

“Why are schools not doing what we expect of them? Is it because they won’t or because they can’t? The implications for school improvement are very different, depending on how this question is answered.”

(National Education Evaluation and Development Unit, 2013, p.19)

The quote above, from a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) report, rang out for me from the drone of a 2018 conference with too much content in a vast room packed with too many people. It suggests that won’t do is a question of attitude. Can’t do is a question of aptitude and is easier to remedy through training, support, resourcing and other interventions. It sparked my curiosity. Can do had never been in the toolbox of my professional vocabulary, but that was about to change.

At Social Innovations, we develop programmes to supplement public school education. Schools are under pressure to cover the core curriculum. Our programmes don’t get in the way. Rather we offer enrichment – such as after-school programmes and libraries – that supplements the academic programme of the schools. Our programmes are not about turning around poorly functioning schools; that is the work of those who are tasked with implementing system-wide reform with billions of rand to spend. Rather we rely on the strong foundations of functional schools to host programmes funded by those with millions to spend. We don’t need to select top academic schools. But selecting can-do schools that are more likely to deliver on the partnership – and offer the donor a social return on investment – is the make-or-break decision we take. While we have a school-assessment method to guide us, our most reliable tools when visiting schools are gut feel and intuition.

On a winter morning in 2019 I visited Hammarsdale, a hilly, semiindustrial area on the outskirts of Durban, where several retailers have set up distribution centres with government incentives aimed to create jobs in the area following mass industrial retrenchments in recent years. I had been managing an early childhood development programme in the area for several years on behalf of one of these retailers, another was considering funding after-school programmes in primary schools. I visited five schools to assess their suitability to partner with us. My colleague Thabisa shifted down the gears of her white hatchback to get us up a hill, around a sharp curve and to the gates of the fourth school we were visiting that day. A security guard unlocked the gate, we signed in (perimeter security is an important feature of a functional school) and we drove into the grounds. The principal was not there that day, so we met with the school’s Head of Department for Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), who invited us into the principal’s office. We remained standing while speaking to her. She seemed anxious and uncomfortable, and constantly avoided eye contact. She then took us to see a Grade 4 class.

The teacher was seated on her table with her legs stretched out before her and her bare feet resting on a learner’s desk. The classroom was hopelessly overcrowded and rowdy with children shouting and laughing and shrieking. A boy threw something at another learner across the classroom, and giggled into his hand as he saw us walk in. The teacher jabbed away at the keys of her cellphone, frowning into the screen, and glanced towards us without greeting as we stood at the door.

She yelled at the learners to quieten down before once again attending to her phone. There was still no greeting. Her boss didn’t flinch. There was none of the ear-splitting sound of chairs being scraped

back that I usually hear on such school visits as children stand and chorus, “Good morning teachers and visitors.” But I got the impression that this nonchalance was normal here.

I wasn’t about to recommend this school as a partner for a donor-funded programme. It would be akin to a financial advisor recommending a stock bound to fail. As we left the grounds, Thabisa asked me, peering into the rearview mirror as she carefully reversed out of the narrow gate, “Did you see her cane?”

“Maybe she uses it to point at the blackboard?” I suggested hopefully.

Although Thabisa had grown up in the area and still lived here, her parents had sent her to a “town” school in Durban.

“I don’t think so,” she said, “that wasn’t a pointing cane.”

“Maybe her feet were sore?” I offered.

Thabisa just looked at me and raised her eyebrows. You can quickly get a sense of a can-do or a won’t-do school by looking at its grounds, by experiencing the culture that prevails in the classroom, and by feeling if a place is managed with love or indifference. Each school is an institution with its own culture determined by individual attitudes, and it’s the can-do people who I was really interested in learning more about.

At Social Innovations, we work with about 200 public-school teachers in any given year. I have come across won’t-do teachers, but we work with many who are excellent in terms of their integrity, their ambition for their learners and their efforts to deliver results. I understand the power of a can-do teacher to drive the culture of a school; to transform the life of a child. The NEEDU quote got me thinking: How can we characterise a can-do teacher? What inspires and motivates her? What is her attitude to her life and work? What brings meaning and purpose to her life? Most importantly, what can we learn from her that may improve the public-schooling system?

At the same time that Thabisa and I navigated our way through the hills, valleys and curves of Hammarsdale in the little white hatchback, I felt weighed down by the avalanche of news that continued to pour out of the seams of rot in local, provincial and national government exposed by the media and civil society organisations. Corruption, ineptitude, callousness, political manoeuvring and the self-serving actions of politicians and so many public officials have stolen away time, money, energy and creative thinking that could have gone into improving our education, healthcare, economy, job creation and tax collection. As the interminable and necessary commissions of enquiry ground through their work, and as those who have stolen from us continued to walk free, I wanted to find a parallel narrative.

While our media continues to cover corruption and the failures of our political system, this book turns our gaze momentarily away from public officials who are in power towards those who are in service. It allows glimmers of light to shine through the darkness of the narrative of public education and reveals can-do teachers who are excelling despite the odds. It considers what we can learn from these teachers to influence how we attract, select, train, deploy and retain teachers to build the quality of the schooling sector and the public sector more broadly.

All of the people you will read about between these pages are award winners and/or have been recognised as top performers. Fifteen of the teachers profiled in this book have made it to the finals of the annual National Teaching Awards (NTA), an initiative of the Department of Basic Education that recognises the performance of teachers in different categories. One of the teachers was recommended to me by an organisation working towards improving maths and science performance in the public-schooling system. I hope you enjoy meeting them as much as I have.