

Bridge's communities of practice for school principals – A driver of innovation in South African education



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The work of *Bridge* – an innovation agency in South African education

The education system is rife with dysfunction and yet filled with creative innovation. This anomaly led to the emergence of Bridge, an organisation which aims to create linkages between instances of effective practice in the belief that connecting what works can have the effect of changing the system for the better. Bridge is an education-focused non-profit organisation that links innovators in education in South Africa. Its mission is:

“to connect key leverage areas in the education system with working practice, and where necessary to create working practice, in a way that optimises diversity and values so that the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts”¹

Innovation in the context of *Bridge* is not the creation of something new, but rather the deepening and combining of what already works. *Bridge's* model of scale is, therefore, relational. It focuses on connecting and spreading multiple points of successful practice through understanding their collective impact on the entire education system. This differs from, but is complementary to, traditional models of scale, which focus on finding particular models and rolling them out at scale, or on driving scale through large policy-driven interventions.

The community of practice as a driver of innovation

Bridge brings together a range of innovators in education and it connects them in organising units with specific objectives that can link and spread successful practice. *Bridge's* strategy in this regard is the use of a ‘community of practice’ approach to promoting the sharing of good and effective educational practices so that there can be an increase in common purpose, a reduction in duplication, a maximising of resources, and an impact on policy so that the education system as a whole can benefit.

The foundational building block of a community of practice needs to be trust. *Bridge* has discovered that, without the development of trust and peer support, the objectives of a community of practice will not be met. When trust is developed, however, remarkable collaborations can take place. An example is a *Bridge* community of primary school principals in Gauteng, which agreed that the member schools would like all Grade 7s leaving their schools to be tested in numeracy to determine where the teaching gaps are. An examination of the data has allowed individual schools to identify weak areas in the teaching across the different schools and also for better co-ordination between primary and secondary schools in this geographical area.

Communities of practice are not just gatherings of people with similar interests. They are groups of practitioners who share an interest in a field and who collectively learn how to perform better in that domain as they work together and regularly engage. *Bridge* has, for example, seen one group of principals in a community of practice share a primary school booklet, with tests and text for the foundation phase, which was developed by one principal in the group.

Rather than slow, costly learning from experience, the deliberate development and support of communities of practice offer a way to empower members for well-judged responsibility and action.

The community of practice as a tool of innovation provides three main levers of change to its members:

- it develops confidence;
- it develops trust; and
- it develops a sense of belonging and shared identity.

Communities of practice assume that learning is collective, social, and comes from our experience of participating in daily life rather than from an isolated or academic pursuit. Rather than slow, costly learning from experience, the deliberate development and support of communities of practice offer a way to empower members for well-judged responsibility and action. Pleasingly, in the case of one *Bridge* community of practice of principals, the members now attend district meetings as a group, and sit with each other and not as individuals. A set of principals which, in this case, were historically divided, are now homogenous.

Communities of practice are fundamentally different from, and offer much more to participants, than the disciplinary and professional knowledge offered by professional learning communities, which focus on a specific subject or skill. Much more importantly, though, they offer morale-building fellowship and resources for exercising power with good judgment. Communities of practice allow for the development of collective wisdom and collective action. This collective action is not reactive, though. In successful communities of practice, there is a building of a range of innovative solutions to problems as well as a shared applied vision of good educational delivery.

Bridge's methodology for communities of practice stresses the importance of the voluntary participation in these communities of their members. Participants are encouraged to set their own collective agenda. Their developmental needs emerge organically from within their own contexts, and they are encouraged to engage in reflective practice, thus learning from experience and gaining new insights into their work. The main purpose is to support participants to work together to become empowered and central agents of change in education. The sharing of vision and

the growth of collective problem-solving approaches are greatly beneficial, and with these the potential for empowering participants is great. One *Bridge* community of practice for principals has seen the development of a brief for principals, designed by a member, about how to ensure that a School Governing Body (SGB) election runs smoothly, and what the legislation involved is. His willingness to share his experience of potential pitfalls has been to the benefit of the group.

The role of the facilitator in the community of practice

The facilitator is central to the success and meaningfulness of *Bridge's* community of practice intervention. The complex and varied dynamics of communities of practice mean that this role requires a mature and sophisticated Development Professional in this position. The facilitator needs to be able to bring to life the vision of the community in a spirit of co-creation, symbiosis and collaboration rather than in one of competition or threat. This involves encouraging the participants to move beyond a position that seeks competitive advantage and to value the work of a group working collaboratively.

They are expected to carry out day-to-day administrative duties, handle the management of a school and exercise professional judgment. In addition, they are expected to articulate a vision and provide the effective organisational and instructional leadership needed so that teachers can succeed.

The facilitator also needs to identify and clarify the community's own understanding of both its challenges and opportunities, as well as to develop its sense of what it can do to meet its challenges and maximise its opportunities. To accomplish this, the facilitator must put aside any belief that problems can be solved for the community. Only the community of practice can work for and achieve the change that is possible.

Working with school principals

Although *Bridge* convenes and facilitates communities of practice in a wide range of focus areas, it has a growing and particular commitment to communities of practice for school principals because of its belief that principals are agents of change within the broader system, both individually and collectively. International experience and research emphasise that the principal, more than any other role player in the system, holds the key to school improvement. The leadership, management and administrative structures provided by principals are essential for teachers to discover and exercise their competence. These principals can therefore provide the environment for competent teaching, without which public education could potentially fail.

In spite of the centrality of the principal, however, the education and training of principals often provide very little preparation for the range of responsibilities they are required to perform. They are expected to carry out day-to-day administrative duties, handle the management of a school and exercise professional judgment. In addition, they are expected to articulate a vision and provide the effective organisational and instructional leadership needed so that teachers can succeed.

Even the best education system cannot offer complete support for principals, and interventions by central departments and district offices are only part of the support that principals need. The social reality of school communities is one of local autonomy where central authorities may provide guidance and even inspiration at times, but may be seen as interfering, frustrating, or ineffectual to others. The effective principal at the centre of the school system can be a powerful positive force

in utilising this autonomy while drawing on the resources offered by the authorities and other community and business stakeholders. The competent principal must be accountable to the authorities and formal structures, but is above all responsible for the growth of the school as a whole. The principal is thus the link between the hierarchical structure of the department and district offices but also, between the stakeholders of the school and local community. However, these competing demands can leave principals feeling disempowered, exhausted, and incapable of dealing with the stresses of these pressures. While this poses threats to both principals and schools, and can expose their weaknesses, it is precisely in relation to this tension where a community of practice can provide an opportunity for collaborative transformation.

Case study: the South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition

Within a community of practice, the development of a sense of relationship and commitment among its members is most important. In this regard, there is a lot to be said for the highly specific, attainable project that is carried out by the members of the community and which deepens the bonds between them. An example of this can be found in the work of one of *Bridge's* communities of practice for school leaders: The South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition².

The Coalition is a self-regulating collection of leaders of intervention-based independent and public schools and supporting organisations. All of the schools in the Coalition are committed to the continued creation, implementation and dissemination of innovative, high-quality and sustainably affordable educational practices, processes and models directed at providing access to, and ensuring success for, socio-economically vulnerable children. Collectively, they form a community of practice that is committed to transforming the lives of children disadvantaged by the realities of poverty.

Through understanding what effective practice is, the ultimate objective is to integrate this effective practice into broader educational policy decisions within the national context, influencing and supporting the dialogue around a potential impact school movement in South Africa.

When it first formed in 2010, the Coalition defined its own set of educational themes and broad strategic objectives, which have guided its activities over the first years. One of these objectives is to create common purpose through developing peer support and trust amongst Coalition members. Additionally, and through collaborative work, the Coalition aims to explore the collective impact of its schools and to share its experience. Through understanding what effective practice is, the ultimate objective is to integrate this effective practice into broader educational policy decisions within the national context, influencing and supporting the dialogue around a potential impact school movement in South Africa.

Thus, the principals and school leaders of the Coalition are engaged in defining, sharing and refining best educational practice, actively participating in reviews of each other's work and school evaluations, attending content-based workshops, and participating in assessment and monitoring and evaluation as and when necessary. Two examples of how good educational practices are shared are, firstly, that one school is embarking in 2013 on an integrated curriculum approach in Grade 8 as a direct result of seeing this at work in another Coalition school while, secondly, a school in the Coalition reports that it is funding bursary students differently having seen the structure of funding that another school uses.

The power of peer reviews

It is in relation to the specific task of school peer reviews, though, that the Coalition has seen some of its most exciting work. In order to develop and drive quality across a range of schools, the Coalition members have agreed that there is a requirement for a shared commitment to on-going improvement. Peer reviews, where school leaders and their staff observe each other's schools in action, are a good mechanism for schools to establish a process of self-reflection and continuous learning as well as to participate in and support each other's school improvement initiatives. Instead of focusing on the approval or punishment of a school inspection, the peer reviews focus on discovering opportunities to serve learners better, as well as to transform school leadership and thus achieve school improvement. They create a safe environment for a principal to understand the strengths and weaknesses of his or her own school, thus acting as an effective driver for change. Members of the Coalition went to the United States for a workshop, where they collaborated on the development of tools and templates for the peer review process. The trip was in June 2012 to Newark, New Jersey, and the workshop created the opportunity for 8 coalition leaders to share their past experiences with school inspections, become familiar with peer review models, develop their own review criteria that are relevant to the SA context, and conduct mock reviews in a number of different school contexts. As one principal said:

“Having staff members being part of a team has brought a richness to them and their approach within our school, and the preparation and receiving of a review has been a gift to our school and staff. It has already resulted in a more collective leadership approach and caused staff to reflect deeply on their teaching practice, their classrooms and their engagement with students. The privilege of being involved in the development of the instrument and going to the US to create it was an amazing opportunity, not only the development of the instrument but the engagement with other SAESC members and the journey travelled together there and my own personal growth. I have learnt so much more about myself and been encouraged to be bolder with difficult conversations and to practice more constructive self-reflection.”

Conclusion

This case study reflects the purpose and process of *Bridge's* communities of practice. Members of the Coalition have been able to build a sense of relationship and cohesion, as well as a sense of ownership, through creating standards of excellence and formulating the evidence which defines those standards. This community of practice has also developed its own review criteria and the tools for its peer review process. Consequently, the community of practice has provided a quality learning and transformation opportunity for its members. The work of this Coalition confirms the foundational premise of communities of practice, namely, that if the development of communities of practice is not approached through a focus on its members' power to identify and solve their own problems, a very good idea in principle will not go very far in practice.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www.bridge.org.za/30.page>
- 2 <http://www.bridge.org.za/171.page>