

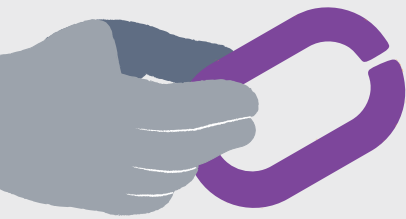
NASCEE and IPASA Discussion Paper

Deep collaboration for deep change

Rethinking collaboration in South Africa
during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper intends to elicit conversation about some of the potential new and emerging approaches to transforming our education, training, and human development sectors through deep collaboration while we simultaneously seek to manage a transition to virtual and online education that is equitable and universal in its nature. The paper is written during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of extreme stress and disruption which has provided governments, civil society, and professional associations the opportunity for deep reflection and collective vision-setting through interdisciplinary and disintermediated approaches.

While our reflection on the need for change draws on local and international literature, its goal is specifically to catalyse dialogue and create an appreciation for the need for deeper collaboration to effect a change in the South African education system during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this short paper we argue that it is through building trust and sharing priorities amongst the many stakeholders playing in the education ecosystem that we can move from deep dialogue, once we have achieved the trust required for this, to deep collaboration.



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Introduction

The past decade has seen an acceleration in a global recognition that the education sector, in line with trends across all sectors, will need to rapidly and efficiently transform for delivery in the online space in order to benefit from the technological advances being made. The onset of COVID-19 and its concomitant dramatic, ongoing negative consequences has escalated this need to an urgent and critical level as the conversion to online and digitalised education is no longer a discretionary choice for post-school or indeed basic education institutions, but an unavoidable prerequisite. As most educational institutions have been compelled to consider and adopt virtual education strategies, resistance to the adoption of an online delivery and assessment system has been substantively reduced. This reality presents a unique and powerful window of opportunity for convening a needs-driven conversation between the disparate players required to access and deliver the educational tools needed to adjust to this new and unavoidable reality.

Whilst addressing the shift to a technological paradigm, the recognition of the need for a change towards a more sustainable and equitable education system should not be forgotten and is indeed a key component of the global conversation about how education systems need to be reconfigured for the future (Alfadala et al 2020). This raises an awareness of the need for a dramatic paradigm shift, achievable only through collective visioning. This is extraordinarily timely, given the pause experienced during the global lockdown which has amplified the need for such a change in global consciousness. Despite our awareness of the need to effect such change, embarking on real collaborative efforts to create an adaptable education system for the 21st century remains a challenge. The debate is particularly pertinent to the South African education and training sectors, given our historic and ongoing inequality in the delivery of and access to quality

education as well as many of the social support services required to enable learning. This inequality, driven as it is by significant socio-economic divides, has been and is likely to be further exacerbated by COVID-19's ongoing impact on the ability of our schools and educators to effectively deliver in-person education. While we had all hoped that the worst of the pandemic's impact on our country would pass with 2020, it appears to be a sad reality that 2021 is set to see a continuation of the difficult health, social and educational impacts of the virus, placing further strain upon an already struggling education system. In effect, COVID-19 has clearly unveiled the lack of resilience to systemic disruption within the South African education system.

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The technological tools which are generated to enable decentralised and inter-operationalised teaching, learning and qualification management for the education and training sectors in South Africa will need to bridge the divide between two key underpinning approaches that are held in tension with one another. The first of these is the requirement for high technical efficiency, accuracy, transparency and data visibility. The second is the growing imperative and recognition of the need for the deep humanisation of education. There is a growing consensus that the education systems of the future need to be highly individualised, customised towards innate strengths, and support innovative and entrepreneurial mindsets to create optimal outcomes in terms of the creative leadership competencies required for the future, at both an individual and a collective level. Globally, it is widely accepted that this type of outcome is dramatically different from what traditional education systems have delivered in the past. What is therefore required is that the delivery systems and technological tools used in the delivery and assessment of education need to be in service of both society and of the individual's needs, rather than being the determinant of the individual's choices and the societal outcomes resulting. To achieve this requires a deep understanding of the tension between the outcomes driven, project management-centred and technical aspects of a centralised and automated education and qualifications management system and of how these can be defined by and aligned with a personalised approach to create a 'soft' interface which holds the human needs of users at the forefront. In addition, our collective ingenuity is required to make high quality and technologically delivered education available to all sectors of our society, not just the privileged few, in a way that is accessible, cost effective and equitable.

To achieve the objective of a system that is in service of human beings and of society, the needs and perspectives of all of those using and engaging with our education and training systems need to be as fully visualised as is possible. This approach holds the greatest potential for the co-creation of a shared vision for the system that recognises the needs of the various user levels as well as communicates clearly and in trust on where the system is and is not aligning with these needs. No matter how sophisticated the delivery and technical systems developed are, they have to meet the needs of the end users, particularly where there is any level of discretionary use or there is a risk that the system will not be used. As our social and educational systems evolve to meet the demands of 'System 4.0', these two developing streams of thought (technological efficiency and humanisation), while not necessarily in opposition to one another, certainly do require a strong bridging process to satisfy the needs of both.

The first of these demands is the drive towards technological efficiency, transferability of data, high co-ordination and the systematisation of information and information access which may lead to the *centralisation of technological resources*. The second is the strong and clear call for the humanisation of our systems, the recognition of our uniqueness, inherent value, limitless creative potential and inter-dependence. *Individuality and the recognition of uniqueness tends to decentralise and/or expand*. These two powerful streams of thought require excellent translation in order that they can be balanced and can operate coherently. We could perhaps visualise this as the translation from 'code' to 'language' – or 'syntactic' (feeling, emotion, core belief) to 'semantic' (rules of communication, commonly understood and easily interpretable ways of communicating). To achieve coherence of approach between these two streams requires a balanced co-creative process, such that neither system of thinking and relating is overwhelmed or subsumed by the other. The key principle is that the technological systems created must always remain in service of the human beings and the society they are being created for – indeed, some of the most successful technological tools of our time (such as Google, Air B&B and Uber) are built on this principle. This relationship is much like that between the woof and the warp of a beautiful Persian carpet – both are required to create a thing of strength and beauty, but the balance and tension between the two needs to be carefully managed to achieve durability and symmetry. Constant checking, evaluation and recalibrating of the movements being made in either direction are required to hold the tension correctly.

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Exploring notions of deep collaboration and deep change

The type of change required to transform and humanise our education systems is not superficial, nor is it likely to be easily achieved. Deep change of the nature required to dramatically shift our education systems to become future ready cannot be achieved using the same levers of change that created our existing systems (Robinson 2017). Deep change requires that those contributing to the design, policy and delivery of our education systems reach inwards, towards the very philosophical underpinnings, assumptions and emotions that determine the way we configure and engage with education. Facilitating profound change at this level requires us to move beyond our habitual patterns of engaging and to lean into an emerging and uncertain future (Scharmer 2018). In South Africa, the structural and systemic overhaul of our education system will require deep, continuous, and committed change processes amongst all those actors engaged in South Africa's education ecosystem in order to enable a shift in the underpinning dynamics of the system. Ideally, the goal should be to help us reposition how we choose to be together – not how we choose to control and manage each other.

To engage with deep change in this way is simultaneously a deeply personal exercise, and yet also requires the development of a collective conscience and will. If we collectively, as a nation, wish our systems to change, and particularly to change in a way that allows us to move beyond prevailing authority-based and hierarchical approaches, it requires a far deeper and more meaningful level of engagement amongst those who comprise our South African societies. We refer to this type of engagement as 'deep collaboration'. Deep collaboration is collaboration that allows for the development of collective awareness and collective will. It is an intentional movement towards understanding and perceiving each other, building collective values and purpose, and aligning around a journey towards significant and transformative global and country-level change. Such an approach moves far beyond simply 'doing projects' together and towards the development of shared meaning and values and, ultimately, the insight that we are deeply and meaningfully interdependent. In essence, it is engagement of a nature that allows the system to see and understand itself and allows for us to see and understand our part within it (Scharmer 2018). It requires us, as a nation, to value our harmony while continuing to celebrate our differences. We are starting to witness the evolution of this type of

mindset and approach within the global education system. Thought leaders in the field are calling for a dynamic shift in how we design, develop, and deliver our education systems – in short, how we revolutionise our education systems such that they are truly in service of the human beings at their centre, allowing for the evocation and development of the human will, creativity and the unique potential of learners (Alfadala et al 2020; Fullan, Quinn & McEachen 2018; Ricón-Gallardo 2020).

Compelling cases for deeper levels of collaboration within our global education systems have been made, calling for change at the level of the foundational philosophies around the purpose and value of education (Daly 2010; Fullan et al 2018; Hargreaves 2006; Ricón-Gallardo 2020; Seashore-Louis 2006). In the realm of education, 'deep change' goes far beyond the superficial adjustments that have been positioned as 'change' in recent times within many education systems, including our own South African education system. Policy reform, curricular modification, reworked accountability structures and processes and methodological changes in delivery do not constitute the deep change to which we refer – rather, 'deep change' as envisioned in this article speaks to the spirit of the system, from which all actions emerge (Scharmer 2018). Much has been written about revolutionising and reformatting current education systems to meet the needs of an evolving and increasingly complex future. Models from thought leaders such as Fullan (2021), Daly (2010) and Ricón-Gallardo (2020) commonly focus on the need for human centeredness as a key prerequisite of any education reform initiative undertaken. There is an appreciation of the complexity involved in changing from linear, conformist, authoritarian and bureaucratic education systems to ones which allow for open and creative ways of viewing problems and seeking solutions. In addition, research has recognised the value of supportive and strong social networks, connections across and between schools and communities, and a philosophy of interdependence as key factors that allow for deep and sustainable change to occur (Daly 2010; Ricón-Gallardo 2020)

For real change to take place, there must be a celebration of mistakes as part of individual and collective growth and understanding as well as a willingness to break silo thinking across sectors and be open to learning from very disparate fields of knowledge, particularly where these sectors are themselves being disrupted (Breakspear,

Peterson, Alfadala & Khair 2017; Fullan 2019; Seashore-Louis 2006). The practice of education is deeply related to and interdependent upon other disciplines and sectors. Change and change management is not education specific, but is a systems approach transcending the specific sector in which it is found. Leveraging existing change models that have been developed and have shown success in other sectors allows for education to lean into previous learning about how to successfully lead change. One such example of cross sectoral innovation being applied to an education context is the Agile School Model proposed by Breakspear et al (2017), which utilises the Agile Sprint process employed within business development models to facilitate school level transformation.

Change models must also be sufficiently flexible to accommodate contextual differences (Ricón-Gallardo 2020). Flexible systems which are able to constantly evolve and improve in response to incoming data, contextual and environmental shifts and the changing needs in the world of work are essential if education is to remain relevant (Breakspear et al 2017). Ideally, we need to find a way to embrace both social movements and scientific change management theories, allowing horizontal relationships and dialogue to become central to the change envisaged, rather than having educational change managed as a top-down process which entails merely breaking down complex work structures into smaller repetitive activities for control and compliance (Rícon-Gallardo 2020).

One of the core impediments to deep change is the inattention to (or inability to facilitate) a social compact between those expected to deliver on and embrace change at the level of the school, such that they can work coherently and collaboratively in the direction of said change, and those who are mandating the change processes from the 'control room' of the system. Politicians, policy makers, education officials, school leaders, educators, learners, and community members suffer from poor and/or inadequate attention to the lines of communication between them, a lack of inter-system information and experiential feedback loops and high levels of frustration, disillusionment, and apathy (Daly 2010). The lack of a common vision and purpose across all levels of the system, the absence of a simple and clear enabling theory of change and relational deficits make it extraordinarily hard for change to 'stick'.



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Shifting our understanding of our current era

The predominant narrative is that this so called '4th Age' of society in which we find ourselves is primarily about technology. Technology, it is true, is undoubtedly the most obviously defining feature of the current age. It has allowed for massive disruptions in how we receive, process, and manipulate information, how we engage with each other and the reach and scope of interactions that have become possible at a global level. However, we should also be conscious that while technology offers a powerful lever for change, how that change occurs and the direction in which it takes us is not predetermined or even, by default, positive. If we capitulate to the concept that the technology itself will determine the future of humanity and of the globe, we abdicate our responsibility to craft and create the future that we desire, one that will serve us all. Ultimately, it is human decisions that determine how our systems operate (Both 2018). The choice we face now is whether we engage with technology such that technology is in service of humanity or whether we abdicate our power, and humanity takes the role of being in service to technology (Tapscott & Tapscott 2016). The very language that we use to talk about this new age can determine which direction we choose. Our constant reference to the '4th Industrial Revolution', and the 'Age of Technology' immediately places us into the framework that technology leads.

This period of history has also been termed the 'Age of Disruption'. Our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly been one of the most globally disruptive occurrences of our time. The rapid and accelerating changes which we are seeing globally may easily evoke a sense of fear and uncertainty. This uncertainty may be managed in two ways: it may precipitate a flight to safety – holding on tighter than ever to existing systems and to methods of control that allow us to hide from the fear and potential loss of certainty; or it may be leant into and embraced. When we lean into uncertainty, we recognise that the true potential of chaos and disruption is the opportunity that it offers for rebirth, for creativity, for newness (Scharmer 2018). Deep change then becomes possible – offering a move towards more beneficial, appropriate and human systems. However, change of this nature is hard and requires a regeneration of the social compact.

There is also an alternative narrative to that of the '4th Industrial Revolution' – a narrative that talks of 'System 4.0', the 'Wellbeing Economy', the '4th Revolution of Humanity' and the 'Age of Humanisation' (Fiorimonti 2017).

This is a narrative in which ownership of the direction our societies move towards is placed within the human realm of conscious choice and agency. It calls for a move from centralised and authority-based decision making based on personal, party or country agendas towards generative and collective co-creative vision-setting, an appreciation of the inter-connectedness that we hold as humanity, our dependence upon our planet earth and our natural systems, and the celebration of the power of positive purpose (Scharmer 2008). It invites us to move from 'ego to eco- system' and to pay a collective and active role in setting the future direction for our societies.

As we move into System 4.0, it must be recognised that learning and education need to supersede the particular operational systems developed to deliver them - and it can be strongly argued that the will to learn is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. In our current context, there is an increasing ground swell calling for the dramatic overhaul and re-humanisation of the way in which we practice education. Synchronous and powerful examples of alternative approaches are emerging from across the globe. Interestingly, these are frequently from Global South countries in which the prevailing Western/Global North birthed education systems seem to have failed to deliver on their promise (Ricón-Gallardo 2020). Powerful and effective alternative education methodologies that are being delivered at scale are emerging. These include systems such as the People's Action for Learning Network (a global South-South collaboration across 14 countries on four continents), Fundacion Escuela Nueva (Columbia), the Tamkeen Community Foundation for Human Development (Morocco), Design for Change (a global innovation for education initiative) and several others. The one unifying feature of these systems, which have evolved independently and synchronously, is the commitment that they have to the evocation of human potential, the development of agency in learners, and the recognition of each learner's (and educator's) unique humanity and inherent ability to learn and develop. Even within the Global North countries, there is increasing recognition that the existing education system is bankrupt and is not fit for purpose for the age of disruption that we are experiencing. The call to develop systems that can better harness and develop human potential and encourage collaboration are growing louder and more urgent (Schleicher & Tuominen 2020).

Rethinking collaboration for the South African education and training system

While deep collaboration is how we create the environments and conditions that allow for deep change of a positive nature, it is also an end in itself in that the ability to collaborate deeply is in and of itself a feature of the deep change we are trying to enact.



The typical model of education delivery is hierarchical, bureaucratized, and automatic. This is most certainly the case in the South African education system. Our education system leaders, school leaders and educators have been steeped within a system that works in a particular way, that is comfortable by virtue of familiarity and to which they are habituated. Lack of attention to shifting this reality and creating a conversation and awareness of the need for change as well as failure to attend to the levels of psychological safety that are essential to embark on a change process are probably the biggest impediments to change. It follows therefore that the prequel to change, namely change readiness, is by far the most essential element that needs to be attended to in order to create an environment within which change can happen. This by default means that the hardest work, the least visible work, is the most important (Scharmer 2018).

In the South African education system there are unfortunately many instances of a significant trust deficit and poor relational quality (van der Berg et al 2017). Consultative forums are frequently experienced as ‘show and tell’ forums by participants, with the impression that their experience and opinions do not count, are not heard and will not make a difference to how decisions are ultimately made. This is a death knell for deep collaboration, and unfortunately, the more negative engagements such as these are experienced, the more damaged trust becomes. While deep collaboration is how we create the environments and conditions that allow for deep change of a positive nature, it is also an end in itself in that the ability to collaborate deeply is in and of itself a feature of the deep change we are trying to enact. Unfortunately, review and examination of the South African education system makes it clear that at most levels of the system, our systems are deeply disempowering, hierarchical, process based and punitive. In addition, we have a strong and painful undercurrent of intergenerational trauma in the country which creates impediments to trust and keeps us trapped in negative and painful narratives. In order to bring about change to this reality, we need to consciously and actively choose to engage in the ‘presencing’ and empowering aspects of how we approach the work done in the sector. This requires strong and conscious leadership from multiple levels within the system – and it requires, if it is to be successful, the political will to engage in a different way of being from those who are responsible for the overall wellbeing of the system.

Conclusion

In proposing an open conversation to foster deeper engagement that can contribute to a shared vision for change in our education system, the insights provided on technological advancements cannot be ignored. We recognise the opportunity technology provides us, especially during a time when options to communicate and remain connected are few. However, the pause we have experienced in the last year during the pandemic emphasises the urgency of the need to address the desired change in a much more meaningful and robust manner. We propose a collaborative, empathetic, humanistic and inclusive approach which is sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged as well as those operating at all levels within our education system. Sustainable change can only be achieved if the actors responsible for the change have consensus on what kind of change is required and are able to collectively enact and promote the desired change. The best and most sustainable change is often built through transparency, trust and action and evolves through trialling and prototyping early collective initiatives, rather than through over-analysis and the desire to have a 'perfect' outcome. Hence, attention to change readiness and the

willingness to engage in collective thinking, visioning and prototyping is key. This typically is enabled through dialogue and trust building interactions and is iterative, as participants move through the process of change. High levels of underlying positive intent in convening such dialogues may be the single most important element for engendering trust. Once more, it is the intangibles of will, intent and philosophy that are most likely to predicate success. Bill O'Brien's observation that 'the success of an intervention is dependent on the interior condition of the intervenor' (Scharmer 2018, xi) perfectly describes this phenomenon.

Our hope through this paper is to initiate some of the early discussions and dialogues that could assist us in moving towards change readiness. We therefore welcome further interrogation of the ideas raised in this paper and invite readers to engage with the opinions expressed and arguments employed so that we may collectively participate in collaborative dialogue towards a common vision for deep change.

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