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EDUCATION: SA'S GLIMMER OF HOPE

BY MANDY DE WAAL

South Africa's public schooling system is one the most expensive in the world, yet delivers such poor outcomes that it is trapping people in cycles of poverty and unemployment. *Finweek* investigates Partners for Possibility, a civic effort that aims to teach public schools how to reboot, and to change the lives of learners in the hope of bringing equal education to all by 2022.

"There was a time when we were just teachers, when we were just getting our students through the grade. We didn't see our place in the bigger picture," enthuses an excited Ridwan Samodien, the headmaster of Kannemeyer Primary School in Grassy Park, Cape Town.

"In my view, there are so many teachers and leaders of schools who are plugged into the mundane. There are too many people who are just salary collectors," he says.

Samodien, who is entering his 34th year in teaching, and who has been at Kannemeyer Primary School for about 20 years, is not what you'd call a "salary collector". Thanks to a mentoring programme called Partners for Possibility, he's rebooted

his approach to the role he plays in education in the country.

SA's education system is in crisis, and Partners for Possibility is a civic programme that has taken a very different approach in an attempt to change this. Before getting into what that is, and how it works, let's take a look education in SA.

THE DISMAL STATE OF EDUCATION IN MZANSI

Nelson Mandela once said that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". In SA that 'weapon' has lost its power.

At the end of February, education researcher and academic Nic Spaullo eloquently outlined the problem this country faces during a speech he gave at Durban Girls' High School: "After 20 years of democratic rule most black children continue to receive an education that condemns them to the underclass of South African society, where poverty and unemployment are the norm, not the exception."

Said Spaullo, who is currently completing his PhD in economics at Stellenbosch University's Research on Socio-Economic Policy group: "This substandard education does not develop their capabilities or

expand their economic opportunities, but instead denies them dignified employment and undermines their own sense of self-worth." His doctoral thesis will examine the quality of primary education in 14 Sub-Saharan African countries.

"Today," he said, "half the country lives on less than R25 per day. They are in abject poverty. With less than R25 per day they need to buy food, clothing, shelter, transport and all the other basic necessities needed to live free from deprivation." Spaullo quoted another shocking

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number during his speech. “Ten million South Africans live on less than R10 per day.”

His speech focused on urging the youth at the school to do something regarding this issue. “It is my hope today, that sitting in this hall, there are those who will use their talents, energies and ambitions to finish the unfinished business of South Africa.” In 2011, the Southern Africa Labour

and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town (UCT) compiled a paper called *The Policies for Reducing Income Inequality and Poverty in South Africa*. In it, the authors drew a direct correlation between education and poverty.

“Education plays an important role in predicting an individual’s position in the income distribution,” the paper reads. “Education is the key variable in

determining a) whether an individual finds a job in the first place and b) the nature of the employment and the level of remuneration.”

In short, if you send your child to one of the 20 000 dysfunctional public schools in SA that are moreover located in black townships, your child’s prospects will not be as bright from an employment and economic perspective as those of a child who goes to a functional school.

IN CASE YOU’RE NOT CONVINCED, THESE STATISTICS SHOULD SWAY YOU:

of the some **20 000** dysfunctional schools in SA, only **5%** of the children who enter schools in Grade R or Grade 1 make it to tertiary education. Most of the children who pass through dysfunctional public schools do so without becoming functionally literate.

CHANGING FUTURES

The results that the school is achieving are telling. “Our latest results, 2013, show that our Grade 3s scored 74.2% for numeracy and 70.8% for literacy, with a class average of 69.8% and 61% for mathematics and literacy respectively.”

In 2008, the class average for maths was just over 40%, which means an increase of 20% has been achieved. Literacy at the school has also made a big upward jump. The school is now taking district achievement awards for its improvements in numeracy and literacy.

“I have been headmaster for 14 years, and since being a part of the Partners for Possibility programme it has made me aware of the key role I must play in our country’s history,” says Samodien. “Given the crisis that the education system is in, the change is critical. We must see what we as principals can bring to the party to grow community and to contribute toward building South Africa. This is what I have learned over the past couple of years.”

“We all need to be turned on to

different outcomes, which will change the lives of learners who attend those schools.

“What we have done here at Kannemeyer Primary School is an awakening. At one time the teachers were just going through the motions. They came to collect their salary, but didn’t have a sense of contributing to a bigger picture. What we have done is to create a sense of a bigger vision and a common understanding of the role that everyone can play in this school, to achieve a vision everyone believes in. So the teachers here aren’t just salary collectors any more,” said Van Rhyn.

“In business we practice this. The idea that there is a purpose for that organisation that requires a community who are aligned. That there is a purpose and a vision, and everyone in a business ecosystem buys into, and supports this vision. They know what they must do to succeed. These very basic organisational development concepts are taken for granted in business as ‘the way you do things’,” the organisational consultant-cum-social entrepreneur said.

But at Kannemeyer Primary, things have changed dramatically. “We believe in the philosophy that your ‘Attitude determines your Altitude,’” reads a report from the school detailing its progress. “We further believe in ‘possibility’ and hence our theme: ‘KPS Alive with Possibility’, and by believing that anything is possible we buy into the philosophy that: ‘If you can dream it... you can certainly achieve it.’ We have refused to allow our former disadvantaged status or our impoverished status to define us.”

TAKING ACTION

The country’s education system is failing its people and is perpetuating cycles of poverty that trap people in an inferior existence. Changing this can’t be left to government because it is a crisis of such magnitude that business and civic society needs to pitch in and help. Entrepreneur Louise van Rhyn decided to do something and has started a movement that is sustainably changing public school outcomes.

Van Rhyn has made it her life’s work to further Mandela’s vision of quality education for all. “I am extremely privileged. I have had the opportunity to live, work and study in many different countries around the world. I’ve studied and worked with many iconic leaders and have had many amazing opportunities to develop and grow my professional practice,” she said in an interview for the site Xtraordinary Women.

“I returned to South Africa with my family after living in the UK. I wanted my children to grow up in South Africa, but soon realised that this decision came with responsibility. If I wanted them to flourish, I had to do what I could to ensure that South Africa is a good place for them to grow up, be educated and raise a family. This is what led me to what I do now,” added Van Rhyn.

She met Kannemeyer Primary School’s Samodien and so began a bold social experiment. The effort is called ‘Partners for Possibility’ and it is a project that changes hearts and minds by bringing world-class business thinking into schools to build leadership and community. Most importantly, it is a process that brings massive change to schools in order to deliver remarkably



Shaheeda Harris, the principal of Tygerhof Primary School, and Haadie Abrahams, the deputy principal, welcoming Partners for Progress to their school.

TURNING BLACK SCHOOLS INTO ‘BEACONS OF HOPE’

“Deracialising the South African school system did not solve the problem. That is the key conceptual or analytical understanding we all need to have,” says Nomalanga Mkhize, a lecturer in the department of history at Rhodes University, in the documentary *Some Children are More Equal than Others: Education in South Africa*. “Deracialisation is not transformative. What is transformative is changing the structural problem of the way the school was set up in the first place,” she says.

The country’s problem is that black public schools are, for the most part, intellectually and financially impoverished – that they are not centres of excellence. That they fail to help the majority of South Africans to realise their true potential and to become independent, active citizens who contribute to this country’s growth.

“What we should have done is to go to the black schools and turned them into beacons of hope,” says Mkhize, who explains that one of the first tasks of democracy should have been to fix the structural apartheid that exists in SA’s education system. Transforming substandard township and rural schools that hamstring black advancement should have been democracy’s first order of business.

Today, all that matters is changing these schools to contribute to the growth of South Africa, and in doing this, Partners for Possibility offers a glimmer of hope in what is a dire situation. It is already changing the lives and futures of some.

what it takes to change this country,” Samodien says. “I heard a beautiful quote the other day that goes something like this: ‘The greatest gift someone can give to an under-resourced school is a caring heart.’ The big difference that Louise has made is because of her caring heart and her love for this country. This is what has made the difference. And if teachers and principals can be more caring we can change things, we can make a difference.”

The results show the impact the programme has made on the school. Other improvements

have also been made – the library has been revamped, a ‘reading adventure’ room has been installed, and donors helped set up a canteen as well as a Science Learning Centre.

RIPPLE EFFECT

What’s important about this programme is that it is growing both in communities and nationally, so the successes are being replicated. In the education district that Kannemeyer falls under, called Grasslow Park – comprising Grassy Park, Lotus River, Parkwood, Wynberg,

Pelican Park and Strandfontein – a community of eight high schools and 23 primary schools have banded together to assist one another so they all benefit. The schools’ administrations are like-minded and Samodien serves on the programme’s executive committee.

A major breakthrough has been an initiative between the schools, UCT and The Dell Foundation that sees teachers doing advanced maths to sharpen their skills and understanding of the subject. This is likely to boost maths literacy and outcomes at the schools even further in coming years.

“Previously the schools were very insulated and separate from each other. What Partners for Possibility has done is to create a network or a community of principals. This is new thinking for public education. Previously every class, every teacher would do what they need to do – which was to work in silos,” says Van Rhyn.

“Because of our past, because of apartheid, we had this notion that ‘nobody cares about us’. People would drown in their own sorrows and then become dependent. This was about waiting for someone to come and rescue us. But when the lights go on, people realise that they don’t have to wait for anyone. They realise that in the classroom they can change the world.”

One way this attitudinal change was brought about was to show staff how important their contribution to learners and families is. “In the affluent community I live in, appreciation is the norm. When I came here to Kannemeyer I thought it would be the same, but it wasn’t. I suggested an ‘appreciation evening’ and the teachers weren’t sure about this, but we had the appreciation evening. The parents made the food and we gave the teachers gifts and flowers. Parents wrote notes of appreciation. That changed everything at the school. The teachers sat and had tears running down their faces. They didn’t know, didn’t realise, that they were appreciated,” says Van Rhyn.

This is one of a multitude of positive changes that have been introduced to the school, to help make it a centre of excellence. And this is one of close on 200 schools that have been brought on board to achieve the goal of providing quality education in all schools in SA by 2022. What’s critical about this initiative is that it does this by achieving “improved education outcomes in under-resourced schools”. ■

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