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# Large-scale improvement interventions in the education system: PILO's contribution to the theory of change in education<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

This article focuses on a system-wide education improvement intervention by the Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes (PILO), run in partnership with the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. It examines PILO's intention, and implementation of building strong supportive professional relationships in schools, based on fusing accountability and support to guarantee the effectiveness and sustainability of change. The study is based on perceptual data from heads of department (HoDs) and teachers on key components of the programme, written evidence from teachers' curriculum trackers and planners, and from HoDs' monitoring forms. Drawing on literature that foregrounds the idea of *internal reciprocal accountability*, we conclude: 1) Teachers appreciated planners and trackers assisting them with curriculum sequencing and pacing, and HoD monitoring work for making the process more transparent and comfortable. 2) Teachers' reflections were thin and superficial, blaming poor results on 'struggling learners,' overambitious curriculum, and challenging school circumstances – but not on teacher practice or difficulties with learners' learning. 3) Professional conversations were supportive of regulative practices but unable to engage with the instructional core. 4) PILO's model of change seems to have resulted in HoDs and teachers focusing on curriculum coverage monitoring, and general reciprocity. Differentiated forms of support, and meaningful opportunities to learn the conceptual point of topics being taught, are needed to build reciprocal accountability.

**Keywords:** systemic educational intervention, curriculum coverage, internal reciprocal accountability

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<sup>2</sup> The research in this study was commissioned and funded by SAIDE in partnership with PILO, which wanted independent researchers to provide snapshots of its intervention in KZN in its early stages of implementation. Our article draws on this research study, which was published as a book chapter (Shalem 2018). Opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own.

## Introduction

Large-scale improvement interventions in the education system, whether in a thousand schools or in a few districts and their schools, is usually informed by a theory of change, which can be either explicit or (as is most often the case) implicit. Theory of change refers to predictive assumptions ‘about the relationship between desired changes and the actions that may produce those changes’ (Connolly & Seymour 2009: 1). Fullan (2006) argues that the desired changes in schools should be about improved results and also about improved teaching and learning. Elmore adds that, if such desired changes are to be achieved, a change in the organisational culture is also required; he explains:

Cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modelling the new values and behavior that you expect to displace the existing ones. (2004: 11)

After identifying clearly and realistically the desired ends, a theory of change needs to specify the means by which these ends will be pursued, as well as the reasons why these means or strategies have been selected to pursue the desired changes. Fullan (2006) calls the design of change strategies and tools a *theory of action*.

The issue of the appropriateness of the change tools or theory of action that will move specific institutions and individuals from where they are to where they need to be, is not fully resolved. The change management literature, which has been studying the change process in schools since the 1980s (Fullan 1982; McLaughlin 1987), continues to debate the nature of, and the balance between, demand and supply. Other scholars (Darling-Hammond 2004; Elmore 2004; Fullan 2006) refer to the nature of, and the balance between, the change tools of external accountability (or pressure) and internal accountability (support and pressure).

In 2015, in partnership with the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Department of Education (DoE), the Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes (PILO) started the Jika iMfundo improvement campaign in roughly 1,200 primary and secondary schools from two KZN districts<sup>3</sup> for three years. This system-wide educational intervention, which was financially supported by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), was rather different from those of other provincial departments. PILO’s idea was to improve learners’ results and the schools’ and teachers’ coverage of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) by targeting the whole education system of the KZN DoE, and focusing on the work and relationships of district officials, principals, school management teams (SMTs), heads of department (HoDs) and teachers alike.

One of the main strategies of PILO in schools – under investigation in this study – was to develop professional agency, a collegial professional culture and greater organisational capacity in schools. This shift in the behaviours and practices of school stakeholders was expected to foster better internal accountability. As explained by Metcalfe (2018), PILO is about developing, among and

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<sup>3</sup> This intervention is supposed to be rolled out, over time, to all the KZN education districts.

within districts and schools, internal reciprocal accountability as the main change tool to fuse accountability and support in order to guarantee the effectiveness and sustainability of this system-wide intervention.

This article examines how the forms of internal reciprocal accountability expected from HoDs and teachers take shape on the ground in selected primary schools in a mostly rural district of KZN. We analyse the components of the programme aimed at building strong professional relationships in the school, and the perceptions of HoDs and teachers regarding its various components: teachers' use of curriculum planners and trackers, teachers' mandated reflections, the professional form of HoD monitoring, and the nature of professional conversations between HoDs and teachers.

We argue that a key challenging tension runs through the conceptualisation of professional relationships between HoDs and teachers. Whilst the programme expects HoDs to develop a new monitoring process for developmental purposes that is fair, transparent and effective, the HoDs and their teachers have insufficient professional knowledge to carry this through. Our analysis shows that HoDs in the research sample provided supportive monitoring that was broad and generic – at the expense of providing specific instructional support targeted at the level of teacher practice. Teachers comply with what they see as the main expectation (curriculum coverage) at the expense of deep and useful reflection on what learners find difficult and why, or identifying the support they need to assist their learners.

This weakness in the internal accountability of schools stands in the way of building a supportive collegial and professional culture in schools, which is a key aim of the programme. We suggest that this tension is structural and plays out in specific ways when implemented in a poor social school context and especially given the scope and scale of the intervention. The Jika iMfundo campaign targeted institutional change in more than 1,200 schools in two KZN districts, many of which had limited financial and human support and resources.

## **Research design and processes**

This qualitative study relies mainly on the perceptions of HoDs and teachers about the Jika iMfundo campaign that was implemented in two KZN districts from 2015 to 2017. The data collection process, which was completed in October 2017, consists of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was collected by PILO in around 40 primary schools in a mostly rural KZN district. It consists of school reviews that were done in November 2015, and surveys of curriculum coverage in August 2016. The 2015 school reviews consist of interviews with teachers and HoDs about teachers' use of the curriculum trackers and the relationships between HoDs, deputy principal and teachers. The 2016 curriculum surveys consist of interviews with HoDs on teachers' use of trackers and their improved curriculum coverage.

To supplement this perceptual data, we collected some harder evidence from a sample of six

primary schools that were representative of the PILO's coding system.<sup>4</sup> There was one 'green' school (needing little support), three 'amber' schools (needing further support) and two 'red' schools (could not move forward). Curriculum trackers and planners were collected from twelve Grade 3 English as first additional language (EFAL) teachers for the four school terms of 2015 and 2016, and for the first term of 2017. This subject and grade is significant because English becomes the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) from Grade 4 onwards. Finally, PILO provided us with HoD Tool 2 forms from four HoDs working in our sampled schools, with reflections on their conversations with teachers and on their monitoring.

This article is divided into five sections. The first discusses different kinds of change tools with specific emphasis on the interdependence between external and internal accountability, and on approaches to teacher development. In the second section, we examine PILO's theory of change regarding professional relationships, one of the key change drivers. The third section examines the four components that comprise the programme, and their assumptions. The fourth section explores the perceptions and experiences of HoDs and teachers with these four components. Before concluding, the fifth section analyses the extent to which the four components of the programme can promote or have promoted internal reciprocal accountability.

## Theories of change

Educational accountabilities can take different forms, depending on the nature of schools and, in particular, their developmental capacity. The main ones are:

- Bureaucratic – accounting to the line of authority by following policy, rules and procedures.
- Political – accounting to the politically elected bodies.
- Professional – accounting to the specialised knowledge of the profession by making appropriate judgements in context.
- Performance-based – accounting for results to the superior line of authority.

Accountability can also operate internally and externally. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009: 110) explain that 'when individuals and groups willingly take on personal, professional and collective responsibility for continuous improvement and success for all students,' they display internal accountability. External accountability, in contrast, is about making schools or other institutions account to the department and the public for their performance, often measured by learners' results.

Elmore (2004) argues that external accountability does not have much positive impact on learners' results without the prior existence of some organisational capacity in schools, or what he calls *internal accountability*. He maintains that this is the most appropriate accountability. Schools with a poor organisational capacity first need a form of *reciprocal accountability* with the district. He

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<sup>4</sup> This coding system was developed by PILO for SMTs to rate, themselves, the state of their schools. This self-rating was only done by SMT members who attended the SMT module session.

defines the latter as: ‘For each unit of performance I demand of you, I have equal and reciprocal responsibility to provide you with a unit of capacity to produce that performance, if you do not already have that capacity’ (Elmore 2004: 244–245). He emphasises that external accountability has to be aligned with, and promote, internal accountability.

Tensions usually develop when different accountabilities are juxtaposed because of their slightly different goals and purposes. O’Day (2002) argues that the greatest impact comes from an appropriate combination of bureaucratic and professional modes of regulation because of their complementary aims of improving both the processes and outcomes of schooling. Assessing the change tools that have the most influence in changing schools, Barber and Phillips (2000) argue that the greatest impact occurs when pressure and support are combined, or fused, in one tool.

Support ranges from the provision of better material resources, improved working conditions, strategies to improve the school culture and organisational capacity as well teachers’ professional knowledge. According to Fullan (2006), most theories of change are weak on building the individuals’ and collective’s capacity, which he defines as the individual and organisational knowledge, competencies, resources and motivation to change. The literature also suggests that pressure and support need to be differently calibrated and differently applied to schools, depending on the nature and capacity of schools and their teachers (Shirley 2011). Disagreement seems to revolve around what is appropriate and what needs to be prioritised in terms of support and pressure for the different schools targeted by large-scale improvement interventions.

An important challenge around support is to identify its specific focus, form, quality and appropriateness in relation to the different needs of schools and teachers. In South Africa, the challenge in teacher development is specific – for historical reasons of poor schooling and racially segregated and unequal training system, the majority of teachers (more so in poor socioeconomic provinces) display poor professional knowledge. The gaps in teacher knowledge have a major influence on the teaching and learning in underperforming schools (Hoadley 2012; NEEDU 2013; Taylor & Taylor 2013). This suggests that the question of teacher knowledge needs to be seriously taken into account when building strong professional relationships.

Many teacher development scholars advocate for a shift from a cognitive model in which teachers learn new professional knowledge in a decontextualised form (with courses or workshops), to a situated learning model. Guskey (1986) argues that, to improve learners’ results, a change of practices needs to precede a change of beliefs, especially in struggling schools. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) add that the change process is circular and involves constant dynamic interactions between teachers’ changing practices, beliefs and outcomes. Elmore (2004) underscores the need to open up opportunities for teachers to engage in continual sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work. This resembles the sociocultural perspective according to which ‘learning needs to take place in the same context in which it needs to be used’ (Bertram 2014: 94). Fullan (2006) also emphasises that learning occurs in context but he adds that teachers need to reflect purposefully on what they are doing in order to learn and grow effectively.

We argue that, in countries like South Africa with many poorly qualified HoDs and teachers, the situated model and Fullan's (2006) emphasis on effective teacher reflection are unrealistic and too demanding. This is because the amount of formal knowledge that informs the new teaching activities teachers are expected to master is underestimated (de Clercq & Shalem 2014; Shalem et al. 2016; Shalem 2018). Knowing and working with learner misunderstandings, and scaffolding the complexity of subject matter, depends on teachers' knowledge of the subject they teach and of how to teach it. Support for our findings can be found in academic works on the development of teacher and professional expertise, more broadly (Elmore 2006; Winch 2010; Slonimsky 2016). Elmore (2004: 7) argues that some prior capacity in terms of teachers' knowledge and skills is required before teachers can grow from reflection exercises (also advocated by Fullan 2006). Winch (2010: 104) sums, succinctly, the view that we support: 'The possession of relevant systematically organised knowledge is a prerequisite for action.'

Next, we examine PILO's theory of change and its assumptions around professional relationships that aim to develop mutual trust and respect between teachers and HoDs and work towards a form of professional (as opposed to bureaucratic) reciprocal accountability between teachers and HoDs.

### **Conceptualisation of PILO's theory of change for the Jika iMfundo campaign**

PILO aims to mobilise all stakeholders to work towards the common goal of better curriculum coverage. It privileges this objective because curriculum coverage has been found to be lacking in many schools in South Africa. School effectiveness researchers (Taylor 2011; Taylor, van der Berg & Mabogoane 2012) see it as an important contributory factor to the improvement of South African schools because it provides learners with better time-on-task and better opportunities to learn. According to PILO, district and schools should all account for school curriculum coverage, which it uses in this system-wide intervention as a proxy for improved learner results and as the main criterion for external accountability.

The main claim behind the intervention is that improved curriculum coverage and school performance can only occur and be sustained when the behaviours, routine work practices and organisational culture of both district and school personnel change and become more professional. It is important to note that, since 2010, various provincial education departments have come up with ideas on how to make teachers adopt new 'preferred' practices. They have supplied teachers, with the help of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), with scripted lesson plans (LPs) that specify what to teach and, also, how to teach and assess – in the hope that learners' results would improve. More recently, random controlled quantitative experiments (Fleisch 2016, Cilliers et al. 2018) have shown that, on their own, LPs are not sufficient and need to be supplemented with coaches who can assist teachers through on-site visits. Coaches were found to be more effective than just-in-time (JIT) training of teachers once a term. PILO, however, presents a different model. For PILO, a sustainable strategy must be institutionalised from within the concerned education department to ensure that subject advisors and HoDs are responsible for, and play, the role of on-site coaches.

The reasoning being that a strong professional culture, in which district and school personnel relate to each other in a collaborative supportive manner, will generate synergy and collective capacity to improve school performance. PILO's notion of a professional culture appears close to what Fullan, Rincón-Gallardo and Hargreaves (2015) describe as a collaborative culture that combines individual responsibility, collective expectations and corrective action. But it also seems to mean that such a professional culture includes a higher level of professionalism, namely, 'the profession's internal quality, authority, values and autonomous practices' (de Clercq 2013: 32). Improving teacher professionalism is 'a pedagogical project centred on the internal quality of teaching as a profession, with its relative control in making autonomous decisions over teaching practices' (ibid.), a project that is very difficult to achieve in many South African schools, which are poor, under resourced and poorly supported.

The change strategy chosen to improve the districts' and schools' professional culture comprises multifaceted capacity building, and pressure targeting district and school personnel. This exercise is about building the professional capacity and culture of district and school personnel while, at the same time, making district and school management support and monitor, developmentally, teachers who have to account for and improve on their professional practice of curriculum coverage. Such ambitious professional accountability norms suggest what Elmore (2006: 7) refers to as 'coherence in the organization around norms, values, expectations and processes for getting the work done.'

The next section describes the four components of the programme with a brief evaluation of their assumptions and change strategies to understand whether these are appropriate to the kind of district and school context in which the Jika iMfundo campaign operates.

### **The programme components and their assumptions**

To restructure the professional relationships between HoDs and teachers, PILO provided teachers with curriculum planners and trackers (and scripted lesson plans, but only to foundation phase teachers). It then required teachers to conduct weekly reflections on their lessons, which would inform professional conversations with their HoDs to identify areas for assistance so supportive actions could be developed.

The first component, curriculum planners and trackers, is intended to help teachers plan and deliver the CAPS curriculum at the required pace as well as set a basis for the HoDs' work of tracking and monitoring teachers. It aims to make the monitoring process more transparent and developmental. This would then assist in developing more mutual trust and respect between teachers and their HoDs, and in promoting some professional (as opposed to bureaucratic) accountability between teachers and HoDs.

The second component, teachers' weekly reflections on their lessons, is intended to develop in teachers, the capacity to monitor what their learners are learning and how. To guide such reflections, on the front page of the planners and trackers, under 'Weekly Reflection,' the

following is asked:

- Was your preparation for the lesson adequate? For instance, did you have the necessary resources?
- Had you thought through the content so that you understood it fully and so you could teach it effectively?

At the end of the weekly page in the planners and trackers, two sets of questions are to be answered to assist teachers with their reflections and decisions on what to change and improve:

- What went well? What did not go well? What did learners find difficult or easy to understand?
- Did you complete all the work set for the week? If not, how will you get back on track? What will you change next time? Why?

These weekly reflections aim to encourage teachers to adopt the habit of reflecting regularly on the success or failure of parts of their lessons, and to inform professional discussions between HoDs and teachers on how to improve teachers' performance and curriculum coverage.

The third component, one-on-one monthly professional conversations, is intended to structure the time and form in which HoDs and teachers discuss and identify areas of teaching that require supportive actions to improve the curriculum coverage. To assist with this, PILO provided HoDs with a toolkit to guide their monitoring and support activities. HoDs have to report on:

- Tool 1: Teachers' curriculum planning and use of the trackers.
- Tool 2: Their monthly conversations with teachers about planning, lesson preparation, assessment and their class visits, as well as the actions they plan to support the teacher.
- Tool 3: Curriculum management checklist.

The fourth component, supportive guiding professional development (PD) actions for teachers, that the HoDs had to identify during the professional conversations, was one of the most complex yet important tasks.

The third and fourth components were enabled by some HoD training intended to prepare them for one-on-one monthly professional conversations and identification of the required PD actions for teachers. Two forms of training were organised to that effect:

- SMT training delivered by PILO coaches with the support of circuit managers. This training focused on the role of HoDs as curriculum managers and aimed to assist them to know when meaningful and appropriate *opportunities to learn* could be available to teachers (Ball & Cohen 1999; Borko 2004). This training also focused on how to conduct professional problem-solving conversations with their teachers (what PILO calls a *How can I help you?* response).
- JIT training delivered primarily by subject advisors trained by PILO coaches. The JIT training, which consisted of three sessions of five hours duration, three times a year, aimed to enhance the HoDs' role as pedagogical leaders, or on-site coaches, by focusing on the

content and pedagogy that underlies the scripted lesson plans and the latter's alignment to CAPS.

Three critical comments deserve mention with regard to these components. First, PILO experts trained subject advisors who, in turn, trained HoDs who were then expected to use what they had learnt to assist teachers improve on their curriculum delivery and pacing – either during their grade meetings or during their required professional conversations with teachers. The training of trainers (subject advisers) has never, in the past, been very successful. This training approach derived partly from the fact that PILO did not have access to sufficient content experts to train, fully, district subject advisors and support them when they had to train, properly, the HoDs in each school phase whether they taught mathematics, EFAL or an African language. Worth noting here, is that teachers were not trained directly.

Second, developing the HoDs' monitoring process, which is effectively more transparent and developmental for teachers, is a specialised professional activity that relies on HoDs' and teachers' professional knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, failing which the tracking and monitoring will remain general, unspecific and somewhat constrained, as our data will show (see below). This situation, which often occurred in large-scale improvement intervention, led Fullan (2016) and Elmore (2016) to argue that going to scale is not a viable model for education. Fullan (2016) explains that usually there are not enough proper resources, the solutions in each new situation are not exactly the same, and the first users are usually more motivated but the programme tends to lose momentum as key sponsors move on or new ideas come along.

Third, HoDs were expected to guide with the identification of appropriate support strategies to build the capacity of teachers to improve curriculum coverage. It is extremely difficult for HoDs to identify and prioritise the meaningful opportunities to learn needed by teachers, let alone where these are available (Ball & Cohen 1999; Borko 2004). The HoDs faced other challenges in that respect because of their heavy teaching and administrative workloads (see Mthiyane, Naidoo & Bertram 2018).

To sum up, we have argued that PILO's challenging assumptions regarding the conditions of possibility for building internal reciprocal accountability in more than 1,200 differently performing schools bring about structural tensions that run through the programme. The impact of these tensions on the ground needs now to be analysed, and the next section uses the empirical data collected on the implementation of each of the programme's components.

### **Perceptions and experiences towards the programme's various components**

Let us look first at the take-up and use of the planners and trackers over time, as perceived by teachers and their HoDs from two sources of data: the 2015 PILO school reviews, and the 2016 PILO curriculum coverage surveys. We examine the ways in which the planners and trackers are perceived to function as support for teachers, and identify the points of pressure they generate on teachers' practice in relation to curriculum coverage. Second, we examine HoDs' perceptions of

the quality of teachers' reflections, the problems these raised, and whether HoDs felt the reflections were useful in determining their support and monitoring of teachers' curriculum coverage. This analysis is then supplemented with a few examples drawn from the eight sets of planners and trackers collected from the six sampled schools.<sup>5</sup> Third, to understand the kind of new relationships, organisational capacity and internal accountability that are being built in these schools, we examine HoDs' and teachers' perceptions of their professional conversations and whether these are empowering teachers and HoDs to forge a new form of internal reciprocal accountability. An underlying idea is to compare what HoDs and teachers say, and whether the responses to the different components differ especially between the red, amber and green schools.

It is important to emphasise that, except for the teachers' written reflections, all the claims made are based on perceived and not actual practice.

### **Curriculum planners and trackers: Enablers?**

How helpful do teachers find the curriculum planners and trackers?

The 2015 and 2016 PILO survey data from the 40 sampled primary schools suggest that teachers and HoDs felt there was a good take-up of the curriculum planners and trackers. In the 2015 school surveys, or within a year of their introduction, the planners and trackers were reported to be used routinely by 95% of teachers because they were perceived as useful guides to enable teachers to improve the sequencing and pacing of curriculum activities specified by CAPS. An HoD from an amber school explained:

The tracker has enabled us to follow the syllabus logically and sequentially. It is mistake-free and allows for review and self-reflection ... The sequencing of the content in line with the CAPS policy has made life easier. (2015 PILO school reviews' data)

The tracker gives instructions on what should be covered in each lesson, and how. It guides teachers on pacing, alerts them if they are falling behind and on what needs to be improved. Some HoDs from amber schools noted that, despite the planners and trackers including times for the repetition of activities, teachers felt it was designed for bright learners and not for 'struggling learners' around the pace of the activities:

The tracker has too many activities to do in a single day which becomes a challenge to struggling learners who happen to be a majority in this context. The different topics in a day make it impossible to do in one day and 1-hour lesson – counting, ordering, division and multiplication at the same time. There is no time to recap on the following day; learners are left behind. (2015 PILO school reviews' data, amber school)

The pace of learning by learners is a challenge ... Learners struggle to conceptualise some of the topics, which creates a backlog of other topics as the teacher tries to ensure that previous topics are covered. (2016 PILO curriculum survey data, amber school)

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<sup>5</sup> We decided to use only the planners and trackers (as well as their weekly reflections) of those (eight) teachers who filled them across the nine terms from Term 1 of 2015 to Term 1 of 2017.

Some teachers asked for a reorganisation of the sequencing of some CAPS topics:

The issue of the fast pace of the trackers ... homework and class activities was raised and teachers admitted that they do not have enough time to check and mark learners' work, they think it is too much. Can Jika iMfundo assist with grouping the common topics together and make one unit/topic? We are unable to keep up with the pace of the tracker as we are required to teach the topic once and move on to the next topic. Some learners learn easily if we drill the lesson. (2015 PILO school reviews' data, amber school)

There was also resistance to the trackers, and this was linked to the school micro-politics, as an HoD in a red school explained:

Teachers see no point in submitting their curriculum planners and trackers to HoDs for monitoring. The HoD blamed this behaviour to union influence. He reported that there are silos in this school and everyone works in their corner and rarely talks. (2015 PILO school reviews' data)

The 2016 PILO curriculum survey data shows that 36 primary school HoDs (90%) confirmed more frequent use of the trackers by teachers. An HoD from an amber school mentioned teachers' appreciation of the trackers:

Teachers are now so used to the trackers to cover their work ... they are up-to-date. They are able to see if they fall behind and especially if they were absent from school. They are able to make means to cover the work to be on track. (2016 PILO curriculum survey data, amber school)

The 2016 PILO curriculum survey data contains HoDs' views on how much of the curriculum was covered. The average figure for maths was 75%, 70% for isiZulu, 68% for EFAL. A pleased HoD<sup>6</sup> confirmed that foundation phase teachers now cover 'all the concepts in listening, speaking, phonics and the writing of paragraphs every week and as a result, learners are improving in speaking the language.' This suggests that teachers have become more familiar with the trackers and work better with them. However, there were cases where the HoD admitted that teachers did not complete trackers regularly. An HoD from an amber school explained that this was 'due to the slow pace of the learners [and the fact that] more time had to be spent on one topic/section' (2016 PILO curriculum survey data, amber school).

### **Teachers' reflections: A facilitating stepping-stone?**

Curriculum planners and trackers are also meant to help teachers with their weekly reflections. Only a few HoDs, from green and amber schools, saw the positive benefits of teachers' reflections in providing an opportunity to think of what worked well, what did not work well – as well as share ideas about what to improve. An HoD from an amber school explained:

Reflection helps in identifying learners who have grasped the concept and those who need more time or more help. It helps the teacher to plan for remedial lessons and devise strategies to enhance the teaching–learning environment. (2015 PILO school reviews' data, amber school)

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<sup>6</sup> The school of this HoD did not have a colour because the SMT did not have opportunity to indicate the school's colour code to PILO.

Most HoDs, however, seemed to believe that the reflections were thin, vague and focused mainly on struggling learners not understanding the taught concepts. Some complained that teachers were not always honest or aware of how to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. They also mentioned that some teachers put the blame of poor curriculum coverage onto the school conditions and the curriculum ('too many activities'). An HoD from a red school admitted that teachers were not willing to share the problems experienced in class; they were scared of revealing their weaknesses:

Teachers kind-of hid their weaknesses ... [There] were some 'contradictions' between what teachers write down on the reflection part of the trackers and what they say verbally when they talk informally or during departmental meetings. (2015 PILO school reviews' data, red school)

The HoD of an amber school did not know what to do with these reflections because 'during training, the issue of how to value teachers' reflections was not sufficiently emphasised' (2015 PILO data, amber school). HoDs continued, in 2016, to feel powerless about some teacher reflections. An HoD from an amber school mentioned objective challenges such as 'not coping with pace, overcrowding in some grades (63 learners), no individual attention is possible.'

Our written evidence from the eight teachers' sets of trackers confirmed the PILO-collected data: these reflections did not focus on teachers' teaching, they were unspecific, or focused mainly on struggling learners and on the difficulties they represented for them when trying to complete the required tasks and activities. Many teachers didn't answer the questions: 'What will you change next time?' 'Why?' or they answered: 'There is nothing I will change even if the lesson did not go well.'

The second part of the reflection (on what may need to change) was not always well understood; some HoDs did not appreciate the purpose or rationale for the reflections, while some teachers were puzzled as to what was required. The HoD of an amber school explained how teachers reflected: 'To avoid lengthy statements, they just stated that all went well, even when this did not actually happen.'

Thus, very few teachers' weekly reflections were found to be very detailed in answering the questions or in addressing explicitly some of the questions. By comparison, in describing her challenges, a teacher in a green school noted that learners struggled 'to read and write sentences, follow simple instructions ... and participate in simple conversations' (2016 PILO curriculum survey data, green school). The teacher concluded that she needed to find time to go over these skills during the week. In contrast, in a red school, the two-week reflections of a teacher never mentioned that something had to change to assist learners.

### **Professional conversations and support between teachers and HoDs: How productive?**

The planners and trackers, together with teacher reflections, were supposed to assist HoDs in monitoring teachers' curriculum coverage and in informing their professional conversations to identify priority support strategies and actions for their teachers. To that effect, as mentioned before, PILO gave HoDs a toolkit with guiding questions to structure their reports on their

professional conversations with teachers. Tool 2 asks, in one column: ‘What is working or needed in relation to teachers’ planning and tracking, lesson preparation and assessment?’ Another column requires teachers and HoDs to agree on a) the necessary actions to strengthen teachers to improve on these various aspects of their work and b) the supportive role HoDs can play in this respect.

The 2016 PILO curriculum coverage survey data reveals that these conversations did not occur effectively in some amber (nor in red schools) – either because the HoDs did not have enough time, or because the school environment did not provide the safe space required for these kinds of conversations. For example, the HoD of an amber school admitted that ‘the culture of having conversations with the teachers has not been developed.’ In a red school with poor staff relationships and little trust, the HoD spoke of monitoring rather than having open conversations: ‘Everyone in this school tries to put a mistake on one another and use that negatively against them. So, it is not easy to monitor, plan and supervise teachers’ work’ (2016 PILO curriculum survey data, red school).

In contrast, an HoD from an amber school noted that the tool ‘facilitates class visits, which was not the case in the past, and ensures that professional conversations can support the teacher.’ The HoD from another amber school remarked, interestingly, that these conversations doubled-up on the integrated quality management system (IQMS) exercise, and that teachers’ reflections were used to advance a development plan for the school. These conversations were easy to have ‘because teachers and HoDs were aware of what was expected of them’ (2016 PILO curriculum survey data, amber school). The experience was sometimes very positive with an HoD<sup>7</sup> explaining that conversations made their role more legitimate:

The conversations are easier than before ... more supportive. They enable the teacher to be conscious of his/her weaknesses with a view to improving on those identified areas. Where there are glaring weaknesses, it is easier to have a one-to-one session, especially since some teachers remain silent during departmental meetings even if they need help. (2015 PILO school reviews’ data)

In summary, our analysis of the professional conversations, which were supposed to diagnose ‘what needs to be improved,’ shows that these conversations did not contain very specific recommendations about teacher support actions. Many HoDs and teachers welcomed the conversations, which they perceived as supportive and constructed within a transparent authoritative framework, remarking that very few teachers resisted or resented the new HoD role.

In the HoD Tool 2, collected from our sampled schools, the problems identified to assist with teacher support actions were common sense or vague: the need for extra classes, individual attention for struggling learners, and a request to convene meetings with parents to ensure they encourage or assist, if they can, their children with homework.

The 2015 PILO school reviews’ data reveals a similar trend regarding the vagueness of the development assistance envisaged for teachers. HoDs of amber schools noted that a developmental

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<sup>7</sup> The school of this HoD did not have a colour because the SMT did not have the opportunity to choose a colour code for PILO.

workshop or supportive discussions for the way forward had to be set up but there was no mention of what exactly the focus of these workshops or peer learning discussions would be (2015 PILO school reviews' data).

In contrast, in a green school, a principal (acting as HoD) explained that the HoD Tool 2 was useful in providing assistance to teachers because it is used 'to plan meetings, reflect and have constructive conversations which are premised on building professional interfaces support and build peer learning. It is a consistent way of building routines across the board at school' (2015 PILO school review's data, green school).

This 'light touch' understanding of the meaning of appropriate teacher support or development could be taken as evidence that the HoDs' take up of their professional role is not yet very substantive and that they do not identify and prioritise specific forms of support for different kinds of teaching practices.

### **Jika iMfundo programme and the promotion of internal reciprocal accountability**

Our analysis shows that many teachers and HoDs included in the PILO 2015 and 2016 surveys appreciated the planners and trackers because they clarify and simplify their respective work. The HoDs felt that most Jika iMfundo schoolteachers were assisted with the sequencing and pacing of the CAPS content on a daily basis, and that their monitoring work had become more consistent and easier partly because teachers felt more comfortable about such a transparent process. On the second component, teachers' reflections remained, on the whole, rather thin and superficial. The main emphasis in red, and some amber, schools was on blaming poor results on struggling learners, the overambitious curriculum and the challenging school circumstances.

After two years of reflections, teachers of most amber (and all red) schools did not appear to improve much on the substance of their reflections. This was certainly not helped by the prompts for teachers' weekly reflections, which focused on the learners' learning and the curriculum coverage but not on the equally important issue of teaching and teachers' improvement of their practices. By not focusing substantively on teacher practice or on the difficulties in learners' learning, these reflections did not assist in informing the third component – professional conversations between HoDs and their teachers.

Yet, these professional conversations constitute an essential cornerstone of the PILO intent of creating a favourable terrain for internal reciprocal accountability between HoDs and teachers. Our findings suggest that these conversations were supportive over the monitoring practices that target curriculum coverage, but were unable to engage with the instructional core or be specific about what needs to be improved in teacher practices and knowledge.

To generate substantive professional conversations amounts to a bigger challenge than PILO envisaged. Yes, PILO provided HoDs with a toolkit for structuring their conversations with teachers; yes, it trained subject advisors to train HoDs in content knowledge and pedagogic content

knowledge. Weekly substantive professional reflections and conversations demand the habitus of a certain level of professional knowledge – amongst other understandings of professional practices. To identify the foci or forms of support needed by teachers to improve their practices (such as FP teachers diagnosing reading levels in the classroom or addressing learners' common errors) and their curriculum coverage, more direct instructional modelling and training of HoDs is needed to engage, effectively, teachers about what constitutes improved practice, for example, in group guided reading.

The PILO documents do not mention any training of HoDs to identify the appropriate foci and forms of support needed by teachers to improve their practices. Yet, this is a serious challenge given the legacy of poor teacher support and the fact that many teachers found that the IQMS exercise evaluates their performance without providing appropriate quality support so they can improve (de Clercq 2013).

It is our contention that greater professional knowledge among HoDs and teachers would provide a foundation (possibly more quickly in green and some amber schools) for building substance behind the collegial working culture of trust and respect, which both surveys suggest HoDs and teachers begin to experience from the PILO programme. HoDs also need to learn to strike a better balance between their regulative role of demanding compliance to the rules of pacing, embedded in trackers and HoD toolkits, and their instructional coaching role of engagement with teachers and their, often weak, instructional practices.

## **Conclusion**

This paper unpacked what we identify as central tensions existing in the PILO programme's conceptualisation regarding school work and their manifestations in HoDs' and teachers' perceptions and experiences – as well as in teachers' reflections and conversations between HoDs and teachers. The idea was to understand if, and how, a terrain of internal reciprocal accountability between HoDs and teachers was facilitated in different PILO schools from a mostly rural KZN district.

PILO's focus on the development of a collegial professional culture in the school system, and the creation of more transparent monitoring tools is important, according to Elmore (2006), to turn around schools' performance. To that effect, the introduction and use of planners and trackers (with reflection questions for the teachers) appears to have made the relationship between HoDs and teachers more open and supportive. The development of collegial professional practices and conduct in these schools differed, mainly because schools with weaker capacities (some amber, and red schools) require more time, training and the acquisition of greater professional knowledge by HoDs and teachers.

To form a conducive terrain for internal reciprocal accountability, professional support and monitoring will have to be more differentiated and will need to focus not only on more curriculum coverage but also on better teaching practices for improved learners' learning in schools of

different capacities. By targeting and improving the regulative mode but underplaying the instructional mode, PILO omits the significant link in the chain of school improvement between professional knowledge and practices.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), as well as Fullan et al. (2015: 156), define internal accountability as promoting ‘a collective responsibility for the continuous improvement and success for all students.’ We reemphasise that the planners and trackers’ prompts for teacher weekly reflections, focus on the learners’ learning and the curriculum coverage but not on the, equally important, issue of teaching and teachers’ improvement of their practices. Improving learners’ learning involves a lot more than improving curriculum coverage or the pacing of teachers’ teaching. Better learning will only occur when teachers acquire sufficient professional knowledge to make better decisions about their teaching and assessment practices in their specific classroom context.

This brings us back to Elmore’s (2004) notion of reciprocal accountability: PILO is slowly building a professional collegial set of practices (signalling a shift towards a mix between bureaucratic and professional accountability). But there are consequences to PILO’s model of change – placing curriculum coverage at the centre of its institutional vision seems to have resulted in HoDs and teachers focusing more on the monitoring of, and accountability for, curriculum coverage and general reciprocity and much less on improvements in teachers’ practice. Practice improvement will come from teachers being afforded meaningful opportunities to learn the conceptual point of topics included in the subject they teach – the strengths and weaknesses of certain choices they make when they teach a topic and how learners learn the topic or the *raison d’être* behind the failure of particular learners to grasp an aspect of the topic.

We contend that Elmore’s (2016) recent call for a shift of mindset on change models is apt as a conclusion. He says that instead of ‘basing new learning designs on received ideas that are “feasible” in existing institutions,’ we need to be basing ‘learning designs on the theory and science of how humans learn’ (ibid.: 533).

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