

# EdEco Initiative South Africa

## A Case Study on Building the Relational Conditions for a National Learning Ecosystem Approach in South Africa

Goal of this initiative: to support the visualisation, mobilisation, and connection of actors in the South African Education System within an environment of trust and relationality, thus laying the foundational conditions for a functional, collaborative, and relational national learning ecosystem.

This initiative is taking place under the auspices of the [DBE-E<sup>3</sup>](#), the South African Department of Basic Education's flagship innovation programme for supporting Entrepreneurial Mindset, Employability and Lifelong Education, as well as learner critical competencies, within South African schools.

Alongside their global counterparts, the South African Department of Education has been grappling with how to introduce the critical learning competencies (character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking) into the South African education system. One of the fundamental difficulties in doing this is that most education systems, with South Africa's being no exception, are based on archaic models of vertical control, and the transfer of knowledge and skills is managed in a deeply hierarchical way. To achieve the kinds of education outcomes fit for an uncertain future, education systems need to transform to allow for fundamentally more humanised, experiential, and individuated approaches to learning. Such a transformation requires a reconfiguration of the underpinnings and philosophical approaches to the exercise of education. This includes a shift in the ability of the actors within the education sector to operate collaboratively and coherently towards the transformation of education, and to understand their synergistic roles within the education and societal ecosystems, such that learners are equipped for the future with what are now commonly referred to as "21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills (Critical Competencies)".

Embarking on this kind of journey is both urgent and necessary, but also daunting, and this work is relatively uncharted in the South African context. While existing models to support this type of transformation are in existence, introducing these into the South African education space requires intent, effort, and a consistent commitment to bringing new and generative thinking to progressively larger numbers of actors to enhance the levels of acceptance and willingness to work in this way. It is this transformation of thinking and approach that we are seeking support through the EdEco Initiative.

In November of 2020, DBE-E<sup>3</sup>, in partnership with Kaleidoscope Lights, held a multi-party stakeholder dialogue to assess whether there was an interest, appetite for, and perceived value in embarking on a process to visualise, connect and enhance the relational network and functionality of the South African education ecosystem. Many of the participants in this dialogue opted to engage in an ongoing experimental process to move towards a deeper level of connection and education ecosystem coherence.

As a result, in February 2021, E<sup>3</sup> and Kaleidoscope Lights embarked on a process to co-initiate, co-sense and co-evolve a model to deepen levels of trust, connection, collaboration and ecosystem emergence within South African education sector, using a variety of systems change modalities. We named this process the EdEco Initiative.

Participants in the EdEco Initiative were drawn from multiple different sectors, including Civil Society, Education NGO's, Business, Philanthropy, and Public Private Partnerships. As the project has progressed, the number of participants has grown from 16 to 80, with new partners joining via "porous border" approach.

The specific projects undertaken by the group to facilitate the development of trust and relationality between actors include:

- Annual participation in the Presencing Institute's u.lab 2x programme, which delivers curriculum and training for participants on the Theory U model of social systems transformation.
- Consistently held, regular weekly convening sessions which are open to all interested in the process, and in which a variety of wide variety of dialogic, community-building and relational processes are used to foster deeper levels of connection, understanding and insight.
- Intermittent in-person and virtual workshops with a specific focus on fostering trust-based partnership, collaborative work, and connection between actors.
- Deep Dive exercises to understand the work of sector partners, deepen insight and support shared reflective capabilities on what is occurring in the education sector.

In the coming months we will be expanding the scope of work to include workshops to convene "meta-node" actors (network activators and conveners doing similar work in aligned but sectorally different spaces, that are necessary for expanding into a more comprehensive understanding of a national learning ecosystem – eg ECD, Tertiary Education, Youth Development, Skills Development, Health sectors)

The key value of this work lies in its attention to the relational substrate, levels of trust, and wellbeing of the human connections of those focussing on the work of transforming the education landscape. Our goal is to foster increased systems' capacity for generating higher levels of connection, relationality, and trust, thus our hope is that the participants in this process will increasingly replicate the approach in their own environments.

#### Outcomes to date:

- Participants report feeling substantively supported and encouraged in their work in the sector.
- They reflect greater levels of connection, care, encouragement, and insight between members of the group.
- Group members are starting to utilise the methodologies explored to foster similar levels of connection and care in their own spheres of influence.
- Multiple spontaneous collaborative initiatives, shared working, and overlaying of programmes are starting to occur. These represent genuinely co-created opportunities developed in response to systems needs being experienced, rather than preconceived "projects" for which partners are sought (ie, collaboration is arising out of relationship, rather than relationship being forced in the context of pre-determined project needs).
- The narratives and experiences of this space are starting to be related into and experimented within a number of aligned spaces, including the philanthropic/ funding sector, youth sector and corporate social investment sector.

- Linkages with aligned global initiatives seeking to achieve similar outcomes are being activated and actioned.