

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH – WHAT ARE TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER-LED CURRICULUM INITIATIVES IN RELATION TO CHANGE IN PRACTICE?**

### **4.1 Overview of Participating Schools**

Prior to entering into the detailed findings and conversations held with the participants, it was important to examine briefly the organisational environment of the schools at which the participants were employed.

All schools are independent schools in the Central Gauteng region and are members of the Independent Schools Association of South Africa (ISASA). The heads of the schools are all members of the South African Heads Independent Schools Association (SAHISA).

The participants felt that the management structures at their schools were instrumental in allowing full participation and support to teachers who wished to participate in the GISCDI, and this in turned shaped their values and expectations. The management arrangements allowed the teachers to exercise leadership and present ideas that brought about change. They all felt that the organizational cultures at their schools had allowed them to lead and facilitate growth in their colleagues, and they felt entrusted to do this independently of the school management. This phenomenon reflects the ‘exercise of teacher leadership, regardless of position or power’ (Frost and Durrant, 2003b:3). The approach is

distinctive in that it emphasizes the capacity of all teachers to engage in 'teacher-led development work'.

The experience of the participants in the GISCDI has been a positive one. They are enthusiastic about the GISCDI and feel it has been a privilege to be part of such an exciting initiative. The concepts of teacher leader, distributed leadership, trust and collegiality are closely linked to the success of the curriculum initiative and the findings highlight how an improved professional image enhances teacher practice. The participants were pleased that they could share the details of the changes that they implemented in their classrooms after reflecting on their practice, and in their responses, they openly discussed the benefits they have experienced in the learning of their students. Further information on what would inhibit or promote this initiative was clearly articulated and proved to be most useful in sustaining the GISCDI. A detailed analysis of the interviews, with relevant quotations from participants, will substantiate the findings and support the research.

#### **4.2 Teacher Leader Concept**

The background of the six participants has already been sketched, gaining insight into their personal and professional lives. All six participants felt that the teacher leaders, who were co-ordinators and who led the curriculum initiatives, had encouraged them to take the knowledge and information from the regular curriculum meetings, reflect

on their current practice and share them with colleagues at their own schools.

According to Sheryl :

“The Headmistress’ role at our school has been limited to validating the teachers’ own changes. The teachers have been the real leaders because they know in what respects their teaching is lacking and what needs to change to put it right.”

Kate was of the view that:

“It is definitely a teacher driven process. We know what needs to be done to bring our skills into line with what is required. The Head helps, but only because of the needs we have identified.”

Len’s experience was expressed as follows:

“Without the Headmaster’s allowing us to take the lead to improve what we know was lacking, no real change would have been achieved.”

Paige’s perception was similar,

“We know that our skills have become rusty and outdated, fallen out of sync...using our input the Head has worked with us, to improve us. But the knowledge of what needs to be changed

in my teaching remains my knowledge, because for me it is a day-to-day experience.”

### **4.3 Trust**

They feel they have become teacher leaders at their schools and do acknowledge that it is partly their own personality traits of risk-taking, linked to the concept of trust from the school management that allowed them to implement the changes.

Sheryl said:

“ I firmly believe the Head is unaware of the changes – but that is a good thing as she just lets me get on with my ideas. I am definitely trusted and encouraged, as she feels strongly that the teachers are leaders in their classrooms and teaching practices.”

Len’s comment was in agreement with this notion as he felt:

“ The Head allows us the complete freedom to try out new curriculum initiatives.”

Kate was excited by the risks she took to change her teaching. Even though many of her colleagues were of the old school and initially chose to stick to the known and tested, she felt empowered by the success of the changes she had made and encouraged others to do the same. She stated:

“I personally initiated these changes after attending meetings and reflecting on what I was doing. I was also greatly encouraged and liberally shared the ideas with other colleagues in my school. It was awesome – I felt I was leading the changes! They were scared at first, but then when they saw how much fun it could be, and not too scary, they reviewed their lesson planning, joined in and now much discussion about new ideas takes place during break time, over a cup of tea!”

#### **4.4 Distributed Leadership**

The concept of teacher leaders and trust by the Head of the school allows for distributed leadership in an institution, and the teachers who attended meetings felt they were empowered to share in leading the school in the implementation of the new curriculum. They commented that the ability of the Head of the school to distribute power to teachers, so that they could lead others, reflected the trust in the GISCDI, as well as in the teachers who were then empowered to promote the new ideas and teaching strategies to bring about change.

Sheryl, who teaches at School A, a co-ed school, was surprised by the interest from colleagues once she had been given autonomy to lead curriculum change. She commented:

“ I now run extremely fruitful, in-service professional development sessions with my colleagues after attending

meetings. We have lots of discussion and share resources and ideas, and we extend these into the Foundation Phase. These teachers first commented that their load was too great - but once they saw the fun we were having and how we were all helping each other, they asked to join in. Wow, how often does this happen in schools?"

Len's Head of School approached him to run a workshop with all staff on the design and use of rubrics. He was delighted by the regard the Head had for his knowledge on assessment and felt completely empowered by his trust in what he had gained from the GISCDI. He stated:

" After attending the workshop of the GISCDI on Assessment and Rubrics, I realised how my own assessment strategies needed revision. I immediately worked on developing rubrics linked to assessment in all the learning areas I am responsible for. I have seen the benefits of rubrics in teaching and assessment first hand and have been asked to run a workshop for my colleagues and monitor their implementation of the rubrics in their teaching, I feel completely trusted, and, yes I am excited to be developing my colleagues and myself. The Head acknowledges that I know more than him and he asked if he could please attend and be a participant in the workshop. What a privilege!"

Paige had a similar experience at her school:

“ Transformational Geometry has been isolated as a classic need for development amongst Mathematics teachers. I discussed this with our Head and she has given me the autonomy to co-ordinate professional assistance to develop our Mathematics teachers and to lead this development. I set up a meeting at which we all reflected on our lesson planning and classroom practice. We then discussed how we could make positive changes to enhance our teaching of transformational geometry. These changes have now been implemented, the children are loving it, the teachers have commented on how they feel empowered to teach differently and the results of Benchmarking Assessments show the development of the children's skills in this area. Thanks to the Maths meetings we have moved forward.”

#### **4.5 Collegiality**

The most significant area within this research that teachers felt had been of the greatest benefit to their teaching and professional growth was that of collegiality. All participants stressed the importance of sharing ideas, teaching strategies, assessment plans and resources as being a vital factor in the success of the GISCDI, and it was highlighted as the most important factor in sustaining the process. The sharing between teachers and between the independent schools has allowed

for relationship building, encouraged professional reflection through conversations with colleagues and promoted teacher development, as all participants felt they could openly share their triumphs in the classroom and verbalise their fears. The support offered by other teachers enabled teachers to take risks and implement change, as they knew there would be time for discussion and comparison at the regular meetings. They also strongly commented that they now knew their standards were within the range of other independent schools and they felt more affirmed and successful in their roles.

Sheryl was fairly new in Gauteng. She felt welcome at the meetings and made new friends. She stated:

“I came from out of town and knew no-one in the local teaching fraternity. Joining the GISCDI meetings and being involved has allowed me to meet other teachers, get to know them and share with them. I never knew whether my methodologies or assessments were quite right, but after participating in the GISCDI meetings and sharing ideas with professional colleagues, I felt affirmed in making relevant changes to my practice. I found the Visual Literacy workshop to be most useful – I had never considered how much detail could be included at a Grade Seven level. I was part of the team that developed the booklet and I immediately realised how my own practice needed to change. It has made me feel part of a



community, this I needed as I don't really enjoy the big city life."

Jane, the most experienced and most senior teacher of those interviewed, has had to go through great many changes personally and professionally. She felt that this new camaraderie had never happened between independent school teachers previously, and it was greatly affirming. She commented:

" The unselfish support and guidance from other teachers has been of great benefit to many schools. This is something different and never happened before; teachers would never share ideas – let alone worksheets. Goodness me – teachers treated you with disdain if you dared ask to see what they were doing! It was as though they had absolute copyright over all their work. This collegiality is absolutely wonderful and how nice for young teachers to gain the inside information when they start teaching. Unlike in my day, where you found your way – by hook or by crook! Thank goodness for the energy of the co-ordinators, it is thanks to them that we all stay in touch regularly!"

Kate used to feel rather isolated in her all-male environment, and not having taught elsewhere, her connection to other schools was limited. She states:

“ It is most important to talk and learn from others – it must continue. It is a rewarding process and I feel completely supported by other teachers. I have made friends and we now plan combined school debates and speaking forums – thanks to the meetings where we get to know each other and what we would like to try. It is great fun and I would like to grow into the role of co-ordinator.”

Len was most positive and felt that his greatest learning had happened because of the GISCDI meetings. He said that males at all-boys schools have a reputation for doing only the bare necessity of work. He felt that he had had the opportunity to change that perception. He had learnt so much from the meetings that he felt confident about initiating change – and changed incorrect perceptions. He says:

“ The sharing of ideas, resources and assessments has extended my knowledge enormously. I have encouraged so many colleagues at school to join me. Once they saw my motivation and enthusiasm in applying the new ideas, and the fun the boys and I were having, they wanted part of it. The excitement also led to some previous negative comments, about us males being lazy and slack, being changed to being more supportive. The e-mail connection has been vital, and learning from colleagues has benefited me tremendously.”

Mary shared Jane's opinion on the importance of shared inter-school relations. She states:

“ The improvement in interschool relationships has been unbelievable – we share, collaborate and learn together as a community of teachers and this makes it a very worthwhile process.”

Paige supported Len's notion of enhancing skills and implementing change and she commented:

“ Being part of the curriculum meetings has helped me concentrate on specific areas of change. Building the skills lists refocused my teaching – I implemented the ideas and changed my teaching for the better.”

#### **4.2 Changes to Practice**

These findings were most reaffirming for the GISCDI and the next step was to consider the actual changes that teachers had implemented so as to ensure the improvement of quality in their teaching. The participants were questioned about the actual changes they had made to classroom practices, and then to consider the benefits of these changes to the learning or performance of their students. Most of the changes were implemented after the participants had attended the GISCDI professional development sessions and they went back to their schools, reflected on what they were doing and put into practice what they had learnt at the meetings. These sessions were planned according to the needs of the teachers and from the results of the actual

Benchmark Assessment. The assessment highlighted the common areas of support required for teachers and the sessions were planned accordingly. The comments from the participants clearly showed that the sessions were beneficial and led to change in teaching and classroom practice after the workshops. They reflected on their current practice and then they felt more confident and competent to initiate the changes.

#### **4.2.1 Changes to Teaching Visual Literacy**

The outcome of Reading and Viewing in the new curriculum document clearly states the need for more exposure to visual literacy in all grades. The results of the first formal Benchmark Assessment pinpointed visual literacy as an area of limited expertise. The teachers acknowledged this at the next GISCDI meeting and the English co-ordinator immediately planned workshops to improve the teaching in this area, and provide support needed in the form of videos, photographs and other resources. The participants all commented that this type of in-house, professional development was greatly beneficial to their teaching and their personal comments reflected their enhanced competence in successfully introducing their own ideas and new dimensions to their classroom practice.

Sheryl felt excited by the success of the changes she implemented in her Visual Literacy lessons. She stated:

“In Visual Literacy, I have made significant adjustments to my teaching. After attending the workshops put together by the teachers, I went ahead and implemented the ideas of teaching camera angle and shots with the students, looking through actual lenses and describing their experiences and feelings. Using the ‘Today I Woke Up’ video and booklet developed at our workshop, I was able to teach the students to recognize the various film and advertising techniques – having these resources available and on-hand made a difference and this definitely motivated me to change my previous classroom practice. I was amazed at the results – the improvement is enormous!”

Len extended his learning from the meetings and the workshop on Visual Literacy and decided to experiment with the new technology at his school. He experimented with the Smart Board, using ideas from the workshop. He elaborates:

“ I have developed and extended my teaching of Visual Literacy to include the use of a Smart Board in Film Study. Our school had recently installed a Smart Board and I love trying new technology – so I played around and – wow I discovered a whole new world! This is fantastic, as the children are able to competently capture various camera angles and shots and print out their own

worksheets. Because this was so successful we have now extended this down to the Grade Four classes as well.”

Kate also felt successful in her attempts at implementing a relatively new section into her lessons. She also commented that the boys she teaches were delighted with commenting on advertisements and creating their own cartoons – they independently used new technology and surprised her with their results. She says:

“ I experimented with Visual Literacy and made great changes to the style I used previously. The boys bought into this and developed their own ideas using video clips and then planned and produced advertisements and cartoons using electronic media. The results were amazing – we were over the moon! They now love English lessons.”

These comment by teachers were made after their students had completed the Benchmark Assessment, the results of this section in the assessment had shown significant improvements and they felt affirmed in their new skills and teaching methodologies for Visual Literacy.

#### **4.2.2 Changes to Assessment**

With the onset of OBE, assessment in education in South Africa has seen many changes, and the move away from purely summative assessment, linked directly to formal tests, was challenging for many experienced educators. The teacher leaders in both the Mathematics

and English learning areas planned assessment workshops. At these sessions, teachers worked in groups to develop rubrics that covered all the skills to be assessed. Copies were circulated to all schools linked to the GISCDI. Because the teachers had been instrumental in the development of these support materials, they felt confident to create their own rubrics and share these with colleagues at further GISCDI meetings.

Sheryl had had no idea what a rubric was until she attended the workshop. She said that she now felt more confident in her assessment of her students as she could use information from the rubrics to make an honest judgement. She commented:

“ After the workshop at which we learnt about rubrics, I thought deeply about how I used to assess and gather marks. It became quite clear that I had to do serious rethinking and move to criterion-based assessment. The ideal way was with the rubrics we created at the assessment workshop. I regularly use the rubrics created at the workshops and have even made some of my own. This has improved my teaching and I now know why I award an A or a D for an essay or piece of writing, and I can clearly show the children and parents how improvement can take place by analysing the criteria for achievement at different levels.”

Len affirmed what Sheryl had found and extended the use of them to the lower grades. He says:

“ The use of rubrics has been invaluable. We developed these at curriculum meetings and they are extremely useful. I have also developed rubrics appropriate for Grade Four to Grade Six. The teachers are all so appreciative, they have said that they considered how they assessed their students previously and realised the vital need to change their previous practice. Many of them are now developing their own rubrics in all learning areas. What a breakthrough! “

Mary, whose previous experience had been mainly in senior school, initially felt threatened by changing from a purely marks-based assessment to a more formative type of assessment using rubrics that describe levels of achievement. She has a personality that demands exact measures, and found this new assessment challenging to her style, but she commented that the benefits were noteworthy:

“After attending the workshop on assessment and rubrics, I reflected on what I was doing in the classroom and realised the need for change. I now use the rubrics in most assessments and I have seen the incredible benefits. I must admit I was most sceptical at first, as I am a marks-based person historically. My school, School E, demands high academic standards and the girls were



always judged on marks. But using the rubrics has changed that focus somewhat and now the girls all know exactly what is expected of them, as they are given the assessment criteria before completing the tasks and it is a transparent way of assessment.”

Jane eagerly described the positive benefits to her students' learning and her teaching by using rubrics for assessment. Paige's comment reiterates the perspective of the Mathematics teachers. She states:

“ This has introduced a whole new dynamic into my teaching of Mathematics. The assessment becomes more holistic and the students enjoy challenging themselves to achieve the maximum by using rubrics. They have a clearer picture of where they want to achieve and they can work accordingly.”

#### **4.2.3 Introduction of Portfolio**

The introduction of the portfolio in English and Mathematics as a record and showcase of students' work was another area that all the participants commented on, and they praised the collegiality of the GISCDI for assisting them in the introduction and development of their students' portfolios. Regular discussions on portfolio work takes place at meetings and teachers, once again, are very happy to share their new ideas and strategies with their colleagues. All respondents agreed that this built confidence and lead to an improvement in their own practice;

they realised that implementation of something innovative was not impossible and not as frightening as initially believed, because they had the support from teachers they respected and trusted.

Sheryl felt that having to submit a portfolio mark for the Benchmark Assessment had urged her to consider seriously what she taught in English writing. Certain skills had to be covered, and rubric assessment ensured that she focused on these skills. She commented:

“ The portfolio has focused my teaching and it has improved my girls' preparation for submitting their work. It has focused on the different genres covered in the Grade Seven year and we thoroughly enjoy working on them. The girls take great pride in submitting articles for their portfolio and they edit all their work to ensure that it has grown and can be showcased as an assessment of their ability.”

Len felt very confident about the portfolio compilation as his senior school experience had prepared him for this collection of work. The boys' school he teaches at runs a project term, and the portfolio material is gathered during this time. He states:

“ I have introduced portfolios that I learnt about at the meetings. They are similar to the senior school portfolios, so I feel comfortable with the idea of this work and happily use it. Now they form a major part of the project term we have at our school. The boys enjoy

working on them. Their individual creativity is showcased and they keep them as reminders of their writing in junior school.”

#### **4.2.4 Descriptions of Other Changes Implemented**

Changes to the participants' practice extended even further and they were most eager for me to look at the exciting work they were doing and to share it with others. Sheryl and Kate were positive about the changes they had made in the methodologies used to teach Visual Literacy. Both teachers strongly felt that this would not have happened if they had not participated in the GISCDI.

Sheryl had created lessons using the Visual Literacy Workbook, this enabled the students to analyse camera angles and techniques. These skills encouraged them to apply this knowledge in analysing photographs and video clips, and make informed comment on the technique used by the producer or photographer.

Kate had taken the skills she had learnt and introduced film study to her boys. She used a different approach and encouraged her boys to take the information on techniques and create various film clips which created specific moods because of their choice of angle, line or music.

Conversations the researcher had with the Heads of these two schools were most affirming. After a Heads' Breakfast on feedback about the

GISCDI at which the researcher was required to present information on the GISCDI process for the term in her role as English Co-ordinator, these Heads approached the researcher to comment on the positive changes they had seen in the teaching of Visual Literacy at their schools. The Head of Sheryl's school, commented that parents had contacted her to congratulate the teacher on her exciting film study lessons, their children were now using the technologically correct jargon while watching television. The Head of Kate's school said that he had just approved a further budget for the English Department to purchase film- making software, as the boys were so keen to practice their newly acquired skills. The Heads definitely felt that their schools' involvement in the GISCDI meetings had allowed their teachers to reflect on their practice, extend their knowledge and skills in their various learning areas and implement positive changes to teaching practice. These comments were not part of the formal methodology, but do add value to the reflections of the teachers.

Mary, who has taught for many years in senior school and more recently in junior school, said:

“If I had encountered this sharing opportunity earlier, it would have been fantastic. I have changed my teaching of language to whole language teaching. I am much more aware of how the students have made stylistic adjustments in writing for purpose. I now teach these

skills, whereas before I just kind of hoped they would be absorbed in some manner.”

Kate has taught English to boys for seventeen years and she constantly found the teaching of grammar a struggle. She commented:

“I fought a never-ending battle with a succession of boys to learn grammar in isolation. Now my style is much more flexible and holistic, and the boys, and I, enjoy lessons.”

She also said that she used to complain that she had never had enough time, but now felt strongly that the focus of the meetings and the benefits of sharing teaching ideas had definitely made her teach with a purpose and use class time more effectively.

#### **4.3 Benefits to Student Learning**

The most important aspect of this research was to ascertain whether these changes to classroom practice had directly or indirectly benefited student learning. As this is a difficult aspect of education to measure, I felt that conversations with the teachers to ascertain whether the changes they had made to their teaching had benefited their students and was evidence of the improvement in student learning available for perusal.

The excitement of the students in new teaching methodologies and the introduction of visual media were obvious to the researcher in the observations made during informal conversations with teachers and

students. The comments made to the researcher by various heads of schools and parents of children at these schools that had implemented changes, also serve to confirm the benefits to student learning.

This research was reliant on the integrity of the selected participants and the information they offered in the interview was successfully recorded and transcribed. All participants acknowledged and appreciated the confidentiality of the transcripts and stated that the conversations were their own, honest perceptions of their real-life classroom practices.

#### **4.3.1 Improvements in Visual Literacy**

The participants all commented that they had definitely seen improvements in their students' ability to analyse film, cartoons, comic strips and advertisements. They all felt that the emphasis on visual literacy had been disseminated to their students via interesting and creative lessons that they had presented after attending the workshops previously discussed. Their students' responses to questions and assessments clearly indicated a sound understanding of concepts such as camera angle, shots, lighting effects and editing in the study of the visual message. The language used in their responses was far more technically accurate and the insight into the messages conveyed by films, cartoons and comic strips had greatly improved. The participants had evidence of this in their students' notebooks, and all felt that their students' responses and their results in the benchmarking assessment

had considerably improved, even though the assessments had been more challenging than in previous years.

#### **4.3.2 Assessment**

The development and use of rubrics for assessment now allowed the students to gauge their own skill development and their progress towards achieving the desired outcomes. This had refocused the students' learning, and many of them now conducted conversations with their teachers in order to strategize improvement in their learning.

The fact that assessment was more transparent, allowed teachers to communicate the outcomes of an assessment, prior to commencement, to enable all students to plan their work accordingly.

#### **4.3.3 More Co-operative Learning**

The use of group work or co-operative learning during lessons has been introduced on a far greater scale. Many participants stated that the information they learnt from the collegial meetings about how to teach children to work successfully in groups, has benefited the relationships within the classroom and developed the emotional intelligence of their students.

Kate observed the following:

“The collegial meetings taught me to teach children how to work in groups. The children work better with each other and their emotional intelligence (EQ) has blossomed. They listen to

others comments when appropriate, and the comments are usually well thought out. The children assess each other fairly and honestly. All the teachers at our school feel as enthusiastic about this as I do; even teachers from other subjects.”

Len’s experience is also affirming and he says:

“By involving ourselves in a process of sharing, we can guide the children to do the same. The group work has succeeded beyond my expectations – the children interact successfully with each other and me, and their EQ has just exploded exponentially. They wait their turn to comment and the comments are insightful. The regular design and use of rubrics by the students has developed their skills of peer assessment, and it appears that there is less bias in their assessments of each other. However, children have to be taught that assessing a peer relies on skill development in this area. Many children can be harsh in their judgements on the worth of another’s efforts, and it is the teachers’ responsibility to guide them initially. They use the rubrics willingly and the teacher has taught them to keep detailed notes as a trail of evidence to fully justify their assessments and ratings on the rubrics. Other teachers in the school have commented on the improvement generally.”

Mary states her opinion as to why the implementation of co-operative learning has been successful:



“It is a basic reality – what you have experienced, you can teach. So I have passed on the collegial meeting experience into my classroom. My children work in groups, get along, are fair in their assessments, listen to each other and make astonishingly insightful comments. The success has set the school abuzz.”

The collegial learning by the teachers at curriculum meetings has been vital for teachers to put collegial learning into practice, says Sheryl. She honestly discusses her findings in the classroom.

“To make the children enthusiastic to work in groups, you have to portray your own enthusiasm for the concept. Our meetings opened my mind completely. I never believed that children could work together successfully until I experienced the dynamic myself. They listen, participate in an orderly manner, cast fresh and ingenious perspectives and assess each other fairly. What is truly encouraging is that they take the experience and apply it elsewhere in their learning, to the extent that other teachers notice the positive change.”

#### **4.3.4 Investigation in Mathematics**

In Mathematics, the teachers saw the benefits in the investigation aspect of this learning area. The students were encouraged to be creative in their problem solving and to try their own methodologies and strategies to complete investigations and solve problems. The process taught them that their own methodologies were valid as long as they

were able to justify, mathematically and logically, what they were doing. An awareness of this amongst the students and teachers allowed for tremendous growth in the excitement and interest in mathematical investigations. The introduction of a collaborative investigation benchmarking assessment, in which the students complete the assessment in pairs, has made the teachers more aware of this style of teaching and learning. The students commented that they thoroughly enjoyed this type of assessment as they could explore their ideas and learn from their peers whilst completing it.

Paige, the Mathematics co-ordinator and Head of Mathematics at an autonomous boys' preparatory school corroborates this phenomenon, and comments:

“My involvement in this process has changed my teaching to make my students more aware of their own creativity. When given a problem, they understand that they can devise their own methods and strategies to solve the problem. They understand that there is no single right answer – as long as they can justify their approach according to the principles. Grasping this allows them to grow and it makes mathematical investigations interesting and exciting. Applying collaborative investigation benchmarking assessments in pairs has increased awareness of the power of this style of teaching and learning. The students appreciate it too!”

Jane, once again, praised the benefits of these new approaches and strongly felt that they had led to development in herself and in her students. She remarked:

“My students find it creatively enhancing to solve the problems using their own methodologies. As a teacher you are immediately aware that learning has taken place, when children demonstrate their understanding by justifying a different approach according to the principles. What better demonstration that they have truly understood the principles? Allowing the students to apply the collaborative investigation benchmarking assessment creates an opportunity for synergies to develop, which would otherwise be lost. The excitement generated makes the teachers that much more aware. Hallelujah to positive change!”

At the Heads' Breakfast discussed earlier in this chapter, the Head of Jane's school, approached the researcher and asked her to convey her congratulations to the Maths Co-ordinator. This Head said that the maths in her school had always been good but she had concerns that not enough concrete work was being done in the lower grades. After Jane had participated in the GISCDI, and attended various workshops on the development of number skills in Junior School children, she approached the Head to support her in changes to teaching methodologies she felt should be implemented across the school. They set up team meetings with all maths teachers and Jane addressed the

areas of concern. The teachers then reflected on their practice and brainstormed ideas for implementing this new approach. The Head said that two younger teachers were so excited with these new ideas that they offered to guide the changes in the Foundation Phase. She felt that if it were not for Jane's participation in the GISCDI, no reflection on practice or changes to teaching would have been forthcoming.

#### **4.3.5 Feedback from Senior Schools**

A major area of positive comment about the benefits to student learning came from the senior schools. Many of the participants teach at schools that feed directly into their own senior schools, so immediate feedback is easily available.

Kate was delighted to get positive comments from her senior school. She commented:

“I swell with pride when I think of the feedback I received from the Senior School about the students who have benefited from the GISCDI curriculum initiative. The message is clear – these students' portfolios reflect increased confidence, and their knowledge has expanded. They not only know more, but communicate it better because they have insight into what result is expected.”

Sheryl also received affirmation from her school's senior teachers. She commented:

“The proof of the merit of the system implemented is the feedback once they reach higher levels. According to these teachers, our students are more aware of their goals, so they know what their portfolios should look like. Their written work is greatly improved because they know what is expected of them, and they perform accordingly.

Jane had positive feedback about the mathematical ability of her students who had moved into senior school. This information pleased her as she is expected to prepare students to achieve the academic excellence the school prides itself on. This is not a simple task as many students find mathematics a daunting subject. She was delighted to report:

“We are judged on how our students perform in senior school. The senior school is impressed because the students' skills in Geometry and Investigation have improved. Because they think more, they are more comfortable to challenge methodologies presented to them. By challenging them, they come to truly understand them. Improvement in these areas is only due to the new approach we have implemented after involvement in the GISCDI.”

This valuable information was of huge benefit, as junior schools are often judged on the quality of the students they send into senior school. It was generally felt that the profile of the teachers had been positively

enhanced, and they now had the confidence to introduce changes, which allowed for their own growth and professional development. It also encouraged them to share these ideas with colleagues at future meetings, as they now had feedback to prove it had benefited the students.

These teachers' perceptions of the improvements in students' learning must be read in the light of the complexity of schools. The causal links between the changes in practice that the teachers described and the learning outcomes of their students, are not straightforward and can be affected by many factors. (Frost and Durrant, 2003).

This research was reliant on the integrity of the selected participants and the information they offered in the interview was successfully recorded and transcribed. All participants acknowledged and appreciated the confidentiality of the transcripts and stated that their honest conversations were their real perceptions of their real-life classroom practices. Comments from the Heads of schools mentioned, were not part of the formal methodology but they do add significance to the programme.

**See Figure 2**

***A diagrammatic representation of the changes made to actual practice and a list of the benefits to students' learning.***

<b>CHANGES TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE</b>
Teaching visual literacy confidently, using various media
Detailed analysis of cartoons, comic strips and advertisements
Using a Smart Board in teaching film study
Developing and using rubrics for assessment
Using a variety of assessment strategies
Transparency in assessment
Introducing a portfolio to showcase work, and for comparison and growth
Teaching English as a whole language
Focus on the purpose of writing
More emphasis on analysing poetry
Focus on teaching measurement in Geometry
More emphasis on investigations and problem solving
Paired assessment for investigations
Encouraging students to present own methodologies with own justification
Teaching students to work co-operatively in groups
Enjoying teaching and having fun in the classroom
Assessing for the benefit of the student

<b>BENEFITS TO STUDENT LEARNING</b>
Improved responses in formal benchmarking assessment
Eagerness to analyse cartoons, comic strips and advertisements
Accurate observations in visual literacy
Enhanced vocabulary in film study, and greater understanding of techniques
Improvement in writing for purpose
Creative writing more focused and correct
Improved achievements using rubrics, as students are aware of criteria for assessment
More effective group work and collaborative learning
Realistic peer and self assessment
Creative problem solving in Mathematics
Eagerness to try own strategies for solving investigations
Accurate justification of own approach to problem solving
Learning from peers in collaborative assessments
More confident and able in senior school
Improved responses in formal benchmarking assessment
Eagerness to analyse cartoons, comic strips and advertisements
Accurate observations in visual literacy

#### **4.4 Enhanced Professional Image of Teachers**

An enhanced professional image does improve the status of the teacher within the school and community, and when questioned about this aspect of personal development, the comments were the following:

“The curriculum development has credibility because it has been so well-presented and sustained, and this enhances us as teachers involved in the process – it makes us feel professional and competent,” said Sheryl

“I definitely feel that I am now more professional in my approach to all my teaching, as I am feeling more confident,” commented Paige.

Len stated:

“Yes, my involvement in the GISCDI makes me more confident, as it boosts my self esteem. This in turn enhances my teaching. I feel I want to give more to my students, so I put more effort into my teaching.”

Kate said:

“I feel I have grown so much, especially being involved in the setting of the papers and the memoranda for assessments. This has challenged me intellectually and socially – I now



understand the importance of being involved and not just sitting on the fence.”

“Ongoing growth is really the best way of describing it. I think it has brought a greater awareness of what one can actually do, rather than teaching in a rut,” said Jane.

The independent school community has been made aware of the GISCDI at various Heads of School meetings, and many requests have been made for the co-ordinators to extend the process in Gauteng to other regions. This alone has enhanced the professional standing of teachers who apply for positions at other schools, as they bring with them knowledge of the GISCDI, which will benefit other schools. The teachers have all commented that they feel affirmed as professionals and have gained skills that have enhance their professional image, especially as the GISCDI has earned credibility nationally.

#### **4.5 Factors that Promote or Inhibit the GISCDI**

In an assessment of the worth or merit of a programme, it is vital to consider what could inhibit the process and what factors promote the process. The GISCDI has been running for over four years and the teachers involved do have a good sense of what could or does inhibit its success.

The participants felt that a Head of School who was not positive about involvement in the process, or did not have a clear understanding of the process, would definitely be an inhibiting factor. Were the Head merely interested in students' results in the benchmarking assessment, and not in the professional development aspect for which it was developed, this would be an inhibiting factor, as it would place undue pressure on the teachers to get good results. If the results were to become the end product of the process, and not teacher development, this would negate the fundamental, underlying principle of the GISCDI. The participants also mentioned that the size of the GISCDI meetings could become an inhibiting factor, and perhaps future planning should include the formation of smaller, regional cluster meetings.

The participants' honest comments follow.

According to Kathy:

“After chatting to a colleague from another independent school, I was shocked to hear that her Head initially felt the process was a waste of time and it was all about their students coming out on top. The teacher was put on the spot and confessed that she was tempted to ‘coach’ her students. Luckily, she was aware that it would have defeated the aim of the process. Fortunately the Head developed an appreciation of this as the process unfolded. I was most concerned and suggested she mention this to the co-ordinator, who could ensure that her Head was given the rationale and code of conduct.”

Mary commented:

“It took a while for the Head and parents to appreciate that the aim of the benchmarking assessments was not to determine some sort of hierarchy amongst the participants. Once the Head understood this, the pressure to ensure that our children measured up, was relaxed and I could focus on using the process for what it was intended – to develop me and my colleagues professionally.”

The factors that promote the process included the buy-in from so many teachers who believe in it and look forward to future meetings to share their ideas. Regular meetings, good networking systems, and the maintenance of good standards in the benchmark assessment are a definite means of ensuring it continues. All participants commented that the commitment from the co-ordinators and assessment teams played the greatest role in promoting the GISCDI.

I have tabulated this information for quick reference by interested parties.

**See Figure 3**

***Factors promoting and inhibiting the GISCDI***

**Figure 3**

<b>FACTORS THAT INHIBIT THE GISCDI</b>	<b>FACTORS THAT PROMOTE THE GISCDI</b>
Head of school not positive or committed to the process	Regular meetings and good networking systems
New Head of school not familiar with the rationale of the process	Collegiality at meetings and sharing of resources and ideas
Teachers feeling threatened by formal assessment	Buy in from so many teachers and the teacher leader concept
Poor results from the assessment not being viewed as a tool of development but rather a criticism of teaching	Formal assessment maintains standard and teachers' interest
Lack of integrity and misunderstanding of rationale leads to coaching for the assessment	Trust by Head of school
Large number of schools and teachers involved could affect communication and collegiality	Teachers leading and growing the curriculum and change to practice
	Not a top-down initiative and allows for distributed leadership
	Ability of teachers to take risks and make changes to their practice
	Willingness of co-ordinators and assessment team to invest extra time
	Support from the Heads Committee who initiated the process

These comments only serve to highlight the importance of the Heads of schools allowing for distributed leadership so that the teacher leaders can be trusted to grow the curriculum and enhance teacher skills in a collegial manner. This in turn promotes and encourages positive change in teachers' practices, and their professional image, which ultimately benefits student learning and improves schools.

#### **4.6 Strategies for Schools to Create a Teacher-Led Curriculum Initiative**

For the research from this report to be useful, it should attempt to provide strategies that schools could implement, and add to literature on school effectiveness and school improvement.

The school effectiveness and school improvement movement, have in the last decade, focused on leadership issues, whole school evaluation, improving student grades, and many other diverse areas. Only more recent research has directed investigation back into the classroom, with teachers as the focus of school growth. This research into the GISCDI has emphasized the fundamental role that the teacher, both in and out the classroom plays in changing schools to enhance student learning.

Strategies for improved teaching and changed classroom practice must include the teacher at the centre, with the programme of change developing from this.

A school wishing to initiate a process similar to the GISCDI must make contact with neighbouring schools and plan meetings to initiate conversations on what needs they might share. Teachers who are committed to professional growth must be selected to lead the process. These teachers must have the resources and administration back up to communicate with fellow schools via email, phone or fax. Agendas can be planned according to initial needs, and guest presenters can be invited to offer workshops to assist in filling these needs.

A collegial atmosphere is vital to sustain the process, and teachers must be made to feel valued, no matter how small their contribution is. Lists of attendees must be circulated and contact details shared to allow for further communication. Dates for follow up meetings must be planned well in advance, and venues should be rotated amongst participating schools.

Once the dialogue has commenced, further discussion on benchmarking assessments can be initiated. If the schools opt for this formal assessment to highlight areas for professional development, assessment teams must be organized. It is suggested that these teams comprise representatives from co-educational, monastic, special needs and second language schools. This diverse sample ensures that the assessments are balanced and fair for all participants. The teachers then meet to plan, collaboratively, the benchmarking assessment. Experience has shown that these teachers work best in groups, each

preparing a different section. The groups meet at times suitable to all members and present their assessment at the next combined meeting. Debate and discussion follows and much learning takes place. The final assessments are typed, edited by two outside specialists and then centrally printed, prior to dissemination to all participating schools.

A minimal fee is charged to cover printing and administration costs, and a collaborative assessment and subsequent marking day is planned. The GISCDI has found that having two marking venues, and ensuring memo discussions happen on the day prior to marking, have streamlined the process and been more collegial. The results are collected, entered into a database and combined with the students' portfolio results, forwarded by the respective schools. The results are then presented to the Heads of schools. These results indicate the students' grades in each section of the assessment, the schools' averages in each section and the regional average. No ranking is given, so each school knows only how it achieved in comparison to the regional average. These results clearly indicate to the schools where professional development should take place in order to improve teacher skills and student learning. This information guides the content of the teacher meetings.

The teacher-leaders attend a Heads curriculum meeting, which is held once a term to provide feedback from the teacher meetings.

This information is intended to assist schools in their planning of collegial meetings to enhance their craft, change their practice, benefit their students' learning and improve their school.