of the mentor was to keep regular contact with the learner through social media, phone calls or at times visits, and to inspire, encourage and motivate the learner. Often, the mentor was a person willing to listen, someone who cared and showed interest in the young person's life and the challenges they face.

> *About having a mentor ... I felt delighted knowing that we could count on somebody to help us get through our last year. My champion parent Mrs. X was very comforting and helpful. She used to check up on me before exams and wish me all the best. She would make sure that I am studying every day and also find out whether I passed each term and motivated me to do better every time. (Learner)*

The mentors also worked with the parents of the learners assigned to them to alert and remind parents of assignment and test dates. Mentors held regular 'coffee mornings' with their parents to provide them with the support they required. Under the programme, the school set up Sunday study sessions for learners who did not have the necessary facilities or quiet space at home. The mentors supervised these sessions by volunteering two Sundays in a year.

The mentors all provided their time pro bono and at no cost to the programme.

> *I was very close to just giving up, but was rescued on this day and they gave me hope. It really benefited me. I'm so truly gratefully to have met my mentor. (Learner)*

- In addition to providing the learners and parents with the regular support, the Umbilo Champion Mentorship Programme arranged other events with exciting guest speakers to equip and motivate learners, parents and teachers. These included:

- Sessions on study skills incorporating time management, goal setting, dealing with distractions and procrastination and managing stress.

- A 'Dare to be different' campaign, covering topics such as: 'Who are you?', 'Breaking free and managing change', and 'Sexual, health and other issues you may face'.

- Ntokozo Hlongwane, author of How to finish Grade 12 with maximum distinctions was invited to share his experiences with learners. His message was that one can learn from failure. He also discussed techniques and skills to master schooling in matric while stressing that they first had to master themselves.

- Pat and Sha Coetzee from 'Dreambuilders' presented workshops and different projects across the schools. They worked with the learners, parents, teachers and mentors. Their programmes included: the '100-day challenge', the 'For the love of it' intervention, the 'My life' programme, and the 'Being an inspirational player and leaving a legacy' programme. In addition they facilitated the life orientation-focussed programme, 'Unlocking the secret within", with all the female Grade 8 learners of Umbilo.

- Professor Jonathan Jansen presented a motivational talk. He emphasised the choices learners make and how easy it is for them to become like the friends they mix with. He highlighted the importance of a value system underpinned by respect, love, discipline etc. He encouraged

learners to strive to go further and be better than their parents, to work hard, persevere and view failure as a stepping stone to success. Learners were encouraged not to let their past determine their future.

> *No matter where you come from, it doesn't determine where you are going to be. You need to reach for the stars to achieve greatness and nothing is accomplished without hard work.*

> *I learnt that I am capable of more than I think I am. (Learners)*

The Umbilo Champion Mentorship Programme also focussed on providing extra tuition, using external facilitators, to all Grade 12 learners. Umbilo teachers also provided extra lessons. The lessons were presented ahead of the school term, during the school term, at weekends and during the holidays.

> *Spring school was truly helpful and it got me off holiday mode which helped me to get home and continue working, I see my marks are improving.*

> *... My marks made a huge improvement, especially in languages, and the external tutors gave us a different outlook at our work. (Learners)*

Volunteers offered many of these interventions, while sponsorships covered some, but a number of activities did incur costs. The Champion Mentorship Programme received independent funding and did not draw against the school fund account. The programme also undertook its own income generating activities, including curry days, dances and ladies' breakfasts. The programme kept a separate fund and provided monthly income and expenditure reports to the mentors. Through the year, R78 144 was raised in sponsorships and fundraising events for the programme. In January 2015, the school pledged and later donated R20 000 to the Matric Fund, bringing the annual income to R98 144. Total expenditure for the year amounted to R82 213, so 2016 started with a small balance in their account.

What did we learn?

We all have a role to play ...

Unbelievable things can be achieved when teachers, parents and learners work together in a supportive school environment. When one of these critical partners drops the ball, or do not play their part, the others cannot do it alone.

Learners admitted that it was most beneficial to have someone by their side in the final year of their schooling. Parents indicated that they felt part of their children's schooling just by being reminded of critical and assessment dates, and having a peer to talk things through with was invaluable.

Parents willingly participated in fundraising activities because the project engaged and informed them beforehand. The school had huge success in raising the required funds. This was unheard of before in this community!

Mentoring requires commitment and support ...

It is important to understand how to replicate the positive relationships between mentors and mentees. Mentorship can be a form of oppression when it goes wrong. Positive mentoring has to be coached, monitored and supported. As with counselling, boundaries have to be agreed and adhered to. Mentors need to be supported as much as mentees. Mentoring requires commitment beyond that of the mentors themselves, however, the value of mentoring continues to be evident in schools even when they suffer from resourcing difficulties (Karcher 2005).

Consider the experience of others …

The Umbilo Champion Mentorship Programme offered some reflections after their first year of implementation:

- Establish a separate and focussed fundraising committee to support the programme.
- Encourage more group studying and peer support. In Term 3, the programme observed learners teaching each other in groups. It should be encouraged early in the year as learners really benefitted from this.
- Don't exceed the ratio of eight learners to a mentor. This will lead to mentors leaving or becoming overwhelmed. The mentoring will be of a good quality and the programme will have a greater chance of success. Mentors have to be in tune with their eight learners and they will know first-hand what challenges their learners experience and how they can assist them. Play an objective, professional role.
- From the outset, everyone must agree to keep their eye and focus on goals and objectives for the year and group dynamics are not negotiable. This was a key success of 2015.
- Ensure that the motivational programme for teachers is intensified. Mentors and the principal must work together to achieve this.
- Support Grade 12 learners through counselling and career guidance.
- Establish a different and separate strategy for struggling and progressed learners. Don't expect them just to fit in or catch up.
- Implement a zero tolerance policy for learners who don't attend all additional and supplementary, Saturday and holiday classes and events.
- Present the testing programme six months in advance and adhere to it. Discuss test results on a monthly basis. Guide learners to learn from their mistakes.

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