



Louise van Rhyn

Louise van Rhyn is a social entrepreneur. She believes the world's huge intractable problems can be solved through cross-sector collaboration and a solid understanding of complex social change. She holds a doctorate in Complex Social Change. She is the founder of Partners for Possibility, an innovative leadership development process in South Africa.
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Vision 2030: How a South African Provocative Proposition is Igniting Active Citizenship and Collaboration

In this article, Louise van Rhyn tells the story of how South Africa's future vision is fuelling active citizenship across the country. The article describes the creation of a co-action and co-learning programme between business leaders and school principals that is firmly rooted in Appreciative Enquiry and that has already touched 437 schools.

Now in 2030 we live in a country we have remade. We have created a home where everybody feels free yet bounded to others; where everyone embraces their full potential. We are proud to be a community that cares.

So reads a portion of South Africa's Vision 2030, beautifully crafted by two prominent South African poets after considering the contributions of thousands of South African citizens.

The Vision 2030 document has been described as an ambitious document for its highly positive description of a possible future for South Africa. In the practice of Appreciative Inquiry, this type of description would be called a provocative proposition, a statement that "bridges the best of 'what is' with your own speculation or intuition of 'what might be'".

A provocative proposition stretches the status quo while suggesting real possibilities. And that is why I view the Vision 2030 description of South Africa as a provocative proposition for the country – it is a description of the potential that lies within the country, just waiting to be tapped. South Africa's Vision 2030 is a description of a flourishing South Africa, a country that works for all.

The ideals espoused by Vision 2030 are provocative, precisely because of the disparity between what is and what could be. In the realm of education, certainly, the disparity is huge. In spite of high spending on education and

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the implementation of some good policies, there are many clear indicators – including functional literacy and numeracy, pass rate and global ranking of the quality of education – that the public education system in South Africa is in crisis.

The education challenge in South Africa

By some estimates, over 80%, or close to 20 000, schools in South Africa’s network of 25,000 public schools are dysfunctional. Stated differently, the system is failing the majority of the 12 million children who are at school.

Failing most of our children has a clear humanitarian impact and the economic impact is equally dire. Economic growth is nearly stagnant and unemployment remains very high, at over 25%. The negative impact of poor schooling is reflected in the OECD’s Global School Ranking Report (2015), which estimates that South Africa’s GDP would grow by 2,624% over their lifetimes if all students achieved a basic level of education to just the age of 15.

In attempting to address this problem, the South African government every year spends more money from its national budget on education than on anything else. In the 2016/17 national budget, the department of finance allocated R218.8 billion (US\$ 141.5) of a budget of R1 463 billion (US\$946 billion) to basic education.

Focusing on what works

I am a “homecomer”. This means that I left South Africa for a period of time and returned home because I wanted my children to grow up in this beautiful country. It is also a country with many challenges, so coming home was also a choice to make a contribution – to use the knowledge and skills that I acquired in the UK and US to help create a Flourishing South Africa, the country described in our Vision 2030 statement.

I have been privileged enough to be taught about the value of focusing on what works rather than focusing on negativity and despair. So when I felt called to get actively involved in our education system, I realised that there are essentially two “systems” of education in South Africa: we have 5,000 schools that work well and 20,000 that are failing. I became intrigued by the question, what if we were to study the 5,000 that work rather than focusing on the 20,000 that are not delivering the education outcomes we need?

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This question opened up a new world to me and a group of fellow South Africans. When studying the success of the 5,000 high-performing schools, we found that, without fail, these schools have a principal who is well-equipped for his or her task and an active and engaged community that is involved in the school and supports it well. We noticed that these two things are rarely present in the other schools.



Anthony Naidoo (Nedbank business leader) with learners from Masakhane-Tswelopele Primary School

I discussed these insights with Peter Block and John McKnight (founder of Asset Based Community Development). In these conversations I realised that we do have a rich national asset in South Africa: we have thousands of business leaders who have the knowledge and skills needed for leading and managing organisations. Corporate South Africa invests heavily in maintaining and expanding this capacity.

Tapping into an existing asset base

I started to play with the idea that we could somehow tap into this asset base of well-trained business leaders to support school principals.

The idea was piloted with a school principal in Cape Town. His name is Ridwan Samodien and he is the principal of Kannemeyer Primary School in Grassy Park. I will forever be grateful for Ridwan's willingness to say YES to an untested and unproven idea.

Ridwan and I started to work together in April 2010 and we are still in a partnership. During the last five years, I have learned more about leadership from Ridwan and my involvement in Kannemeyer Primary School than I learned from doing an MBA or doctorate.

Partners for Possibility

The discovery that this could be a mutually-beneficial relationship gave birth to Partners for Possibility (PfP) – a co-action, co-learning, reciprocal partnership between business leaders and school principals where they develop their leadership skills in partnership and focus on the school and school community as the beneficiary of their collaborative effort.

Once they have joined PfP, the school principal and business leader together set about applying their insights to the school, to identify and address the challenges that it faces. In the process, the business leader often brings his or her own professional network to bear, while the principal finds strength and energy in having a thinking partner who is genuinely in awe of their resilience and resourcefulness.

During the last five years, 437 business leaders from more than 300 organisations have partnered with 437 principals. All of us who have been involved with PfP have been positively surprised by what we have found at the so-called dysfunctional schools. We have been so focused on the crisis-narrative that we have ignored the wellspring of hope and resilience at these schools. We found, almost without exception, that principals at these schools are coping against

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all odds in very difficult situations and are truly committed to make a positive contribution to the lives of the children they teach and the community they serve.

We also found that a school is the largest unit of change in the education system and that leadership offers the most powerful leverage for the improvement of the school. While each partnership addresses the challenges at “their” school, the community becomes more engaged and their narrative starts changing from one of deficiency to one of gifts and contributions.

Lastly, because of the cutting-edge learning methodology, we were also able to get this accredited as a short course at the University of the Western Cape, which means it is deemed to be a “legitimate” leadership development process.

Results – Hope and possibility in 700 schools by the end of 2016

At the time of writing, we have identified a further 200 schools in existing and new regions that we want to help this year through these powerful partnerships, bringing the total number of schools in the Partners for Possibility network to approximately 700.

While results vary, it is heartening to see the specific challenges faced by each school being addressed in a spirit of positivity and possibility. As an example, Kannemeyer Primary, the nexus-school, changed their narrative from “parents are not interested in us and even the teachers place their children in other schools” to “we have a community of committed parents and a strong partnership between the community and educators”.

This new outlook is amplified and entrenched in the community through stories, the use of electronic media and positive media coverage. Every positive action is celebrated and highlighted. Kannemeyer Primary has since been identified as a high-performance school in the region.

The programme is also powerful on an individual level. For principals, the programme often represents the first time that they have received any form of leadership training and they entrench their new-found skills in regular conversation with their business partner, who fulfils the role of thinking partner and sounding board.

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For business leaders, their engagement in this new environment, where they have no direct control or positional power, develops their leadership skills and sharpens, or establishes, a cultural sensitivity that was often lacking but is very necessary in a country scarred by many years of institutionalised segregation under apartheid policies.

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In one recent example, a business leader who has been active in the programme for three years reported the significant improvements in business when she replaced traditional performance evaluation programmes with appreciation and thinking partnerships, calling appreciation “the biggest gift I have ever received or given”.

Re-imagining leadership and how to develop leaders' capacity to lead

I have been very interested in leadership development – as a practitioner at Ashridge Consulting, I had the privilege of being part of the team that developed and facilitated the leadership development process for large organisations such as the BBC, Marks & Spencer and London Underground. We designed experiences to help leaders develop their capacity to deal with complexity, ambiguity and “not knowing,” and marvelled at the value of these experiences.

The Partners for Possibility process enabled us to take this thinking to a new level. Leaders are invited to be in a close relationship with someone from a world different to their own. The process invites all participants to cross boundaries and be confronted with their own “stuff”. The “action learning” component of the process isn't “just” a project. Leaders are challenged to facilitate meaningful change in a school community – change that could potentially change the trajectory of thousands of lives in an under-resourced school.

Business leaders report that they found this very challenging. They realised that they knew very little about life in an under-resourced community. They were shocked and upset when confronted with the realities that so many of their colleagues and staff members grapple with on a daily basis. They realised that they so often get stuff done in their own organisations because of their positional power, and that it is far more difficult to mobilise people to take action when you have no positional power.

Possibility in action





Johanna (principal) and Rosie (business partner) at Siphetu Primary School

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I have often used Peter Block's words in training courses when I said that "the delivery vehicle of our expertise is our humanity", but it was through being an active participant in the PFP process that I realised what this actually means. When I go to Kannemeyer Primary School, no one is interested in how many degrees I have, what my job title is or what kind of car I drive. The Kannemeyer Primary School community want to know that I will treat them with respect, that I will listen and pay attention, that I will keep my promises and do what I said I will do. If I do this I will be invited back with open arms. If I don't, I should not be surprised when people don't respond to my emails and calls.

Through my involvement in PFP, I have learned about "invitational leadership" – that sustainable change happens when people say "yes" to an invitation to participate. It does not happen when people feel forced to do something. I now see "invitation" as the most powerful leadership action. Most people want to make a contribution, they just need someone to invite them.

A final note on making contributions: I recently had the opportunity to help a mayoral candidate for a big city develop his campaign. Instead of standing on podiums telling people how great a candidate he is, he decided to invite the citizens of the city to bring their gifts and contributions to co-create the city they want. His entire campaign was to do the work of bringing citizens together in working groups to do the work they yearn to do while they experience him as a leader who facilitates citizen engagement and co-creation. On reflecting on my conversation with him I realised with much gratitude how much I have learned from leading Partners for Possibility.