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Changemakers share their why, collaborate as critical friends, and highlight leadership skills



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Background: Changemakers are justice-minded individuals working toward implementing positive and sustainable change within their communities.

Aim: The project created a space for Changemakers to connect, engage in critical dialogue, and leave with shared knowledge and skills to dismantle oppressive, deficit-based educational systems in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Setting: From October 2021 to June 2022, 18 American and South African Changemakers from primary, secondary, and higher education institutions exchanged messages about their regional context and attended the Changemaker Symposium in South Africa.

Method: This qualitative study examined how the Changemaker framework guided educators to frame [*ubuntu*], convene [*masikhule*], and ignite change [*skep verandering*]. They framed the strengths and challenges in their regions. Teams convened to address challenges using assets-based ideas that oppose deficit thinking and allow them to become leaders who ignite agency to ignite systemic change. The individual and group narratives were collected via open-ended questions, group discussions, and written artifacts.

Results: They developed statements on: exploring reasons for teaching, collaborating with critical friends, and developing critical leadership skills. A phenomenological analysis of the narratives examined commonalities within each Changemakers' lived experience.

Conclusion: Findings indicate that this process allowed participants to collaborate and reimagine ways to inspire others while renewing their commitment to the responsibilities they face as educators affected by the pandemic.

Contribution: From this project, educators have a framework to participate in global discourse that illuminates commonalities through critical friendships, decreases burnout, humanizes their experiences and increases the implementation of culturally responsive and sustaining inclusive practices.

Keywords: Changemaker; education; leadership; sustainable change; collaboration; professional growth.

We can, in fact, change the world and make it a better place.

It is in our hands to make a difference.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

Introduction

Educators worldwide are challenged with teaching the knowledge and skills necessary for the next generation of learners to succeed. Yet, with the onset of the global pandemic in March 2020, teaching has become increasingly more complex (Meinck, Fraillon & Strietholt 2022). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Responses to Educational Disruption Survey (REDS) assessed 11 countries to learn about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. Responses to Educational Disruption Survey found disruptions in access to schooling, challenges with supporting learners at the level they needed and a decline in the emotional well-being of learners, teachers and leaders (Meinck et al. 2022). The survey findings indicate that although teachers and learners felt supported by school leadership, respondents reported a decline in social and emotional well-being with many stating they felt overwhelmed.

Based on the results of the REDS report, it is evident that teachers are experiencing burnout and require resources to revitalise their perceptions of their profession. A review of the literature on

the recognition of teachers' responsibilities, collaboration with other teachers, reflection and celebration of the good things happening in classrooms, and participation in conversations that inspire rather than limit or defeat educators indicates educators can feel supported and heard when they connect and engage in dialogue (Agyapong et al. 2022; Diliberti, Schwartz & Grant 2021; Ford 2019; Ghouseini et al. 2022; Horn et al. 2007). Historically, stress is reported as the number one reason teachers quit and with teacher attrition lowering student achievement; this is a startling fact (Diliberti et al. 2021). In their meta-analysis of international research on teachers' stress, burnout, anxiety and depression, Agyapong et al. (2022) found that when teachers believe the magnitude of their profession is realised and honoured, this recognition decreases burnout. Additionally, because teachers are solely responsible for the students in their own classroom, it is easy to fall into a profession of isolation (Little 1990). Yet, research (Ghouseini et al. 2022; Horn et al. 2007) purports when we break down the *walls* within schools through sensemaking and collaboration, educators are able to grow professionally in pedagogical practice, active engagement and personal connection to learning. There is evidence that having one's accomplishments celebrated leads to higher job satisfaction (Agyapong et al. 2022). When educators are given the opportunity to reflect on their lived experiences, well-being and professional growth, their learners, families and colleagues benefit (Ford 2019).

The Changemaker project brought educators from South Africa (SA) and the United States of America (USA) together to create a space for critical friends and leaders to connect, learn from each other and inspire change within their own communities in order for educators to address the impact of the global pandemic. This article describes the educational history of the two countries, outlines the adapted Changemaker process, describes three major themes that emerged from the convening and provides implications for instituting global Changemaker projects.

Two countries

Although SA and the USA have differences linguistically and culturally, they share many of the same educational experiences (Jez & Luneta 2018; Jez Hauth & Ramers 2022b; Meda et al. 2022). For example, whereas SA has 11 official languages, the USA does not have an official language (although English is most commonly spoken). Both countries have policies to support multilingual learners, and yet, non-dominant language speakers still experience challenges (Kleyn & García 2019; Makalela 2015). Many African Americans and black South Africans have experienced similar disparities in access and opportunity because of past government-mandated segregation (Walker & Archung 2003). The lasting implications of subpar and exclusionary educational systems echo in schools today, much in part because of apartheid in SA (1948–1990) and the *separate but equal* segregation policies (Plessy v. Ferguson 1896) that were active until the passing of the *Civil Rights Act* (1964) (Hungu & Thuku 2010).

With the emergence of globalisation, educators, learners and leaders are finding new ways to engage in dialogue to dismantle oppressive practices in SA and U.S. schools. Today, both countries work to obtain the necessary funding, training, resources and services to support all of their learners, especially those from historically marginalised communities (Marishane 2017; Phillippi et al. 2022). In the USA, there is literature examining the school-to-prison pipeline in which many African American and Latinx learners find themselves because of inequitable assessment, placement and disciplinary policies (Annamma et al. 2022; Artiles 2022). These practices include zero-tolerance policies, segregated classrooms for learners receiving special education services, inadequate funding for educational materials, a lack of training and high teacher turnover in schools serving at-risk youth. At-risk youth are learners who come from historically marginalised backgrounds or under-resourced communities (eds. Swadener & Lubeck 1995). South African schools also experience similar inequitable challenges such as high learner-to-teacher ratios, inadequate facilities and under-resourced programmes (Juta & Van Wyk 2020; Nhlapo 2020). Additional barriers to enrollment and attendance such as high school fees, transportation and safety affect learners in SA schools (Hanaya, McDonald & Balie 2020; Reid 2002). Educators in both countries report a need for additional training and support in order to provide quality education (Jez & Luneta 2018; Jez et al. 2022a; Meda et al. 2022). This project tasked educators, hereinafter referred to as Changemakers, with identifying assets within their contexts that lead to professional growth and innovative support for learners.

Changemakers

Ten Changemakers from the Cape Town area of SA (six male and four female) and eight students enrolled in a graduate-level course at a private university in the southwest region of the USA (seven female and one male), voluntarily participated in the 9-month Changemaker project. The project was the third global Changemaking project the American professor has organised and completed in South Africa over the last 4 years. Four of the South African Changemakers had participated in past projects; the other six asked to join the project after hearing about it from colleagues. All of the South Africans earned their teaching qualifications from the partner university in Cape Town, six of the eight Americans hold a teaching credential and the other two work in higher education and restorative justice. This project was facilitated by a white, female assistant professor at a medium-sized university in the USA who has been working consistently with partners from universities and township schools in SA since 2013.

Throughout the project, the use of translanguaging as a method for honouring languages was implemented by each member. Translanguaging is the practice of fluidly expressing oneself using more than one language within writing or speech (Makalela 2015). The Changemakers were encouraged to share about their languages (isiXhosa, isiSepedi, isiZulu, Afrikaans, Spanish and English) and given the flexibility to

express their ideas in whatever language they deemed most powerful. Although all 18 members participated to some extent in the online communication, only six (three from each country) were able to join the final Changemaker Symposium in June 2022. This high attrition was because of various challenges. For example, travel restrictions because of the COVID-19 Omicron variant postponed the event to June. This change in date coincided with the administration dates for the matric test in SA (the exit exam for learners graduating from secondary school) resulting in many of the SA participants being unable to join the convening. Other reasons included the global pandemic (COVID-19), family responsibilities, teaching obligations and other individual stressors or travel obstacles (e.g. illness, along with school and family responsibilities). The Changemaker framework describes the process used in this project, and present implications for this work.

Changemaker framework

The adapted Changemaking framework is a three-step process that tasks educators with addressing challenges by framing, convening and igniting (Ashoka 2014; Jez et al. 2022a; Rivers et al. 2015). This qualitative study used the Changemaker framework and its steps to categorise salient themes that emerged from participants' narratives. Through open-ended questions, discussion-based activities and written artefacts, participants shared experiences and their conceptualisations of solutions for addressing challenges they had experienced since the onset of the global pandemic. The phenomenological approach gave the Changemakers an opportunity to make meaning of their lived experiences (Mertler 2022). The Changemaker teams identified, explored and connected themes during the convening to existing literature.

During this project, we called the framing portion, *Ubuntu*, the isiZulu word for *I am, because we are*. The convening portion, or *Masikhule*, is from isiXhosa and it means *to grow together*. This phase provided the Changemakers with the opportunity to build community, identify assets and discuss ideas for addressing challenges. At the conclusion of the Changemaking process, each group of Changemakers offered ideas for educational growth. We called this step, *skep verandering* (Afrikaans for *creating transformation or phenomenal change*). The Ubuntu section includes a description of each step of the Changemaker framework and participants' experiences.

Ubuntu [framing]

The first step in the Changemaker project is framing. Makalela (2015) explained *ubuntu* as:

... '*motho ke motho ka batho*' meaning 'I am because you are or you are because we are', to denote the interconnectedness of all humans as well as their cultural and linguistic existence. (p. 27)

The Changemakers started to learn about each other in this phase through emails, Whatsapp messages and an initial

framing activity at the convening. This process provides the foundation in which critical dialogue can be established. Recognising shared lived experiences strengthens the level of authenticity in which Changemakers can express their skills while reciprocating support as they expressed the challenge of teaching during COVID-19. They continued connecting during the discussion groups at the June convening.

Table 1 provides examples of the participant's responses to the different prompts. For example, the email asked Changemakers about *zazise* (isiZulu word meaning who you are at your essence) by answering: Where does your name come from? Who are you? What are you about? What makes you who you are? The Changemakers told vulnerable stories of how their names (both given and chosen) linked them to their identities. One female American teacher wrote that she shares the same middle name as three of her cousins, which gives her a 'family tie, even though we are not very close'. Another male American school leader wrote about how his parents wanted him to fit into society and so they gave him a 'western name'. A South African shared about the name he chose:

'My other preferable name ... was chosen since I am a social protagonist and have been an activist for many years, giving back to my community as well at the university ... [I] am a

TABLE 1: Examples of framing responses from South Africa and the United States of America educators.

Prompt	South African responses	United States of America responses
Email: Zazise (isiZulu): Who are you? What are you about? What makes you who you are? Please share part of your history that inspired, empowered, informed who you are today	I am a young South African 4th year student teacher. I am a product of the township schools. I love talking and doing art, but if I could highlight my reason for being in the teaching profession, it's the passion that drove me to teaching. I have always looked up to those teachers who sacrifice their family time to nurture us, as diverse as we were. The love they gave to us made me who I am today, so becoming a teacher and going back to my community is more than giving back to me. My teachers planted a seed in me and because of that I have developed to be [a] great knowledgeable farmer that wants to plant more seeds to the Moses' of this world	I am the eldest of two children born to immigrant parents. I am the first in my immediate family to have attended schooling beyond the 6 th grade. My parents have always taught me the value of education and finding passions in my path. When I first went to college, I planned to become a financial advisor. I worked at a theme park as a character performer in my very first semester [<i>my first job ever!</i>] and I fell in love with interacting with children and families. I went on to become an early childhood educator for a few years. After discovering that I loved watching young minds learn and grow, and that my passion lay in educating, I decided to start my path to becoming an educator
WhatsApp: What were some of the challenges with COVID-19 impacting your learners?	The challenge was with high unemployment and insufficient data for online learning. As well as the method of online learning pedagogy which was introduced with immediate effect because of the pandemic	I saw a lot of my [<i>learners</i>] facing difficulties transitioning back to in person learning after being remote for a year. They were facing an extreme amount of burnout once the semester was at the halfway point

Source: Jez, R.J., 2022a, 'All of the things: Shifting from traditional to transformational teacher preparation', *Teacher Education Quarterly* 49(2), 111-116; Jez, R.J., 2022b, 'Nouns to verbs: Exploring educators' learnings, beliefs, actions, and growth', *Teacher Education Quarterly* 49(4), 95-103

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member of an informal settlement which has inspired me for a change within my community.' (Teacher x, SA, male)

These stories provide a window into the past and present experiences of the Changemakers from both countries.

Another email asked Changemakers to share part of their history that inspired, empowered and/or informed who they are today. The female Changemakers from South Africa shared about how they have 'learnt the importance of helping others as a way of self-development'. One female Changemaker from the US wrote about a teacher who 'left an imprint on my life to engage in the field or type work helping to positively change the negative trajectory of someone and that someone is me'. Additionally, a male South African Changemaker wrote:

'... the love [teachers] gave to us made me who I am today, so becoming a teacher and going back to my community, is more than giving back to me'. (Teacher x, SA, male)

A male Xhosa South African Changemaker shared:

'I am a cultural man; I believe that my ancestors are always looking over me. Other than that, I believe that I come from a very disadvantaged background. Where conditions are unbearable for any human, where poverty is no longer a fear. I have managed to find ways out of those dark places. I have [patience] and I always desire winning no matter what comes my way. I believe that I am a champion and champions never quit.' (Teacher x, SA, male)

Next, they were asked to tell a story about a learner overcoming a challenge in their community. They described various obstacles such as restarting school after financial challenges in addition to stories about personal, social and familial troubles. A striking story from a SA Changemaker said:

'Drug abuse is a big problem where I live. I grew up being raised by a single parent [mother] with 6 other siblings. I had to drop out at school in grade 3 due to lack of money at home, but through all that, this year was my last, completing my B.Ed. degree.' e.g. (Teacher x, SA, male)

The Changemakers also shared how they were able to identify creative assets-based solutions, find ways to persevere, listen and build confidence through relationships, and increase communication skills with stories like this from the female restorative justice leader from the US:

'[... a young woman I mentored ...] was on a negative path. She skipped classes, came late to school and it impacted her grades. I remembered from [an] educator who helped me so many years ago to simply be human with her. So I met with her, listened to her, shared food with her, and supported her dreams ... I recognized ... that all she needed was for me to be me. She [went on to graduate] from high school [where she was] the recipient of two awards.' (Leader 1, SA, male)

In April, the Changemakers moved communication platforms from email to a direct messaging app called WhatsApp. Using this format, they celebrated things that brought them

joy such as pictures from graduation and their family. They also discussed the negative impact of COVID-19 on learners by sharing about unemployment and technological limitations (e.g. lack of money for data to access online learning platforms). One Changemaker asked the group how they were taking care of their mental health. Responses included taking quiet time for meditation and yoga. By communicating about their lived experiences, the teams were able to learn more about each other prior to the Americans' arrival in Cape Town.

At the onset of the convening in Cape Town, the Changemakers framed their experiences using the *Being Human Together* activity. The Changemakers were split into two groups and asked to share something that makes them joyful (one word), a talent (one sentence), a time they made a mistake (one paragraph) and what they learned from the mistake (a 2-min 'speech'). One female South African Changemaker shared:

Joy: singing.

Talent: I bring kindness and joy to others.

Mistake: [We have] come to the realization that a mistake is fine, although it makes us anxious ... we learn from it.

Learning from mistakes: We learned that everyone is human but, ownership and responsibility after realizing a mistake is key. (Teacher x, SA, female)

This activity created a space for authenticity and vulnerability through storytelling. Throughout each of the modes of communication (email, WhatsApp and *Being Human Together*), the Changemakers were able to learn about each other and the learners within their communities. They found commonalities and differences in the stories shared. Several themes emerged from this process such as the desire to empower all voices by building relationships with all partners – learners, families, educators and community members. Each participant told a different story of challenges they witnessed. They spoke about pressing matters such as social issues (e.g. pregnancy, drug use and being excluded), educator burnout, challenges with communication, changing mindsets, support from leadership and implementing inclusive practices. Many of these issues mirrored the topics presented in the UNESCO REDS Report (2022). The Masikhule (Convening) section highlights the solutions the Changemakers identified for educators across the world while convening in Cape Town.

Masikhule [convening]

The second stage of the Cape Town Changemaking process was the convening or *Masikhule*. *Masikhule* is a word from isiXhosa language meaning *to grow together*. During this phase, the group framed the commonalities and differences from the individual perspectives and experiences of each Changemaker. Changemakers paired off into groups to explore a topic of their choice. They chose to discuss reasons they became teachers, the support of critical friends and aspects of being a critical leader.

Reason for teaching

The first Changemaker pair decided to explore why teachers choose to teach, as this decision can play a role in the retention of teachers. Whether a life-long passion or a steady job, teaching means something different to each educator (Kirk & Wall 2010). There are a variety of reasons why this career could be attractive to those who pursue it. Some claim that the benefit of serving young minds is an overarching benefit that keeps individuals engaged and passionate, while others suggest that the stability and the high demand for qualified teachers make the field enticing (Nieto 2003; Whiteford 2019; Wadsworth 2001). Though there may be several benefits to choosing this field, one must also explore whether teaching is the individual's vocation or merely a job as one begins the journey of choosing a career in education. The context of choice can explicate the reason why teachers choose to stay or leave during a time of hardship, like COVID-19.

For some teachers, their career choice may not entirely be up to them and other factors such as family, location and job opportunities could play a role (Osguthorpe & Sanger 2013). The Changemaker pair that discussed the reason for becoming a teacher acknowledged that although many have the freedom of deciding their career path, some will experience pressure or guidance from outside sources. The pressure may come from an individual's duty to pursue their university education, whether because of personal high expectations or familial expectations. An individual may decide the path to teaching is not as beneficial as they once believed. They feel compelled to continue their studies and end up in a career that they did not want to pursue. Moreover, educational options could be limited. Many universities limit entry to programmes based on grades, school performance or community service. Education continues to be an open option for many as it often has fewer admission requirements and high job placement rates (Donaldson 2012; Zalaznick 2015). Some teacher preparation programmes market becoming a teacher as a stepping stone in the path to another career (e.g. Teach for America or Teach for All). The Changemaker pair acknowledged that each teacher has a different journey they take between applying for a programme and walking in the door as the teacher of record.

Changemakers then discussed the motivation of those who chose teaching as a career after finishing their teacher preparation programme, especially with all of the challenges teachers are facing. Since the onset of the global pandemic in the spring of 2020, teachers have been asked to balance meeting academic content standards, addressing technology issues, supporting emotional and behavioural development, and finding resources for social, economic and trauma-related safety concerns that emerge within their classrooms (Barnum & Bryan 2020; Crosby et al. 2020; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights 2021; UNESCO 2021). Furthermore, many teachers describe they stay because of an obligation to earn money for their family or a desire to positively

impact children from at-risk families (Nieto 2003). The Changemakers agreed that teachers enter the profession for a variety of reasons and that these reasons influence whether they will stay in the classroom (Wadsworth 2001). For example, teachers who want to make a positive difference in the lives and learning journeys of children and young adults remain in schools longer. Alternatively, teachers who chose the career for its stability, demand or high job availability will often leave the profession or burn out over time (Beltman & Poulton 2019; Bristol 2020; Kirk & Wall 2010; Ryan et al. 2017). Research (Kirk & Wall 2010; Ryan et al. 2017) found that pensions and longevity play a crucial role in the livelihood of educators and might encourage them to stay in their career without exploring other careers or gaining skills needed to transfer careers.

To address the dilemmas of burnout and reignite one's passion for teaching, the Changemakers discussed ways teachers can continue to invest in their careers in education. Firstly, they can support. Many teachers claim that the primary reason for their lost passion is the lack of support from their upper management, administration or leadership. Although school leaders are there to support educators within the schools, many educators claim that they do not feel supported by their administrative leaders when it comes to workload, stress management and overall goals. As Jez et al. (2022a) shares, as we shift from traditional to transformational teaching practices, for every new initiative, responsibility, curriculum or practice that is added to a teacher's plate something needs to be taken off or shifted to ensure success in implementation. Secondly, learners and teachers benefit when resources are available (Bryner 2021; Resh & Lanlan Xu 2014). In SA, class size can be up to 50 learners and class materials are often old, inaccessible or unavailable. In the USA, there is a disparity between well-funded, suburban public schools and public schools in historically marginalised communities with staffing, technology and course offerings (Annamma, Connor & Ferri 2013). Supporting teachers by mindfully integrating evidence-based practices, innovative ideas and creative materials related to the learners and families in the community can lead to the learners thriving (Slavich & Zimbaro 2012). Thirdly, providing opportunities for teachers' voices to be included in decision-making is also beneficial (Shanklin et al. 2003). If teachers feel unheard or ignored while policies and practices are being decided, resentment can arise, and resentment can also lead to stress and burnout (Beltman & Poulton 2019). Fourthly, professional development should be continuous, applicable and relevant to the school (Christofferson & Sullivan 2015; Jez & Luneta 2018; Jez et al. 2022a; Meda et al. 2022; Siebert 2005; Wei et al. 2009). The Changemakers believe that in order to serve learners effectively, teacher preparation programmes should reimagine authentic opportunities in the field while they are learning to teach (Jez et al. 2022b). Conversely, veteran teachers can learn from the preservice teachers who come in with current evidence-based practices (Jez et al. 2022a). Cultivating relationships in the teaching practice can combat burnout while providing support.

Creating a circle of critical friends

The second pair of Changemakers focused on creating a circle of critical friends. The term critical relates to Paulo Freire's (1970) work on praxis which tasks members of a community to deeply reflect and evaluate their biases, ideas, practices, assets and challenges. The *Critical Friends* framework is built upon protocols whereby learners, educators, leaders and community members collaborate to improve pedagogical practices and learners' learning (Blake & Gibson 2021). The circle format provides a space for participants to work together as co-collaborators through dialogue focused on continual reflection and inquiry. They share perspectives through a reciprocal process of giving and receiving feedback. There are several steps central to this process that enable the partners to be critical friends.

Initially, the circle of critical friends needs to remove hierarchy in order to co-collaborate. The individuals enter the circle seeking ways to improve professionally and invite colleagues and learners to become mutual partners. It is important for critical friends to put themselves within the work in order for feedback to become mutually beneficial. This level of interaction is transactional and requires new meaning-making to take place (Olan & Edge 2019). Colleague-to-colleague or teacher-to-learner dynamics can benefit from this authentic engagement because it removes power imbalances through giving and receiving feedback in a reciprocal relationship that values humanity, growth mindset, deep listening and other reflective practices (Wennergren 2016). Feedback must be viewed through the lens of collaboration instead of correction in order to utilise this approach to improving instructional strategies. This takes vulnerability on the part of all members.

Once relational respect has been established, the circle can address concerns. Improving instructional practices (providing feedback on instructional strategies, curriculum, etc.) through critical-friend-to-critical-friend feedback contributes to creating a common language and can lead to culturally sustaining practices. Culturally sustaining practices are actions that work to dismantle deficit practices found in schools and replace them with practices that honour the community's strengths, assets and abilities around learning and teaching (Paris 2021). When done correctly, the critical friends' dialogue serves as a form of professional development by way of improving pedagogical practices that can contribute to a deeper connection for learners and teachers (Blake & Gibson 2021; Wennergren 2016). Learners can also benefit from a reciprocal feedback model by receiving more feedback from teachers. Furthermore, this process can be replicated in the classroom when teachers allow learners to provide feedback on instructional practices and lesson delivery. Creating circles of critical friends will help teachers seek an understanding of where misunderstandings have historically occurred or where concept or content connections were not made well as the teacher had intended. Critical circles can help teachers meet learners' individual needs.

Critical leaders

The third Changemaker pair chose to examine the ways in which leaders are identified and how they can continue to learn and grow. The pair asked the question: Are people born a leader or are they made into leaders? They agreed that some people are natural leaders, willing to step up, advise and build community. Nurturing leadership skills can be easy with born leaders, but it is important to realise those without obvious leadership qualities can be very good leaders. Yosso (2006) explores this idea with her work on community cultural wealth (CCW). Community cultural wealth pushes the interplay of cultural assets that many individuals bring to leadership and areas the education system needs to grow in order to create a more just system. Many potential leaders have *aspirational capital*, or they dream of the future even when facing obstacles. When school leaders come from the community they serve, they have historical knowledge of what that community has experienced. In SA, this includes the impact of the apartheid system on township schools and in the USA, the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al. 2013; Badat & Sayed 2014). *Linguistic capital* plays a huge role in schools in both countries. This includes knowing the benefits of being a multilingual learner, family member or educator and using practices like translanguaging to amplify community engagement. Having a network of people and resources, *social capital*, is another strong leadership quality that someone from the community often possesses. A leader who comes from outside the community can build their social capital by asking questions, meeting people and learning about local businesses, agencies and organisations (such as churches) that can support the school. *Navigational capital* touches on the ability to maneuver through institutions, especially those systems that were not created to support at-risk youth or aspiring leaders. Many prospective leaders may not know how to become a leader without mentorship from others. Motivation and guidance may be necessary for some leaders to grow into leadership roles. Although *familial capital* refers to the cultural knowledge, history and intuition among family members, this concept can also be extended to the non-biological family unit found in many communities. Finally, *resistant capital*, or the ability to see inequities and the skills to dismantle oppressive systems is not something that leaders are often equipped with within their training programmes. Yet, as the pair of Changemakers discussed, educators are unable to ignore the unfair experiences of their learners and families and they are dedicated to integrating social justice into schools.

This pair of Changemakers also discussed the complexity of factors, such as social stigma or perceptions, that can influence a leader's abilities. In leadership, there is a perception that all leaders believe they are the experts, they cannot make mistakes and they have all of the answers, but that is far from the truth. Leaders can be nervous and feel unprepared for the job at hand. A good example of this is when giving a presentation. When presenting, it is common to have one's nervous system

stimulated. Even when one is prepared, presenters make mistakes. Unfortunately, when this happens, their leadership abilities can be questioned instead of grace being extended to the presenter. Leaders are human, humans make mistakes, and everyone has the opportunity to learn from those mistakes and grow. When leaders dehumanise themselves because they think they need to be perfect, they miss a powerful opportunity to connect with their community. One specific example the pair discussed is how to be inclusive of all members of the community by using the correct terminology. Even though a leader identifies as LGBTQIA+, they may not be used to including pronoun choices (they or them, his or him and she or her) or understanding the new use of transition or congruence instead of referring to surgical interventions such as sex reassignment. Jones et al. (2019) remind leaders that creating a safe environment means continuing to learn and grow as societal expectations shift. Another example of what leaders need to unlearn and relearn is patience (Nhlapo 2020). When a leader is impatient with a teacher, learner or family, they can come off as intimidating and unapproachable. Critical leaders who work on their communication style, continue to challenge themselves and grow, involve partners in the decision-making process and support the teachers at their school. In applying these practices, critical leaders reap the benefits of creating a culturally sustaining environment for learning.

Skep verandering [igniting]

Skep verandering, or creating transformation or phenomenal change, is an Afrikaans word we chose to reflect on how sustainable change was created. The final stage of the Changemaker project is the igniting stage where ideas are moved into action. After the event in Cape Town, the Changemakers reflected on what they learned and what they were going to do next. They acknowledged the need for more deep listening and time to really express their work in the way they wanted. One female SA Changemaker stated:

'Learning is more for our self growth ... The brainstorming part was exciting because we kept coming up with more and more ideas. If we had more time we could do so much. [However] putting it into words – was difficult.' (Changemaker x, SA, male)

This reflection echoes what past Changemakers have wanted, more time (Jez et al. 2022b). Overall, the Changemakers' final reflections highlighted a reawakened understanding and commitment to being responsive to learners, collaborating, celebrating and inspiring others.

Responsibility

Changemakers remarked on discovering new levels of responsibility through the different opportunities for sharing and reflecting during the project. One female Changemaker from the USA described the need for teachers to take responsibility and advocate for their learners. They went on to explain that:

'[A]ll kids are all teachers' [*learners*]. You have to see each other as professionals, partners, collaborators, and a team. At times we are sensitive about how others perceive us. We need to be aware of who we are, why we are.' (Teacher x, US, male)

This reflection supports past research aligned with honouring educators (Agyapong et al. 2022; Diliberti et al. 2021). Participants also identified barriers to sustainable change and systems that needed further interrogation and disruption to our traditional way of being. As one participant put it:

'We need to relinquish the control. Follow the "rules of hierarchy" – [*that are*] unspoken, [*know*] hierarchy as a way to survive- I needed to know others' places in order to navigate in certain places, be aware of who's who, listen to people. It will let you know how they see themselves, that will let you know how they see other people.' (Teacher x, US, female)

The Changemakers highlighted that although the systems at play in both countries could feel demotivating at times, through the Changemaking process, the group said they felt seen, heard and valued.

Collaboration

Discussions were authentic and vulnerable because of the reciprocal trust and connection built throughout the Changemaker process. One female teacher from SA wrote:

'This event was more intimate and personal. It allowed me to talk to educators about education in South Africa and, more importantly, education in general. It was nice to have this opportunity to collaborate ... learn from them. We learned that post-COVID effect we were experiencing in the states was also felt in Cape Town. Sometimes we can be so engulfed in our problems that we forget we are not alone, not alone in the struggle, but more importantly, not alone in wanting to enact change.' (Teacher x, SA, male)

Working together, and not in isolation, supports past research (Ghousseini et al. 2022; Horn et al. 2017; Little 1990). Participants were invigorated by the discussion about similarities and differences. A female teacher from the US realized:

'[T]he struggles teachers are going through are not that different, we all go through the same things. There wasn't room to feel offended, everyone was heard and able to connect, disagree, and discuss what they meant'. (Teacher x, SA, female)

The Changemakers were encouraged to critically assess their personal teaching path and what they can do better during the whole group, small group, pairs and individual reflection times. This collaborative dialogue often pushed their thinking further. As a team member from SA stated, 'One person was formulating words and the other added spice'. Another female teacher from the USA who had been sick earlier in the trip shared they began to challenge how they felt. She originally said,

'I feel like my brain is a wet rag that you were squeezing the last bit of juice out of ...'. (Teacher x, SA, male)

She later wrote:

'I realize not many can say they have had an opportunity to share ideas and experiences with like-minded Changemakers from

across the world, to experience a culture different from my own, and to open myself up to new opportunities. It was a trip I will hold dear to my heart as I move into my career as an educator, and one that I will remember forever.' (Teacher x, US, female)

Overall, the collective experiences cultivated during the framing, convening and igniting phases led to each individual growing personally and as a group.

Celebration

Changemakers affirmed the benefit of being in the community and recognising what it means to celebrate the value of their work. A significant observation was the power of being reflective. 'We call those grows', one female teacher from the USA shared:

'[W]hen we make mistakes, mishaps, misinformation, or stumble, we grow. This is how we evolve and champion openness as teachers. Teaching goes beyond learning how to teach and what to teach'. (Teacher x, US, female)

This supports Ford's (2019) findings on critical self-reflection providing opportunities for celebrating assets and growth. The Changemakers realised that it is not a deficit to stumble, but rather part of trying new things. For example, one Changemaker quoted Nelson Mandela saying: '[d]o not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again'. At the end of each day of the Changemaker event, the group celebrated together with dinner. One female SA educator reflected:

'[A]t dinner by the beach with a beautiful sunset ... we were able to connect events further with our Changemaker team, we talked more about our day's work and our personal lives'. (Educator x, SA, female)

Inspiration

Many educators avoid adding extra meetings to their schedule, yet all of the Changemakers went out of their way to participate in this project. A participant mentioned she does not usually like meetings, but the informal nature of this project was helpful. This reflection offered a reminder of the importance of providing educators with opportunities to sit around a table and talk about their experiences and find inspiration from one another. A Changemaker who was also a new teacher acknowledged her new found respect for veteran colleagues at her school, saying, "[older teachers] are the ones with the past knowledge [and] need to come together with respect for each other's experience." As Jez et al. (2022a) found, veteran and novice teachers can learn a lot from each other if given the opportunity, however, reciprocal learning must have a strong foundation of respect for others' ideas and perspectives. As a female school leader Changemaker said: 'Change is hard - we need to understand the direction, the mutual partnership. We have to be reflexive'. The group discussed using norms to enable effective communication that does not feel like a personal attack but rather invigorates others in their growth within the school community. Furthermore, a desire for leaders to get involved in

Changemaker events was highlighted to ensure the inspiration this group experienced moves to real change in our schools. As one female Changemaker eloquently stated: 'Our desire to make things better was inspiring'.

Implications

Several implications can be drawn from the experience of these 18 global Changemakers as they moved through the three-step Changemaking process of *ubuntu* [framing], *masikhule* [convening] and *skep verandering* [igniting]. Firstly, educators can feel empowered with relationship building. Since the beginning of the global pandemic, community members (educators and learners alike) have been in isolation and this has shifted schooling in many ways (e.g. instruction, collaboration and professional development). The Changemaker process can be used locally and globally to reconnect educators to learn from each other and come up with innovative ways to provide instruction and care for their learners, their colleagues and themselves. This group of Changemakers was no exception to this reality. Starting this process during the COVID-19 pandemic while instruction and schooling practices were in their second year of pandemic transition in most school settings, these educators added the commitment of engaging each other in this process to their loads. This implies the value of being empowered by our critical friends. As global colleagues, these professionals were able to draw support from each other, truly emulating the ideals of *ubuntu*.

Secondly, educators can use lived experiences to identify, share and implement culturally responsive or sustaining inclusive practices. Using lived experiences, the Changemakers shared how they were able to deconstruct challenges, identify creative assets-based solutions, build confidence in their knowledge through these relationships, increase their effective communication skills and find ways to persevere. Reciprocal connection of members from different communities can disrupt the barriers related to institutional and societal norms; thus, participants can empathise with their peers and problem-solve without the weight of hierarchical policies or titles.

By way of the Changemaker process, this group was able to remind themselves of why they were drawn to education, create a circle of critical friends and unpack ways one can become a critical leader. In an effort to resolve challenges in education across the globe, the Changemaker process can offer a holistic perspective in educators supporting educators' professional growth. With the prevalence of educator burnout, combined with the challenges of COVID-19, critical conversations can reignite a commitment that humanises educators and promotes asset-based practices to support learners.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

R.J.J. conceptualised and designed the study, expanded notes, analysed data, and wrote the article. C.D. summarised articles for literature review, analysed data, and drafted some sections of the article. M.C. and C.C. developed the critical friends section and reviewed the article. A.M. and K.W. developed the leadership section and reviewed the article. D.R. and C.R. developed the teaching rationale section and reviewed the article. C.H. assisted R.J.J. with additional connection to the literature and revisions.

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Data availability

All unique identifiers have been deleted from responses but country and prompt responses are available.

Disclaimer

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