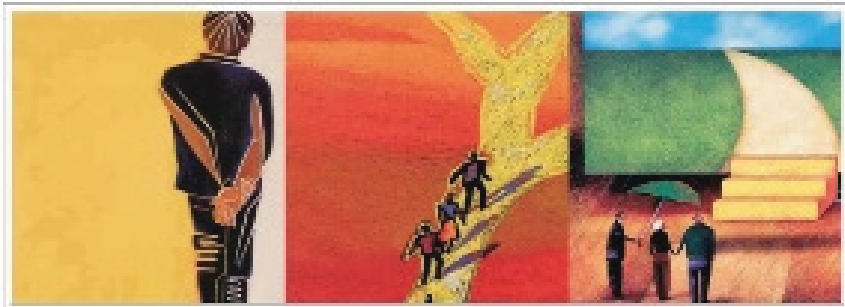

Walking together - in education



Walking together in Education

*Outcomes and reflections on a day of exchange and conversation
November 11, 2009*

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Outcomes and reflections on a day of exchange and conversationⁱ Spier

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Background

On 11 November 2009, almost 150 peopleⁱⁱ from NGOs, government and business, all with a concern for, and interest in, South African education came together at Spier Conference Centre. The day was intended to provide a cross-sectoral platform for discussion about the Dinokeng Scenarios, their implications for education and the ways in which educational role-players might work together differently in the futureⁱⁱⁱ.

The day was jointly hosted by the Bridge initiative^{iv} and the Dinokeng Scenario team^v.





The process

The day began with participants being led into the meeting room by a choir from LEAP Maths and Science school^{vi}. It was opened by two students from the Tertiary School in Business Administration (TSiBA)^{vii} who are Mandela Rhodes scholars. They invited participants to consider the power of collaboration – tangibly evidenced by the very existence of TSiBA and Mandela Rhodes scholarships which enabled them to pursue their tertiary studies.

After participants introduced themselves at tables, John Gilmour introduced the Bridge initiative. He then introduced Dr Mamphela Ramphele, who gave a presentation on the Dinokeng Scenarios.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on the scenarios and what they implied for individual, organisational and sectoral action. Main themes emerging out of this discussion were shared in plenary and then summarised by Ann Lamont in a framework that grouped them systemically.

Tessa Welch of SAIDE^{viii} presented the outcomes of her research into the themes of the DBSA Roadmap and the Government’s Programme of Action. She showed how the priorities of each of these initiatives aligned with SAIDE’s own identification of key themes within education. In this presentation, the relationship of the themes to one another and to national and global contextual realities was shown^{ix}.

Participants were then asked to choose one theme that interested them in particular and to discuss it, using the systemic analysis of education that had been generated out of the morning’s work.

Reports out of each of these groups revealed significant areas of overlap and common concern, sketching the beginnings of a cross-sectoral and integrated response to the difficulties facing education in South Africa today.



Outcome #1 – An overview of the systemic requirements in education

Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared destination • Well formulated and communicated • With clear boundaries at all levels of the education system
<p>Comments :</p> <p>A common theme that emerged from participants was a lack of clarity and common purpose around where we are going on education, how we want to get there and how success will be measured.</p>	
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, long-term leadership • Servant leadership • Bold leadership
<p>Comments</p> <p>Leadership was repeatedly mentioned as a necessary prerequisite to walking together, particularly the ability to put personal agendas aside in the interests of delivery.</p>	
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciate (build on what works) • Trust (Time) • Integrity and honesty (fear of criticism particularly government) • Diversity (racial stereotyping) • Equality (acceptance of two systems) • Fear of Change (married to ideologies) • Personal accountability • Egos
<p>Comments</p> <p>Leadership flows into values which were probably the most mentioned points in the session, yet it is the area that receives the least focus in terms of time and resources. It was also the area where the most “elephants in the room” were mentioned, specifically issues around race, equality and trust.</p>	
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure of civil society (competitiveness, fragmentation, not building on what works) • Funding structures (how funders encourage collaboration) • Government structures (federal system, absence and accountability) • Unions (inclusion, positive contribution and vision) • Whole school approach • Communities, schools and parents being at the centre • Incentive systems and accountability being clear and transparent • Roles and responsibilities clearly defined and related to competence • Process of creating legislation (co-creation)
<p>Comments</p> <p>Assuming that we were able to achieve greater alignment and optimisation of difference in terms of vision leadership and values, we would still need an enabling structure to facilitate walking together. Structural issues were raised with regard to each sector.</p>	
Process / communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear positive narrative • Ask the right questions • Effective dissemination of focus areas • Communicating and building on prior learning • Recognition and rhythm of success
<p>Comments</p> <p>Communication was seen as an important theme in creating coherence between all stakeholders. It was felt that it was very important to create a more positive narrative.</p>	

These systemic requirements were further reflected in a commonality of understanding of what is needed in order to shift particular things in education. See Outcome 3 for a summary of themes emerging from different content areas.

Outcome #2 – connecting themes

Tessa Welch of SAIDE noted that, in identifying the themes, her organisation had made a distillation of the DBSA ten point plan and Government's programme of action. To begin with it was noted that point 1 of the Ten point plan should be considered a rallying call:

- *Teachers to be in-class, on time, teaching.*
- *Teachers to also be required to have and use textbooks in class.*

Tessa's presentation noted that a key educational problem was that policies and systems were not directed to the needs of the mainstream. This, combined with the widening gap between the rich and the poor, resulted in poor learner achievement. In order for the education system to impact meaningfully on its context, a variety of inter-connected interventions were needed, in several spheres.

Fourteen of these themes were identified and discussed in more detail by participants in the conference. These were –

Table 1. Quality ECD

Table 2. Language and Literacy Promotion

Table 3. Monitoring Learner Achievement

Table 4. Teacher and school evaluation

Table 5. Teacher education and development

Table 6. Strengthening management in school (Leadership & Management)

Table 7. Increasing ICT education

Table 8. Inequality, equitable funding & national, provincial and district alignment

Table 9. Provision of LTSM

Table 10. Social mobilisation for improving education

Table 11. Addressing Socio-Economic barriers to learning

Table 12. Gender based empowerment of learners

Table 13. Access to secondary education

Table 14. Access and success in Further Education

Participants were invited to join a theme discussion and to discuss the theme in terms of the systemic elements of vision, leadership, values, structures and processes that would be needed to enable better collaboration within the system as a whole.

Detailed theme-specific perspectives were generated by each table^x. What was striking, however, was how significantly concerns in each area of specialisation do overlap, particularly when looked at systemically.

Outcome #3 – walking together - a way forward

One of the key outcomes of the day's discussion was a great deal of commonality of understanding of what is needed in order to shift things substantially in education.

Without these basic conditions, as well as a united effort to achieve them, things will remain stuck.

*Six big issues emerged as outcomes for a way forward. First is **Whole School Development/an integrated approach** – ultimately education happens at a school level, and all of the efforts of the various players emerge in school contexts. It is at this level that the different inputs become integrated in practice (or not). While educational efforts do need specialisation, the ‘whole school’ should be fore-grounded in our thinking about where these efforts actually land.*

*Flowing out of this integrated view is the necessity of ‘**walking together**’ across traditional educational silos and specialisations, across sectoral boundaries (NGO/government and business) and also across the different levels of the system (from grassroots to national, and linking to international perspectives). If the ‘whole school’ is the common recipient of our efforts, what does it imply for how we should engage with one another?*

*As a general ‘mode’, walking together is clearly the way to go – but what emerged from the day is that this is particularly necessary in relation to the **unions**. There is no point in participating in blame-seeking, but rather it is imperative that ways are sought to help government, unions and other stakeholders to talk with, and hear, one another.*

*Closely linked to this is a fourth theme of **leadership** throughout the system. There is a destructive circularity here: many of the problems in the system could be addressed by more effective, focused and resolute leadership; yet these very problems prevent exercising of that leadership where it does occur. Innovation seems to retreat from the system, and confine itself to manageable pockets of excellence. Yet, it is precisely these pockets that the system as a whole is calling for. How to break this circularity is one of the most pressing questions emerging out of our day together.*

*Fifth, the commonality across specialisations emerged also in relation to **values**. Transparency and accountability feature prominently as general system features; child*

focused practice as a value that speaks directly to the calling of educators. How to work in a way that advances and strengthens these values is a question that occupied all tables.

*Finally, **timescales** were implicit in much of what was shared. Ad hoc attempts to change things will only deepen the problem. We need a 25-year plan for education that is broadly understood and shared, into which shorter-term and more focused changes are made.*

Detail on the outcomes of each table's discussion is available on www.bridge.org.za and further detailed documentation will be provided in the New Year.



In conclusion – Bridge’s reflections and commitment

For Bridge, the Spier day was a culmination of months of preparation and promotion of the idea that in education, collaboration *is* the innovation we most need, and the logical next ‘move’ in attempts to support effective education delivery in South Africa.

Put another way, there is little of substance that can be said about education that hasn’t already been said, and even tried. The sketched outlines above reflect this all too clearly. What is needed is for us to combine, and recombine in new ways, in order to maximise the potential of all these good ideas and practices so that the system as a whole begins to change.

The thinking behind the Dinokeng scenarios bears this thought out and dovetails perfectly with Bridge’s own thinking. We need to change *how* we work, and how we work together, if we are to make a difference. We need to conceive of the entire system as a whole entity into which each contribution is simply one part. If this idea can really take hold then it implies changes for how we all work – as individuals, organisations and whole sectors. The day at Spier was our first sector-wide attempt to put this different way of working into practice. Out of this, we have learnt much about what inhibits change, and also what we might do in the future to ‘walk together’ better.



We have seen and learnt that there are several key entrenched patterns in the system which inhibit emergence of a collaborative and system-wide effort in education. Key are:

- It is hard for practitioners to think beyond their particular contribution, specialisation or '**content**' in education. This showed in two ways. The first is that it was very hard for participants to think through the **process** by which they pursue their content and also work collaboratively. Yet, in order to work collaboratively, we need to examine *how* that collaboration is pursued, not just *what* it results in. As long as we are attached to our individual contributions to the exclusion of seeing how those can join with the contributions of others (from wherever they might come), our efforts remain piecemeal and localised.

The second way in which this feature emerged was in the widespread perception that there was no national plan for education, despite the existence of the Government's Programme of Action and medium-term strategic framework. This lack of '**connect**' between the smaller contributors to education and the larger national system suggested a weakness in communication, both formal and informal, all round.

We have seen that our attempts to encourage a collaborative way of working must make adequate time for people to share what they know and what they have to offer, before asking them to imagine how they might work differently with others. Attempts at innovative collaboration must be grounded in what people already do.

Further, and conversely, we have seen that all attempts at working collaboratively must involve a strong element of informing, and cross-informing, participants of what exists. We cannot attempt to change the way in which things are done without continuously informing ourselves of what already exists.

- Despite extensive efforts to secure the participation of senior **government** officials in the day, we were beset by several last minute cancellations. For many who do manage to be present at efforts like the day at Spier, it may appear as if government is dismissive of their efforts. It is more likely, however, that the inability of senior officials to be present at events like this is reflective of the deeper systemic crisis. In the words of one official, 'my diary is not my own' – thus even key actors in the system are currently unable to exercise leadership and participate in events that may

offer a longer-term resolution to some of the very problems they are currently consumed by.

These things will not change overnight. Bridge will continue to engage all actors, at all levels of the system, and strive to find the appropriate forums in which government can be brought into full engagement with other stakeholders.

- Finally, and despite some acknowledged new energy and commitment to seeking resolution, the sector as a whole might be characterised by suffering from **cynicism, despair and hopelessness**. It is hard to imagine adopting new ideas with any enthusiasm when past attempts and existing initiatives have proven ineffectual, or even destructive. On the one hand, we all know that something must change. On the other hand, many feel as if they ‘know’ that nothing will actually change. There is the risk of a ritualised approach to problem-solving emerging with participants going through the motions, while secretly dismissing the potential of any and all initiatives.

The danger of further ‘talk-shops’ is one that is present in the minds of everyone associated with attempts to intervene constructively in education, including Bridge. Given that Bridge is advocating a change in mode of engagement, it risks such a charge even more than content-driven initiatives, and so risks deepening the cynicism that is so prevalent in the sector. This requires not a backing off of our chosen contribution, but rather a commitment to pursuing it with care and quality. Each attempt at bringing people together should result in immediate benefits (for example the many new relationships that were forged on the day) as well as clear perspective on the long-term benefits.

The Dinokeng Walking Together scenario asks that everyone involved give something up. It may well be that, in the education system, the hardest thing to give up will be despair itself.

To engage meaningfully and effectively with these entrenched features of the system will take a great deal of patience and steadiness of purpose. Things will not change overnight. In all of our favour is a new air of urgency and indications that all players are beginning to open themselves to alternatives – albeit cautiously. It is as part of this, and in support of this, that Bridge commits its energy and resources. Specifically, we commit to –

- sharing the outcomes of the Spier day with the Minister of Basic Education and engaging her on how to involve government more, and more meaningfully, in cross-sectoral attempts to change the way in which education is pursued.

- engaging SADTU around how to make progress on the key question of union participation in the current system impasse.
- continuing to convene and support efforts to work collaboratively throughout the system, including at grassroots, individual school, provincial and national levels.
- using all of this experience, including the day at Spier, to create a living resource that all stakeholders and participants can use in thinking through *how* to ‘walk together’ in education.



Footnotes

ⁱ This report reflects the key outcomes of the day. A detailed set of minutes is available on www.bridge.org.za.

ⁱⁱ Available on www.bridge.org.za.

ⁱⁱⁱ Original invitation available on www.bridge.org.za.

^{iv} From the Bridge concept note: “Bridge aims to draw on South Africa’s rich heritage of educational innovation to create cohesiveness around working practice to support key focus areas in Education, specifically with regard to the Development Bank of Southern Africa’s ten point plan and the Department of Education’s Programme of Action. Bridge also aims to build the capacity of the education system to expand and adopt this working practice. Bridge will facilitate innovation where there is no working practice. The Vision of Bridge is, therefore, *to link the key leverage points in the system with working innovations in a way that optimises diversity, and differences in perspectives and values so that the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. Where no innovation exists around key leverage points, Bridge will facilitate multi-sectoral innovation to create optimal solutions.* Innovation in the context of Bridge is not necessarily the creation of something new, but can also mean deepening, recombining and scaling. Innovation is both scaling and relational.”

^v From the invitation to Spier: “The Dinokeng Scenario process involves leaders from civil society and government, political parties, business, public administration, trade unions, religious groups, academia and the media. They have been brought together by six convenors, all of whom are actively engaged in our national issues. This team has gathered to probe our country’s present and to consider possible futures, the Dinokeng Scenarios, which suggest three possible futures for South Africa. These scenarios are intended to stimulate action-oriented conversations among citizens as to their options and choices.” For more detail on the Dinokeng Scenarios, see <http://www.dinokengscenarios.co.za/>

^{vi} <http://www.leapschool.org.za/>

^{vii} <http://www.tsiba.org.za/>

^{viii} <http://www.saide.org.za/frontend/>

^{ix} The presentation outlined the key themes in education in South Africa today, which were then discussed by participants. For the detailed report on SAIDE’s research and a summary of the aligned themes, go to www.bridge.org.za.

^x Detail on the outcomes of each table’s discussion is contained in the full minutes, available on www.bridge.org.za.