

## **Assisting School Management Teams to construct their school improvement plans: an action learning approach**

**Geoffrey Van Der Voort**

School for Education Research and Engagement, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa  
vdvoort.g@gmail.com

**Lesley Wood**

COMBER, Faculty of Education Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus  
Lesley.Wood@nwu.ac.za

This article reports on a first cycle of a larger action research study conducted to determine how Circuit Teams could support School Management Teams of underperforming high schools towards whole-school development. Although it is a mandated requirement by the Department of Education, none of the four schools involved in the study had developed a school improvement plan, a necessary first step towards whole-school development. In this article we focus on the collaborative intervention we designed to meet the identified needs of the participants regarding the construction of a school improvement plan. A qualitative baseline study revealed the School Management Teams' general disregard towards the school improvement plan as well as limited insight into what skills they needed to develop it, and their imperfect understanding of whole-school development. We explain the action research process we took to facilitate a clearer understanding of the school improvement plan and how to develop it. The data analysis revealed that the collaborative learning experience ignited feelings of empowerment, increased motivation to collaborate with the Circuit Teams towards whole-school development, and generally assisted the School Management Teams' resolve to improve the management of their respective schools. These findings present evidence that suggests the value of an action learning approach to the professional development of School Management Teams, but the process could be equally useful to encourage sustainable change in varied contexts of continued professional development.

**Keywords:** Action learning, action research, Circuit Team, school improvement plan, School Management Team(s), school self-evaluation, systems theory approach, whole-school development, whole-school evaluation.

### **Introduction**

If planning is the primary management function that School Management Teams have to perform (Van Deventer & Kruger, 2009), how can schools progress towards whole-school development if many do not have a written plan in place to guide their continuous improvement? The plan referred to in this context is the school improvement plan. The above question is posed in the light of reports that reveal a lack of understanding on the part of School Management Teams of the significance of school improvement plans in the context of school development in South Africa, as well as their lack of capacity to design and implement such plans (Department of Education, Eastern Cape, 2009). This report indicates that School Management Teams tended to have a very laissez-faire approach to strategic planning and that even if school improvement plans did exist, they were seldom implemented.

It appears therefore that the value of a school improvement plan to develop a culture of teaching and learning (Naidu, Joubert, Mestry, Mosoge & Ngcobo, 2008) is not recognised at many underperforming schools. Schools are supposed to conduct self-evaluation on an annual basis, feeding the results thereof into the school improvement plan, which the school then has implemented and monitored (Westraad, 2011). In addition, the Department of Education & UNICEF South Africa (2008) stresses that, guided by the Principal, the School Management Team must support and guide the educators in elaborating the school's development plans. Furthermore, the School Management Team has to ensure responsibility and accountability by adhering to the comprehensive planning to improve the school, use data to understand situations, identify root causes of problems, propose solutions and validate accomplishments by monitoring based on a clear set of indicators.

This is not happening in underperforming schools. Clarke (2011) found that stakeholders were seldom involved in the planning process, the school improvement plans did not contain specific and measurable targets, there was no systematic collection and analysis of data on learner and teacher performance and attendance, and that the monitoring of these issues was limited and haphazard. Underperforming schools will remain so if they are not guided and supported to cultivate a culture of self-improvement. We conceptualise the school improvement plan as an agenda that School Management Teams could use to improve school functionality, as well as acting as an accountability tool (Van Der Voort, 2013) against which to measure their progress. We wanted to answer the following question: "How can we assist School Management Teams to develop and implement a school improvement plan for their school?"

This is not only a South African issue. International research on school improvement (e.g. Duke, Carr & Sterrett, 2013) emphasises that the futures of hundreds of thousands of young people are in serious jeopardy if the lowest-performing schools do not sustain development. A school improvement plan is regarded as a vital component of such improvement.

Our aim in this first cycle of action research with the School Management Teams was thus to raise awareness around the importance of a school improvement plan for whole-school development and evaluation, and to help them to acquire the knowledge, skills and will to construct one. We selected action learning (Revans, 2011) as the process to attain this outcome as it promotes learning and capacity building, leading to improved performance. Action learning enhances continuous reflection by people working on real-life issues with the intention of getting things done, thereby placing a strong emphasis on action-to-be-taken which benefits both the individuals and the organization (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). One such a real-life issue is the development of a school improvement plan where each school sets priorities, strategies and action plans to address the particular challenges.

We first provide an overview of the theoretical framework that guided our intervention and data analysis, before explaining our research design. Thereafter we present the findings of the qualitative data analysis and discuss the significance of our findings for supporting School Management Teams towards whole-school development, as well as the significance of the action learning process for professional development in general.

#### A systemic approach to whole-school development

We selected systems theory to inform our understanding of whole-school development as it specifically explains the interaction needed between the various components of the education system to reach a common goal (Naidu et al., 2008). The education system is an open organisational structure, composed of different components, relations, processes and programmes which are in constant interaction with the environment (Lunenburg, 2010).

This open system consists of five basic elements: inputs, a transformation process, outputs, feedback and environment (Lunenburg, 2010). The concepts of whole-school development and the related concepts of school self-evaluation are central to the Policy on Whole-School Evaluation (Department of Education, 2001a) which is aligned with the systemic understanding of school functioning. The policy identifies a number of inputs (resources that are given to schools to execute the task of teaching and learning), processes (the ways in which the schools seek to achieve their goals) and outputs (what the schools achieve in terms of academic standards, standards of behaviour and rates of punctuality and attendance) that need to be undertaken by every school in South Africa.

However, the policy does not mention the other two elements of systems theory: feedback and environment. From a whole-school perspective we perceive this to be a serious shortcoming as it means that the policy does not take schools operating in a disadvantaged context into consideration. All schools are given the same inputs and are expected to have the same outputs, but the context in which they function is ignored.

The policy identifies nine areas of evaluation against which every public school in South Africa is evaluated (Department of Education, 2001b) (see Table 1). The same guidelines, evaluation criteria and instruments used by the accredited whole-school evaluation supervisors can be carried out by schools to perform school self-evaluation (Department of Education, 2001a).

#### School self-evaluation

School self-evaluation is another important concept related to school improvement plans and forms an integral part of the

whole-school evaluation process (Van der Westhuizen, 2002). Naidu et al. (2008:49) explain that school self-evaluation must also be executed to “develop a school plan...in order to grow a culture of self-improvement...” which refers to the school improvement plan. Taking the above into consideration, school self-evaluation is utilised both for the purpose of whole-school evaluation and for the development of the school improvement plan.

The school improvement plan therefore forms the basis for continuous school improvement, as well as acting as a monitoring instrument to measure progress towards specific areas of whole-school development. From our interaction with under-performing schools we are aware that these schools have to learn to improve themselves on an on-going basis. Very often they do not get the required support from the Circuit Teams in this regard (Chinsamy, 2002).

The nine areas of whole-school evaluation inform both the external whole-school evaluation process as well as the internal school self-evaluation, both of them leading to the development of the annual school improvement plan. The aim of the school improvement plan is to ensure growth, development and improvement at school level.

Ngubane (2005) stresses the importance of the quality of leadership and management at school level, as well as the importance of participative management which supports the idea of school-based decision-making. To provide such leadership and sustain whole-school development, School Management Teams have to build relations of trust, honesty, communication, competence, openness, a shared vision and values, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry and collaboration (Owens, 2010). It is for this reason that we adopted an action learning and action research design (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009) for the study: to support the schools and to provide them with the required skills to grow a culture of self-improvement.

#### Methodology

Guided by a critical theory paradigm (Neuman, 2006) we wanted to involve the participants in the intervention for change, and to encourage them to take ownership of the process, as befitted our action research design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). We found the definition by Kermis and McTaggart (1988:5) as quoted by Cohen et al. (2007:298) to be all-encompassing for our study:

*“Action research is a form of collective self-enquiry by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social and educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. The approach is only action research when it is collaborative.”*

As part of a larger action research project, this first cycle was aimed at raising awareness amongst the School Management Team members of the importance of a school improvement plan and how to explore whether their own negative perceptions of it might be impeding their ability to construct and implement one. True to practical outcomes of the action learning and action research design (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009) we wanted them to be able to construct a school improvement plan and begin to identify actions to implement it.

We purposefully selected (Neuman, 2006) four under-performing high schools in a large township area in the Cape Town metropolitan area. These schools were selected on the basis that they had performed poorly, had serious management

**Table 1** The nine areas of Whole-School Evaluation (Based on: Department of Education, 2001b)

Key area	Purpose of the key area
Basic functionality	To judge whether the school can function effectively and efficiently and realise its educational and social goals.
Leadership, management and communication	To assess the effectiveness of the leadership and management of the school.
Governance and relationships	To assess the effectiveness of the School Governing Body in giving the school strategic direction.
Quality of teaching and learning, and educator development	To estimate the quality of teaching and the educator development.
Curriculum provision and resources	To evaluate the quality of the curriculum and how closely it matches the needs of the pupils and any national or local requirements. A judgement also has to be made on the range and quality of other activities that enhance the curriculum.
Learner achievement	To assess the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners have acquired.
School safety, security and discipline	To evaluate the extent in which the school knows about legislation and implements it; to check that the school is secure and the learners are safe; to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's disciplinary procedures.
School infrastructure	To assess to what extent the school has sufficient and appropriate staff, resources and accommodation available for its purpose.
Parents and the community	To gauge the extent to which the school encourages parental and community involvement in the education of the learners and how it makes use of their contributions to support learners' progress.

issues, and the School Management Teams were willing to participate fully in the study.

The communities they serve are poverty-stricken and suffer from related social problems typical of many such schools in the country (Westraad, 2011). In total, four principals, eight deputy principals and 23 heads of departments participated in the research. In addition, members of the Circuit Team who supported these schools towards whole-school development also participated, in particular the Circuit Team Manager and the two Institutional Management and Governance Managers.

We generated data through participant observation (Gibson & Brown, 2009) of the interaction during the intervention, focus group interviews and individual interviews (Gillham, 2000), and the analysis of relevant departmental and school-based documents (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

During this first cycle of the action research process individual interviews were held with each of the four principals, as well as with members of the Circuit Team. Structured interviews were used at this stage to gather responses which enabled us to construct a baseline of where each of the schools and the Circuit Team were in relation to whole-school development. We prepared a specific interview schedule for the principals and another schedule for the Circuit Team members. Using structured interviews enabled us to organize the initial data easily, and facilitated the drawing of comparisons.

We also used focus group interviews to generate a wider range of responses than with individual interviews as these assisted us to gain insight into what might have been pursued in subsequent individual interviews. These were also often quicker than individual interviews and therefore more timesaving. Focus group interviews were done with the members of the School Management Teams of each of the individual four schools. In addition, we used these during and after the workshop we conducted during this cycle of the action research to obtain information on how the participants perceived the intervention, as well as for our own reflection. Semi-structured interviews were used during the focus group interviews as these allowed us to follow up on aspects that participants mentioned, and which we felt warranted further investigation and probing.

In a qualitative study such as this one, the data gathered have to be analysed, looking for themes or categories before

interpreting or drawing conclusions from the data (Creswell, 2003). The eight steps identified by Tesch (1990:142-145), as stated in Creswell (2003) were used to thematically analyse the data. Trustworthiness of data was ensured by triangulation of data sources, peer briefing, member checks, avoidance of inferences and generalisations, avoiding the selective use of data, as well as independent recoding (Flick, 2006). The usual ethical considerations applicable to qualitative research (Neuman, 2006) were employed in the research study.

#### The action research process

The focus of action research is to empower people to change their social situation, and to raise awareness on a particular issue. Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005:205) describe the action research process as being "cyclical" or "spiral" as each cycle progresses through a number of steps, which we adopted as explained in Table 2.

During the fieldwork we spent time with the participants, engaging with them in their offices, staff rooms and during the workshop. Our aim was to empower them to change the underperforming situation they found themselves in so that, through their active involvement in the roll-out of the research, they could become self-managing schools.

The action research process followed during the execution of this cycle is summarised in Table 2, and outlines the processes followed in each of the five steps of the cycle.

The workshop described in step three of Table 2 was purposefully constructed in a series of sequential activities that incorporated the following principles of action learning:

- Collaboration (with others towards achieving a particular goal – in this case the development of a school improvement plan)
- Critical reflection (on actions taken by means of dialogue, with the aim to learn valuable lessons)
- Communicative action (with others to reach a common understanding of a situation)
- Co-accountability (for action to reach a common goal), and
- Commitment (to a single purpose, and sharing responsibility with others) (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009; Moloi, 2005; McGill & Brockbank, 2004).

**Table 2** The Action Research Process (Adapted from Van der Voort, 2013:136)

Step	Modus operandi
Identification of the problem	Interviews were held with the four principals on the achievements of each school, the obstacles facing them, as well as their priorities for the 2012 academic year. A follow-up session with the School Management Teams of the four schools was held on their experiences related to the development of their school improvement plans.
Designing the action plan	After liaising with the Circuit Team, it was agreed to host a workshop for the four schools to develop their school improvement plans.
Implementing the action plan	We began the workshop by explaining the nature and purpose of school self-evaluation to the participants. The school self-evaluation instrument, based on the areas listed in table 1, was completed. The participants worked together in smaller groups of two to three people to maximise participation. The sub-groups of each school reported their results and discussed them with the rest of their colleagues. Second phase of the session: each school had to identify at least one, but not more than two priorities from each of the nine areas of whole-school evaluation that they considered to be significant. They then identified a maximum of four priorities from the entire list. A template containing the following headings was given to each group to fill in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and name the four priority areas</li> <li>• Indicate what had been done (completed) up to that stage in 2012 with regards to each of the priorities, and</li> <li>• Indicate what was outstanding and therefore needed to be attended to before the end of the 2012 academic year, in order to address the specific priorities. In this way, they were guided to start identifying the required action to be taken towards addressing each of their priority areas.</li> </ul>
Evaluating the action Reflection and lessons learnt	Group interviews were held to determine participant experiences and their perceptions of their learning. Critical reflection on the processes and data enabled us to identify a number of lessons to inform our future practice.

### Discussion of findings

In this section we report on data analysis of the participants' perceptions of the learning experience. From the analysis, four distinctive themes emerged:

Theme one: The workshop was an empowering and capacity-building exercise

There was a strong indication that the School Management Team members experienced the workshop as an empowering exercise, during which they gained the required knowledge and skills to develop a school improvement plan. Their responses also indicate that this was the first time that they were exposed to such an experience, and that they began to understand the school improvement plan as a tool for school improvement. The following views were expressed by one of the deputy principals:

*Now I know that the school improvement plan is intended to be a living document for the school. It also outlines the specific activities, strategies and interventions that each school has to implement to ensure academic success for all students... . It empowers me because the school improvement plan offers a strategic and integrated process with the potential to deliver sustained improvements in schools by improving the performance of teachers and learners as well.*

The Education Improvement Commission (2000) confirms that the school improvement plan is indeed a living document: a road map that sets out the changes a school needs to make to improve the level of learner achievement, and to indicate how and when changes need to be made. Change involves learning (Dick, 2005) and this implies some form of change at the personal level at least. The response of a head of department indicated that change also took place with regard to their professional development: *The most important lesson was learning how to design an action plan. I was also exposed to the role of management in developing programmes for the school.*

The quotation is evidence that participants not only learned about how to design an action plan, but also began to understand the role of the School Management Team in leading the

development of the school improvement plan.

In terms of action learning, individual learning capacity must be enhanced before effective organizational change can occur (McGill & Beaty, 1995). Participation in the problem-solving process encourages deep learning to take place (Revans, 2011).

The Department of Education, Kwa-Zulu Natal (2007) lists specific aspects that School Management Teams have to undertake when developing the school improvement plan. These include: specific knowledge of the whole-school development process, and their willingness to share information in this regard with all the stakeholders involved. They also have to monitor the implementation of the school improvement plan. The fact that the participants were beginning to understand this role in the development of the school improvement plan, is a first step towards effective fulfilment of these duties.

The last aspect that emerged from the participants' responses in relation to empowerment and capacity-building was the issue of increased confidence, which is an evidence-based outcome of action learning (Moloi, 2005). One of the participants, a deputy principal, had the following remarks:

*The session for me was intimidating at first as I was not prepared and not aware of what was going to be asked. As the session was going on, I became more confident to respond to the questions.*

Action learning promotes empowerment and self-reliance (Pedler, 2011) and also significantly elevates the self-confidence of participants (Revans, 2011). The evidence presented here suggests that our action learning approach has led to better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of School Management Teams with regard to school improvement and enhanced personal efficacy (Bandura, 1997) to begin to take on the responsibility to do this.

Research on school improvement in China (Lee & Williams, 2006) revealed that one of the greatest obstacles in school improvement is principals' lack of understanding school improvement planning.

Theme two: Interaction with School Management Team members from other schools was a powerful learning experience. The fact that the participants were provided the opportunity to display their initial school improvement plans to each other during the workshop presented the opportunity to give input and critique each others' improvement plans. This form of interaction between School Management Team members of the four schools had a very profound influence on the learning that took place. A deputy principal expressed the following views:

*Meeting managers from other schools was exciting. Sitting together, discussing the individual school's challenges, I noted that these challenges were commonly the same for all schools. What makes them unique to each other is how they are addressed individually by the schools. The discussions were empowering in that they encouraged enquiries so that one does not sit with the problem alone. Assistance can be obtained if you work with other people. A foundation has been laid for the possible support from managers of other schools.*

This participant realised that he is not alone in having to deal with problems, and that solutions to such problems can be found through interaction with one another. Fryman, Wilson and Wyer (2000) emphasize that solutions to problems ultimately come from the people within the working environment, and that continuous improvement occurs when individuals collaborate with one another through engaging in critical questioning and reflection.

The participants realised that regular, open and honest discussion with colleagues is important to empower each other to address the barriers they are facing:

*Sitting down as School Management Team members around the issues that affect our schools, showed me the seriousness around bringing solutions to these problems. I also learnt that honesty and transparency are most important when it comes to problems that surround us, in order to be helped. After these sessions I felt so empowered and able to tackle some of the problematic issues within the department. With the confidence that I gained from these brainstorming sessions I feel such kinds of sessions can be held time and again* (Head of Department).

It is important for colleagues to interact with one another in this way, and for them to make deliberate time and space available to engage in reflective learning (McGill & Brockbank, 2004). Our findings reveal that the novel of collective and reflective learning helped them to realise the importance of making the necessary time to get together so that they can support each other in their quest for school improvement.

International research (Townsend, 2007) found that enhancing the skills and capacities of individual school managers through setting up such learning communities is extremely beneficial for the development of school leadership.

Theme three: The participants realised the importance of reflection on management practices

In order to grow towards whole-school development, it is essential for School Management Teams to reflect constantly on the actions they have taken, the directions they have set for their institutions, and ideas for improving their management practices (Fryman, Wilson & Wyer, 2000). Reflection was an important part of participants' learning. A deputy principal made the following remarks:

*We also had time to reflect on what we had already implemented since January 2012 and what still needs to be*

*done... I have learnt that it is important that the School Management Team members meet on a regular basis to reflect on progress with activities. This enables managers to pick up immediately if there are due dates that are not honoured and intervention strategies that can be implemented immediately.*

According to Moloi (2005) a learning organisation constantly reflects on its practices. Quality improvements within schools as learning organisations can only be achieved through open communication, reflection and inquiry processes that collectively contribute to school improvement.

School Management Team members should therefore allocate the necessary time and opportunity to reflect constantly on the improvements they have implemented, evaluate the effectiveness thereof to reach the intended outcome, and put the required measures in place for the following cycle of action that needs to be implemented en route towards whole-school development (McGill & Brockbank, 2004).

Theme four: Appreciation was expressed for the gradual (step-by-step) way in which the workshop was conducted. Both the activities and the content that formed part of the workshop were sequentially structured to guide the participants to construct their individual school improvement plans. The action learning process allowed participants to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to develop their plans. A head of department expressed his/her gratitude for the way in which the workshop was scaffolded:

*I have learnt a lot because I was able to focus specifically on certain areas of the school improvement plan. I also learnt that I needed to look at one thing at a time, e.g. looking at three areas of development (three focus areas). Although development is a process, I have to a certain extent been able to set achievable targets. I think I still need some time to master the process. Where possible, I would be glad if I can go through the process again.*

The action learning process allows for participants to learn how to learn and develop rather than just regaling them with facts and telling them what they should be doing to improve their management. The interactive cycle of action and reflection allows for deep learning to take place (Revans 2011). During the workshop all members of each School Management Team were actively involved in the school self-evaluation exercise and totally engrossed in the development of their school improvement plans. Within a workshop situation one normally finds that people wander off or do not participate actively. This was not the case with the session we facilitated. It was often difficult to stop them at the end of an activity (either to get feedback or to move on to the following leg of the process) because they continually requested more time to wrap up their discussions. Throughout the workshop we gained a very strong impression that this may have been the first time that they were afforded the opportunity to engage fully in whole-school development – our observation was later confirmed by one of the Circuit Team members:

*I have not yet seen such focus and concentrated effort from these school managers. They have not yet been exposed to something of this kind before.*

Action learning also stresses the importance of life-long learning over once-off capacity building (Fryman, Wilson & Wyer, 2000). School Management Teams will therefore require ongoing and focused support. Since the Circuit Team members also participated in the workshop they will be better able to drive the process in the future.

What did we learn from this experience?

Our reflection on the workshop resulted in significant learning on our part that guided our next cycle of action to improve the management of these underperforming schools.

The School Management Teams reported a change in their thinking regarding whole-school development at their institutions of learning. They began to view the school improvement plan as an important mechanism towards becoming self-managing schools. They recognised the value of whole-school development, and could link this to the school improvement plan. In addition, they acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully construct their own school improvement plans.

We are convinced that the changes in the participants' thinking were brought about by action learning. According to Revans (2011) one of the many reasons for the success of action learning is that it tackles real problems faced by the participants. They benefit from the discussions of these issues and by adapting their thinking, are able to find potentially new solutions to their problems.

It was clear that the members of the School Management Teams were willing to be active participants in implementing the strategies listed in their school improvement plans. This was evident in that fact that they agreed to take responsibility for the activities listed in the plans. In addition, the fact that they could identify action steps that they had already taken in addressing some of their priorities was proof of their commitment to turn around the situation they faced. Based on Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline's (2004) explanation of a competent system there was growing evidence that these schools began to focus on becoming self-managing institutions.

It was evident from the commencement of the workshop that the members of the School Management Teams had a clear picture of the problems that their respective schools experienced. They discussed and listed the issues on the worksheets provided to them: not for one moment did they struggle to identify problems. This reminded us of the inherent capacity of people to solve their own problems if they are just given some direction and afforded the time and opportunity to reflect on their schools' situation. Our intervention provided a platform for them to learn how to take action to improve their own schools. In addition, we were able to identify areas that we needed to improve on during the action research process.

The templates we gave the participants to work out their school improvement plans only allowed them to identify their priorities, the appropriate action plans to be undertaken, identify the person(s) responsible to lead the process and link it to a deadline. In hindsight, in order to have a more complete document, the template needed to be extended to include budgets and physical resources.

Only the members of the School Management Teams were involved in the development of the school improvement plans. Other important stakeholders, such as the administrative and teaching staff members, members of the Representative Council of Learners, School Governing Body members, as well as community leaders were at this stage left out of the picture. The National Policy on Whole-School Development (Department of Education, 2001a) emphasises the importance that all stakeholders need to be involved in school improvement. Since the School Management Teams have been capacitated to drive the process of whole-school development, they need to ensure that these stakeholders are brought on board of the process in the future. From this experience, we learnt that this aspect had to be changed during future interventions.

The participants were so preoccupied with achieving improved learner outcomes at the end of the year that the aspect of basic functionality (see table 1) did not feature as strongly in the school improvement plans as it should have. As Westraad (2011) argues, there has to be a strong focus on ensuring that the school is basically functional before attending to other areas of development. In future, we will ensure that more attention is given to this aspect in the school improvement plan.

We also realised that, although each school set a specific target for the overall pass rate at the end of the year, there were no subject-specific issues included under the priority of learner achievement. For example, no subject (such as Geography) was mentioned by name, and there were no indications of the specific needs that had to be addressed to support enhanced learner achievements in the subject, such as map work. This will have to be taken up in the schools' improvement plans for the following year and it is something that we need to emphasise in the future.

### Conclusion

The events that occurred during the workshop represented a significant departure from the traditional, bureaucratic, top-down approach which is commonly followed by the Department of Education in their training interventions (MacMaster, interview 2010). The action research design allowed a more participative relationship to develop between the School Management Team members of the four schools.

The action learning approach adopted in this research study enabled and capacitated the participants to develop suitable school improvement plans. Participants had to rely on their interaction with one another, and learn from each other, as well as by means of reflection and constructive feedback. The fact that it was at times difficult to stop them at the end of activities highlighted the fact that authentic learning took place during the workshop (McGill & Beaty 1995).

Although this small study was limited in scope, the findings are significant for school improvement on an international scale. Schools can only progress towards whole-school development if properly constructed school improvement plans are in place. The management teams, of the four underperforming high schools in this study, learnt not only how to develop their school improvement plans, but also the importance of having them to improve the functioning of their schools and their own management practices. The process of action learning will enable them to sustain this learning. These outcomes emphasise the value of interventions based on the principles of action learning for the development of school leadership. Such learning can, in turn, lead to enhanced functionality, thereby breaking the cycle of underperforming schools in any similar contexts.

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