A lifebuoy environment for successful learning in conditions of multiple deprivation: What are the basics?

Introduction

My field of interest is instructional leadership that relates to all the actions taken at school to ensure that learning takes place. The eventual success of this learning is defined by academic outcomes in standardised tests. School leaders account for these outcomes by implementing a triadic school management construct related to mission formulation, instructional programme management, and school-learning culture promotion. Teachers serve as co-managers to obtain these outcomes with their pursuit of successful learning, through effective teaching. An important factor for successful learning is knowledge of the specific context that determines the construction and implementation of specific teaching and learning actions, with cognisance of learners' own input for success. Multiple deprivation as a specific context is characterised by factors that inhibit successful learning.

I share with you the intervention programme applied by a township school to arrange for positive academic outcomes in the matric examination. Against the background of a sea of dysfunctional schools in our society, this township school's actions represent a pocket of excellence and an example of what is possible. Phillip Hallinger, a renowned American academic who specialises in instructional leadership, emphasises that "we need to obtain better information not just about 'what works' but 'what works' in different settings". The intervention programme which the school principal and staff of the specific township school implement to ensure that their pupils pass the matric examination, represents 'what works' in a South African setting of multiple deprivation to ensure success in the final school examination.

I discuss the township school's intervention programme by using Ulrich Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory as theoretical lenses.

Education in township environments

With regard to teaching and learning in township environments, we know that although much has been done to democratise education in post-apartheid South Africa, 60% of all public schools are considered dysfunctional. Despite the widening of access to

previously marginalised communities, the redistribution of resources to previously disadvantaged schools, the increase of state subsidies to learners through 'no fee' policies, and feeding schemes in schools serving severely disadvantaged communities, a two-tier public schooling system persistently remains. One of the tiers in this two-tier feature is the sustained phenomenon of single-race township schools. This is despite the intention to eradicate the pre-1994 racial segregation, where black and white South Africans lived in separate areas and attended separate schools. We know that implementation of the right to choose a school has resulted in an exodus from black schools and a desegregation of formerly white, Indian and coloured schools, with many black learners who have come to enjoy good-quality education at desegregated schools. Effective schools, however, do not have unlimited space, and the families of pupils in township schools do not have the financial capacity to relocate in pursuit of better-quality education. The result is sustained division according to socio-economic status, which has replaced previous stratification along racial lines.

The urban and peri-urban areas, which came to be known as 'townships', were characterised by severe poverty, overcrowding, and low levels of education before and during implementation of apartheid. These conditions have remained unchanged, with a high incidence of informal settlements in these areas, where currently these informal settlements have mushroomed around affluent residential areas. Many children coming from these conditions enter school without being prepared to learn. Much of not being prepared to learn relates to conditions of low socio-economic status backgrounds, in the sense that children from backgrounds where parents are trapped in poverty are often exposed to antisocial behaviour. Factors such as physical neglect, psychological scars, a live-for-the-moment mentality, teenage pregnancies, family disintegration, gang formation, and peer pressure related substance abuse threaten these children's development possibilities. Pivotal to these conditions is the fact that many children who are raised in poverty are less likely to enjoy the crucial needs of a reliable primary caregiver, who provides unconditional love and support, harmonious and reciprocal interactions, and enrichment through personalised and increasingly complex activities. The deficits resulting from this negligence inhibit the production of new brain cells, which alters the path of maturation, thus hampering emotional development, to predispose the disadvantaged child to social and cognitive dysfunction.

The correlation between poverty and location within a deprived community and opportunity and attainment in education and society results in sustained reproduction of exclusion and marginalisation, fuelled by school failure. One way of countering these debilitating circumstances is arrangement of contextually tailor-made opportunities for successful learning. In this regard, the presence of humane teachers, who tenaciously persevere to ensure that learning happens regardless of inhibiting external environmental situations, is crucial for positive academic outcomes. Equally important is self-initiated responses of pupils to teacher input regardless of hampering family and environmental conditions. In the context of my discussion, teacher perseverance is understood as fulfilling a role model obligation while arranging an after-school study environment for learning to realise successfully. Successful learning relates to the requisite knowledge and skills for diligently obtaining a matric qualification.

Ecological systems theory and self-efficacy theory as a basis for teaching and learning

Regarding Ulrich Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this theory proposes that human development occurs through an interactive, interrelated functioning of socially organised subsystems, to support and guide, or hamper, optimal growth. Accordingly, learner development is a process of reciprocal interaction between the individual learner and other human beings, objects and symbols in the immediate and distant environment and over an extended period, to result in competence or dysfunction. Within this network of reciprocally interacting influences, learners respond to environmental stimuli by seeking and interpreting information as contributions to their own development and life circumstances. These contributions are contingent on learners' self-efficacy levels, which serve as a primary factor to fuel the own environment.

Self-efficacy, based on outcome expectancy, underlies individuals' belief in their ability to execute specific behaviour successfully. In this regard, outcome expectancy pertains to learners taking part in the teaching and learning process, with the expectation that input will lead to a specific outcome, such as improved knowledge and skills, which is manifested as positive academic outcomes. Efficacy expectations that determine learners' efforts on a task and how long they will persist in the face of

adversity are dependent on the level of the difficulty of the task, the strength of learners' conviction, and generality in terms of the degree to which expectations are widespread across situations. The essence of efficacy expectations is that performance and motivation are determined by individuals' perception of their own ability. If learners believe they can accomplish a task, they will acquire the capacity to complete the task, even if they do not have the capacity initially.

The four sources of information by which learners assess their self-efficacy capacity, are the sources of performance accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. These sources are dominated by performance accomplishment, which is understood as mastery experiences, because previous mastery provides evidence for future accomplishment. Learner success builds a robust belief in personal efficacy, while failure undermines efficacy, especially when failure occurs before a sense of efficacy is firmly established. Learners develop high or low self-efficacy levels vicariously through peers' and other people's performance. Seeing others perform challenging activities without adverse consequences engenders expectations of one experiencing success if one increases one's effort and perseverance. When learners perceive their peers as succeeding, their own efficacy levels are increased, while failure on the part of peers influences learners' self-efficacy levels negatively.

Enhancement of self-efficacy through verbal persuasion is contingent on the level of credibility of the persuasion and the persuader. Learners do not benefit from empty praise, but they gain real strength from wholehearted and consistent recognition of real accomplishment by sincere teachers. Although efficacy expectations induced by verbal persuasion are widely used, these expectations are less effective than those arising from experienced accomplishments. However, as a source to form self-efficacy beliefs, verbal persuasion that is manifested as either encouragement or discouragement, is acute to decrease self-efficacy levels with discouragement inducements. Taxing situations, which elicit emotional arousal, inform personal competency in that high arousal debilitates performance. Fear-provoking thoughts about lack of competence can result in learners arousing themselves to elevated levels of anxiety exceeding the fear experienced during the actual threatening situation, such as the situation of writing an examination.

Due to the interactive functioning of ecological systems, interaction between self-efficacy factors in learners' maturing biology, their immediate family and community environment, and the societal landscape in which they are placed fuels and steers learners' development. These interactions result in learners identifying with the teaching provided, so that they develop an internalised sense of taking charge of their own learning, and ultimately their own well-being.

Understanding multiple deprivation

Considered from a teaching and learning perspective, multiple deprivation pertains to factors that inhibit successful learning. These factors are closely linked to socio-economic disadvantage, and they include conditions of severe poverty, the lack of an educationally stimulating environment, and dissonance between social and cultural meaning making. Although poverty is not necessarily an indicator of deprivation, poverty leads to deprivation when it affects human dignity and hampers opportunities to develop oneself and changing one's circumstances. Deprivation arises, then, because of poverty-related factors that inhibit physical development, such as having to survive on a life-limiting income, having poor or no accommodation, lacking enough food, and being exposed to a health-threatening environment. Illiteracy, a lack of morality, and limited knowledge and insight, as epistemological ownership, hamper psycho-cognitive development. Poverty is manifested as either a relative or an absolute concept. Relative poverty could entail an acute lack of morality in the context of extreme material wealth. By contrast, poverty is absolute and persistent when it encompasses a multiple character that is carried over inexorably from one generation to the next.

Within the South African context, children are exposed to deprivation as absolute poverty. Barnes analysed such deprivation by means of five categories, with indicators for each category. The category of material and income deprivation describes children who are living in households with no refrigerator for the safe storage of food, and no radio or television to access information. The category of deprivation due to unemployment includes children of households where no adults aged 18 or over are in employment. Education deprivation pertains to households where children in the age group of 7 to 15 are not in school or are in the wrong school grade for their age. A lack of running water and electricity and crowded households where children share

sleeping space with several persons of different age and gender are indicators for the category of living environment deprivation. The category of adequate care deprivation relates to children growing up in households where both the mother and the father are deceased, or where the mother and the father are not living with their children in the same household. The combination of these categories of deprivation results in children entering school without the basic social capital to be responsive to sustained progress. These children need exposure to the order and ethics of effective schools, where consistency and regularity to acquire social skills and work attitudes are established for possible social mobility.

Schooling in conditions of multiple deprivation

Three factors determine learners' educational achievement, namely the quality of parenting, the quality of schooling, and the community culture within which children grow up (Barnes & Horsfall, 2010). Although some children growing up in a context of social deprivation achieve well at school, due to sound family networks, many children are acutely exposed to deficient parenting, combined with debilitating community conditions. With regard to our sea of dysfunctional schools in South Africa, we know that these deficiencies are exacerbated by poor-quality schooling because of blatant unprofessional teacher conduct. But we also know that there are pockets of excellence where schools achieve success despite militating environmental circumstances. The success of these schools is based on implementation of a school management construct of realistic mission formulation, constructive instructional programme management, and consistent school-learning culture promotion.

Realising a feasible school mission is achieved by communicating realistically high expectations for learners within the sphere of time on task. Managing the instructional programme pertains to critically supportive supervision of instruction and monitoring of pupil progress. Promoting a school-learning culture that fosters learning relies on teachers' professional development and the maintenance of high visibility.

Within a context of multiple deprivation, implementation of this school management construct is dependent on compassion for deprived learners and passion for their upliftment. Compassion is manifested in empathically communicating achievable expectations for learners struggling to survive, demonstrating respect for their human dignity and consideration for their personal circumstances. Passion for learners'

upliftment is manifested in an instructional programme and staff's efforts to provide holistic schooling for deprived learners, and meticulous monitoring of their progress. Ensuring a school-learning culture in multiple-deprived environments demands effort from the school leadership to identify and acquire resources through partnerships and networking. For staff of successful schools exposed to multiple deprivation, solutions for teaching and learning challenges are founded on an unshakable belief in the potential of learners to excel personally and academically, despite adverse circumstances.

The research site

What I discuss as strategies for successful learning to pass matric in an environment of multiple deprivation is based on the intervention programme of a township school who succeeded in improving its matric pass rates from 29% in 2011 to 72% in 2016. Learners at this township school are exposed to absolute poverty, with their parents surviving on informal trading and part-time employment. A glance quickly at the constraining home and environmental conditions of matric pupils in this township environment before discussing the intervention programme.

Home and environmental conditions affecting matric learner success

One of the discouraging inducements leading to a decrease in learners' self-efficacy expectations is the lack of role models in township environments, as motivation for learners to persevere with their schoolwork. Due to a lack of proper policing, *"tsotsis and gangsters"* rule the streets. These criminals *"drive fancy cars, and they wear expensive labels"*, which creates the wrong impression among township learners that the only route to a better and easier life is through crime. With home circumstances being harsh, to the extent that *"many learners spend the whole day on empty stomachs"*, motivating learners to engage in their schoolwork and to understand the value of an education is a huge challenge.

Success with studying is inhibited by the level of noise to which many township learners are constantly exposed within their homes and the surrounding environment. Due to absolute poverty, many families live in rented single-room structures. These structures serve the multiple purpose of being a kitchen, a sitting room, and a bedroom for the whole family of ten or more. Learners complain about the challenge of studying

at home *"because of disturbances from family quarrels and television"*. Ownership of a television despite absolute poverty is attributed to a live-for-the-moment mentality and the contributions of benefactors who want *"to improve the quality of life of poor people"*. The conflict of interests between learners, who want to study, and their family members, who *"want to watch television"*, arises because family members who do not value education put a high premium on compulsive television viewing as a pastime. In this regard a learner confirmed that his parents' assistance with his schoolwork *"is a fallacy"*.

Noise from the surrounding environment, from constant partying taking place in the township setting, inhibits the creation of conditions conducive to studying. The noise from these parties is characterised by *"loud beating music and shrill screaming"*, and it is accompanied by *"liquor, drugs and sexual abuse"*. This represents a negative environment for solid study routines, affecting performance accomplishment to such an extent that, as one learner said, *"you wish that you could go somewhere, away from township, where you could study"*.

The wish of this learner, representing the desire of many township learners, is realised in the response of the specific school to arrange an 'away-from-township' intervention as a study opportunity for matric learners. The intervention programme provides a study environment over an extended period, where learners experience performance accomplishment. Based on the triadic management construct of high expectations for deprived learners realised through critical teaching in a supportive learning environment, learners receive assistance regularly and holistically. This they receive by way of extra classes, accompanied by emotional support and nutritious food. The study environment that is arranged on the school premises takes place each Saturday morning during the first three school terms and on the mornings of one week in the April and two weeks in the July school holidays. The intervention programme concludes with a study camp event a fortnight before the final matric examination commences at the beginning of the fourth term.

Saturday morning and school holiday morning classes

Critical teaching at the Saturday morning and school holiday morning classes is based on a timetable compiled by a member of the school management team and two senior

teachers. Classes are offered according to each school subject's weighting in terms of labour market relevance and complexity of content mastery. The focus is therefore *"on mathematics, physical sciences, accounting, and English"*. Attendance of these classes is arranged with the keeping of an attendance register. Subject teachers record the attendance register meticulously, which is monitored by the school management team, so that they can follow up on frequent attendance defaulters, by calling their caregivers.

Emotional support during these classes occurs spontaneously, in that the relaxed but focused environment assures learners of their teachers' concern for their scholastic and general well-being. For teachers, apart from striving to achieve positive outcomes in the final matric examination, their concern for their learners relates to *instilling knowledge in them, for them to impart that knowledge further"*. An overarching motivation is to make learners to understand that *"success is possible through hard and consistent work"*.

A supportive learning environment is arranged through quantitative hours of interaction with the subject content. This produces qualitative engagement, resulting in learners mastering difficult concepts, encouraging them to persevere with focused attention. The notable number of quiet and peaceful hours of quality engagement, with concerned teachers facilitating revision of important content, enables learners to have increased levels of self-efficacy, equipping them with competencies *"to deal with their problems in a better way"*. What happens in many instances is that *"learners have problems and cannot open up in class or come to the office but can talk to* the subject teacher *openly at the extra classes"*.

Motivational speakers are organised to address learners once a month at the Saturday morning classes and once during each week of the holiday classes. These addresses are from speakers who, in many instances, are familiar with learners' surrounding environments, due to their having similar childhood backgrounds. The addresses from these speakers serve the purpose of a role model, informing learners' self-efficacy levels vicariously, creating the hope of ultimately having an ameliorated life situation thanks to an education obtained through perseverance.

The prevalence of absolute poverty, which causes many learners to attend these classes on an empty stomach, is countered by the serving of a nutritious meal at ten

o' clock every Saturday and school holiday morning session. Private businesses sponsor the ingredients for these meals, which are cooked by members of the community involved in catering services. On occasion, *"KFC will bring packs of Streetwise 2 with chips"* which serves as an extra treat. Regarding these food donations, the school principal emphasised the importance of a properly functioning school as a persuasion measure, because, as he said, *"you cannot go to businesses, say 'Look, I want sponsorship', and when they visit the school, they can't see any product there"*.

The study camp intervention

With the two-week camp event a fortnight before the final examination starts, *"the school hall is turned into a hostel"*. Learners bring their own bedding, and meals are again sponsored by the private sector. The study camp event is compulsory, and no fees are charged.

The camp event's functioning is based on learners doing revision according to a revision timetable. Revision lessons start at eight o' clock in the morning and end at half past four in the afternoon, after which learners are engaged in supervised self-study from seven o' clock to ten o' clock in the evening. The school management team oversees the study camp activities, to monitor that learners *"find the direction that is needed"*. The revision timetable provides for inclusion of all final-year subjects, with frequency of provisioning related to the challenges of content mastery. Educators are paid an incentive from the school fund for the number of lessons they must conduct during the study camp period.

Group teaching is applied at the study camp with subject teachers focusing on designated subject topics to teach the whole learner group. But at the same time, consolidation of core content is extended, with subject teachers all teaching the same topics to the whole learner group. This teaching strategy ensures variation in revision presentation and engagement with subject content from different angles, which serves *"to extend learners' horizons of understanding"*. Learners are also approached to teach fellow learners on topics that they have mastered convincingly, because, as one learner said, *"we can help each other so that we all pass"*. Individual teaching is arranged during the evening's self-study period, where teachers teach learners at risk individually on areas of weakness. Incorporating all these critical teaching strategies

confirms supportive learning to *"help learners in township schools to connect what they learn in the classroom* [with] *what they learn and revise with camping, to* [ensure that they] *perform well in the examination"*.

Many learners are aware of their own input to their academic success. As acknowledged by one learner, *"you have to work on your own … teachers plant the seed, but you have to water it"*. Some learners, however, complained about educators putting too much pressure on them, making them feel overwhelmed with unrealistic expectations. Teachers, on the other hand, are concerned about *"the lack of seriousness in many learners from townships"*.

Although learners assess their efficacy levels as low due to negative self-efficacy source inducements, their poor achievement is also attributed to government arrangements that allow *"learners to spread their matric over two years"*. Many learners who have availed themselves of the two-year option have been promoted to following grades despite failing, as stipulated by government policy, *"to avoid multiple repetitions and being over-aged in the grade"*. The prospect of an extended matric year for learners, many of whom were promoted to their matric year without having attained basic learning outcomes in previous grades, influences learner diligence negatively. Further, the promotion requirement of *"only 30% for some final school year subjects"*, which now also includes languages, sets low standards and efficacy expectations, resulting in a situation where *"many township learners fail to meet basic employment requirements in the labour market"*.

In retrospect

Multiple deprivation – understood as absolute poverty – inhibits learners from township environments from experiencing opportunity and attainment in education. Because of the ecologically interrelated functioning of learners' home environment and their external environment, adverse conditions of a cognitive, emotional, physical and social nature within township learners' home environment are exacerbated by external surroundings, where crime and indifference to the value of an education prevail. The positive change of children's life chances through education based on teacher input and pupil responsiveness is contingent on a community culture with conditions conducive to studying. Implementation of an 'away-from-township' intervention programme based on high expectations realised through critical teaching and

supportive learning has all the components of a favourable community culture arrangement to inform learners' self-efficacy levels positively according to the four sources for self-efficacy encouragement.

As illustrated, consistent and structured guidance through cognitive engagement with subject content provides continuous opportunities for performance accomplishment encouraged by verbal persuasion by sincere teachers. Supplementing cognitive engagement with physical and emotional support, through nutritious meals and empathic assistance with personal problems, reduces the debilitating effect of taxing situations that learners experience at home. Motivational addresses by persons with whom township learners identify increase these learners' self-efficacy expectations. All these arrangements provide learners from environments of multiple deprivation with the best possible chances for achieving positive outcomes in the final examination.

However, the option of an extended final year, and a pass mark of only 30% for some subjects impinge on diligently attaining essential knowledge and skills for possible social mobility. This is because a score of 30% is a false representation of success, constituting inadequate mastery of content with attainment that is necessarily inferior. By contrast, the intervention programme does provide receptive township learners with the opportunity for possible social mobility relating to passing matric, based on convincingly attaining essential knowledge and skills for potential employability. This is then the main aim with the intervention programme, namely, to ensure that marginalised learners are equipped with knowledge and skills to obtain a standardised school qualification diligently. For many of these learners, matric is an ultimate achievement and a potentially positive endeavour, serving as a vector to halt the inexorable cycle of poverty.

However, three questions remain:

Question 1: How is high expectations communicated for diligent attainment of adequate knowledge and skills despite the facilitative measure of an extended matric year and an under-average pass mark.

Question 2: What is the extent to which this intervention programme equips multiple-deprived learners with deep learning to generate competence for further study, resulting in first-generation families with higher education qualifications.

Question 3: With reference to the Gini coefficient of our society, and with consideration of the potential of teacher input and the potential of pupil responsiveness, to what extent does the intervention programme arrange for deep learning that prepares deprived learners for further studies in challenging courses that represent training in scarce skills, with related high-status employment possibilities. Because, only when success is achieved with deep learning of such calibre and extent, will the perpetuated reproduction of exclusion and marginalisation be ended for learners from multiple-deprived environments, despite the lack of quality parenting and despite the lack of a community environment conducive to successful learning.

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