



‘WE DON’T WANT TO SEE WHO IS BIGGER THAN WHO - WE JUST WANT SERVICES’

The Herald NMMU Community Dialogues

There are about 60 of us here and we are sitting in an interesting format – layers of semi-circles – at an internal community dialogue held at NMMU’s Missionvale campus. We are an eclectic lot when it comes to education – principals, academics, students, governing body members and a couple of fly-on-the-wall journalists – tasked with a mission not dissimilar to locating the “God particle”. Only in this case this collective is trying to identify the very root of what really bedevils a seemingly irreparable and dysfunctional system: Eastern Cape schooling. And what we can do about it.

By Heather Robertson

Parents, teachers and non-profit organisations all seem to know what is wrong with our country's education system – and what is quickly echoed here at the dialogue as being high on that list are a lack of resources and teacher commitment.

After the dialogue facilitator, NMMU dean of education Prof Denise Zinn, sets up a “fish bowl” – an inner sanctum of participants airing their views to be replaced later by a fresh ring from the outside – one thing is for sure. It emerges swiftly that despite all efforts on the part of some who are clearly committed, something is fundamentally wrong and that is what is robbing an entire generation of their most basic right: a good education.

If parents ensure their children make it to school every day – neatly dressed in full school uniform and arriving on time – is there a guarantee of a dedicated teacher when they get to the classroom? Are those teachers instilling enough discipline?

It's quite true that among the things identified as being the problems in education these days is the lack of commitment from teachers, in particular those affiliated to the SA Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU). So a question posed, is SADTU's role in education a positive one?

One principal speaks of how “useless teachers were kept in the system and protected by the union, which I found to be demotivating to the dedicated teachers”. Sapphire Road Primary School principal Bruce Damons justly raises a question to teachers, asking if they would want their children attending the schools at which they teach and why.

“We have become so slack and lazy, and have just stopped caring,” he said.

“But parents are failing their children too,” notes another delegate.

Zinn then introduces the questions of “what can be done?” and “what do we need to do?”, and an air of optimism suddenly pervades the room.

NMMU student Yolisa Lawrence raises a pertinent point about the voice of the pupil. “We must involve the students and ask them to identify the problems. They should be here so we can say: what is the problem?”

Practical action on the part of participants includes a commitment to get teachers and parents to work together far more closely, presenting a parenting skills programme, showing teachers more appreciation, and initiating focus group interventions to get to the nitty gritty of specific failings and teacher grievances at a particular school.

Then Paul Miedema, of the Calabash Trust, hits a positive note: “We must share our success stories.” Indeed. Finding out what works is a fundamental antidote to identifying what is wrong.”

This edited extract of a leader article published in The Herald newspaper, written by journalists Zandile Mbabela and Brett Adkins after they attended and covered one of many small community dialogues focussed on solving the challenges facing our beleaguered Eastern Cape schools, encapsulates what we at The Herald have been striving to achieve with these community engagements that we have been facilitating with NMMU's CANRAD (Centre for the Advancement of Nonracism and Democracy) since March 2011.

The Herald
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Not only does this engagement enable us to do our own hands on research into civic concerns, it also provides us with a people-centred as opposed to politician-centred approach to our coverage of local government elections.

The series of education dialogues using the fish-bowl style method of debate was a successful experiment aimed at deriving deeper engagement from community members, allowing them to define the challenges that beset them and then steering the conversation through asking the right kinds of questions for them to come up with solutions. Learners, teachers, parents, union members, academics and education department officials all contributed ideas from pupils saying subjects like maths and science should be taught in their mother tongues, parents who spoke of rotating as voluntary security at a school that was constantly burgled, all unanimously agreeing that the education department needed to be made more accountable.

These education dialogues will this year be followed up by a series of local government dialogues in various wards across the Nelson Mandela Bay metro in the build up to next year's election to ascertain 1) residents' experiences of municipal services by both councillors and civil servants 2) what they expect from the political parties 3) what they think needs to be done to fix their area and the metro as a whole.

Not only does this engagement enable us as a newspaper to do our own hands on research into civic concerns, it also provides us with a people-centred as opposed to politician-centred approach to our coverage of local government

elections. While the debates are open to anyone to attend, we will insist that politicians listen to what community members have to say, as their views will be made centre stage.

The idea for The Herald's Community Dialogues was born at a dinner party in late 2010 at the home of CANRAD director Allan Zinn and Denise Zinn who is now deputy vice chancellor of teaching and learning at NMMU. We agreed that both the university and the newspaper would benefit from stepping down from our ivory towers and connecting with the communities we serve. I had just been appointed editor of The Herald and realised the newspaper had the potential to play a role as a bridge between the city's disparate communities as well as between ordinary citizens and the often remote politicians, business leaders and thought leaders. Since then a mutually beneficial partnership between the CANRAD and The Herald has seen



joint decision making and planning of each event, with the university covering costs.

Even though it was not initially one of our conscious aims, what Danish journalist Cathrine Gyldensted refers to as “constructive journalism” could be used to define what we have achieved through our facilitation of community dialogues. In a column in *The Guardian* newspaper explaining constructive journalism Gyldensted said: “We believe constructive news will keep powers more accountable by asking them to find solutions, rather than simply encouraging them to argue which is always the easiest thing to do.”

Allan Zinn and I have facilitated several dialogues in the Bay since the first one in March 2011 when we managed to persuade a very aloof Eastern Cape education department SG Modidima Manny to deign to listen to the concerns of 600 principals, teachers, parents and community members at the Nongoza Jebe Hall in New Brighton.

During our 16 June Youth dialogue in 2012 we managed to get DA student organisation members to listen to ANC youth league members and vice versa. This year we saw young Afriforum spokesman Marnus Vvn Staden calmly up against the EFF provincial MPL Siyabulela Peter, as City Press columnist Mondli Makhanya and South African Heritage Council’s Advocate Sonwabile Mancotywa tried to make sense and explain the rise of the student anti-colonial movement at a debate on the colonial monuments and the #RhodesMustFall movement. We have hosted book launches that have turned in to major philosophical musings on what needs to be done to kick start our country out of it’s current corruption ennui at the Red Location Museum with Moeletsi Mbeki, Frank Chikane and with Vusi Pikoli at St Stephen’s Church hall in Zwide. Last year the chief financial officer of the metro, Trevor Harper, came face to face with the people at the receiving end of his budget cuts at a dialogue we hosted in Bethelsdorp. He studiously recorded complaints and handed out his direct email address so that problems highlighted could be addressed.

One of the most memorable dialogues we facilitated was in August 2012 with 1 000 residents of the Nelson Mandela Bay metro who arrived at the Feather Market hall to tell local politicians to stop the petty political bickering that had plunged their world class city into a crisis. The speakers at the dialogue, which was themed “Addressing the challenges facing our metro”, and which included Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber president Mandla Madwara, Ratepayers’ Association president Kobus Gerber and Bishop Lunga ka Siboto from the Ethiopian Episcopalian Church, pleaded with local government MEC Mlibo Qoboshiyane not to turn a blind eye “while Rome is burning”.

The residents pulled no punches either. Luyolo Makwabe from Walmer township said: “We are getting a lot of leaders using Walmer as a political battlefield. What is the MEC going to do to address the service delivery needs of Walmer?” Another resident, Xolani Nkonko from ward 21, said: “We don’t want to see who is bigger than who – we just want services.”

This is the greatest success of our dialogues. Giving the microphone to the voices that the politicians say they serve, yet do not listen to and bringing those voices into the mainstream on the pages of our paper and on our digital platforms.

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Heather Robertson has been editor in chief of The Herald and Weekend Post in Port Elizabeth since August 2010. Before that, she was deputy editor, national news editor, KZN bureau chief, features editor and a journalist at The Sunday Times. She started her career as a journalist at the anti-apartheid newspaper South in Cape Town in 1987 and has worked as a features editor for Tribute Magazine and Sunday World and was deputy editor of Elle Magazine. RobertsonH@timesmedia.co.za

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