



SYMPHONIA



School @ the Centre of Community

**Mobilizing citizens and communities to partner with principals
and teachers to educate our children**

The story of Kannemeyer Primary School's involvement in 2010

A S@CC and PfP pilot success story - Karoline Hanks, February 2011

The context

There has been a drastic breakdown of community in South Africa, largely due to apartheid and rapid urbanisation. Linked to the problem of fragmented communities, South Africa faces considerable challenges with regards to education, health and public safety.

Research shows that when a concerted effort is made to connect with parents, education stakeholders and the wider community, educational challenges in schools are easier to address and education outcomes are far more attainable.

Against this backdrop, the School at the Centre of Community (S@CC) project was born. S@CC creates opportunities for business, government and civil society to collaborate in dealing with South Africa's educational challenges. Meaningful engagement with communities and schools by corporate executives and leaders is the basis of the S@CC model.



Partners for Possibility

Louise van Rhyn, founder/CEO of the Symphonia group of companies feels strongly that school principals can play a pivotal leadership role in bringing together the community around the school.

Knowing that school principals have extremely busy, challenging schedules and are often very unsupported and lonely leaders, Louise saw merit in inviting experienced business or community leaders to partner with school principals.

The idea was to create a support system for principals by introducing the **Partner for Possibility** (PfP) role. The PfP is seen as a **thinking partner**, the key objective being to work with the principal to mobilise and engage the talents of the surrounding community. The idea is for the PfP and the principal to work together to encourage the surrounding community and parents to become actively and meaningfully engaged in the challenges of their school.



'I cannot thank you enough for the fantastic initiative-reaching out to us "lonely principals". Many still feel alone, grappling with the many issues that confront us.'

Ridwan Samodien, Principal at Kannemeyer Primary School

The activities at each school depend on the needs of the principal and that particular community. Through the support of structured training as well as group and individual coaching, the PFPs develop their own leadership skills, while working with the principal to craft creative solutions to challenges at the school. This role provides an opportunity for leaders to develop their capacity to lead change in a complex and ambiguous environment. It is an opportunity for active citizenship whilst making a meaningful contribution to one of the most significant challenges facing our country.

Kannemeyer Primary School - Background*

Kannemeyer Primary School (KPS) has 500 students from Grade R to Grade 7, and employs 20 teachers. The diverse Grassy Park community surrounding the school is renowned for its high crime and unemployment rates. Parental engagement at the school has always been low and disciplinary challenges are enormous.

Ridwan Samodien is a principal with passion. He has taught for 31 years and has been the principal of KPS for 12 years. Under Ridwan's leadership, KPS has been a part of several dynamic and positive initiatives that have improved the school and provided opportunities for learners to grow.

- From early on as principal, Ridwan has engaged with the Novalis Institute, which supports a process of whole school evaluation. Ridwan set up a drumming group and established a food garden at the school as a result of his association with the institute.
- Ridwan channelled his passion for the environment into the establishment of a recycling unit at KPS. The school has been recognised by the Fairest Cape Association. It has also won a competition for being a green school. The school has won other environmental awards, and it is registered as an Eco-School with the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA). Through the relationship with WESSA, environmental education has been brought into the classroom. A DVD has been made documenting the school's environmental commitments. SEED and the Primary Science Programme have also accompanied KPS along the way.
- When Ridwan became principal KPS, he joined the Grasslow network – a network of schools in the Grassy Park, Lotus River and (more recently) Wynberg areas (see right).
- Two literacy NGOs now work at the school: Wordworks and Help2Read. Through these two programmes, teachers are more equipped to pick up and address learning difficulties. Parents have also become involved as volunteers to support children with learning difficulties on a one-to-one basis at school.



* The section "Kannemeyer Primary School - Background" is drawn from the report written by Sue Davidoff (November 2011), *The Story of Kannemeyer Primary School. Grassy Park.*



- Early on, Ridwan recognised that there was a real lack of community involvement in the school. He began finding ways of building more creative links between Kannemeyer and the neighbourhood. In October 2008, Kannemeyer was included in the Extra Mural Education Programme (EMEP). EMEP seeks to support the development of extra-mural activities at schools, and to establish the school as a 'community hub', where activities continue at the school after-hours. The focus is on the development of leadership capacity for principals and teachers taking on extra-mural activities. Following on from its involvement with EMEP, the school now offers a variety of sport and extra-mural activities. EMEP has also offered workshops for parents, and EMEP has helped in the facilitation of the Parent Support Group. Safeline and The Constellation Institute have also been involved in this process of working with support to and skills development of teachers.
- The school has a feeding scheme, where some 200 needy children are fed breakfast and lunch every day. There is a full time cook attending to this.
- Besides the normal routine visits from the Education Department, it has also been involved in support for the school in a specific way in that the staff have gone through four out of six sessions on 'deep democracy' as a way of addressing conflict in the school.

The Grasslow network: collapsing fences that divide and separate

Grasslow's main quest has been to avoid the duplication of activities and resources and to counter competition amongst the neighbouring schools, to foster cooperation, and to build a body of resources and a culture of interdependence and resourcefulness among them.

Linked with this has been the establishment of a variety of learning forums, including a two-year Leadership Development Programme, learner development, teacher development, non-teacher development, HOD development and school safety. This has led to the establishment of a Development Desk, which now has a full-time coordinator, Selwyn Page.

A spin-off from Grasslow has been the opening up of principals' minds to think more creatively and less bureaucratically, the establishment of neighbourhood watches, accessing welfare grants, improved learning possibilities for children through identifying problems and learning difficulties, and filtering this through to the classroom and classroom practice.

Ridwan is an executive member of Grasslow, and is regarded as a 'doer, an ongoing learner'. While the initiative has been highly successful, it has taken a long time to build trust and break down barriers between the participating schools.

Despite all these exceptional initiatives and developments, Ridwan has always been aware of the need to locate all this school growth more intentionally within its community context. He has always been keen for a far deeper engagement with the community. He has also been anxious to bring the parents of Kannemeyer more closely on board with the education of their children and the development of the school.

A partnership is born

After a series of meetings and workshops in March 2010, Ridwan was introduced to Louise van Rhyn and the S@CC project. Shortly thereafter, Louise made the decision to test her PfP idea with Kannemeyer.

“Parents in ex-Model C schools are actively involved with their children’s school work. In our schools, parents simply aren’t interested.”

These were the words of a teacher at Kannemeyer when Louise first visited the school. Louise’s research focuses on how cultures are shaped by the stories people tell about the way things are. In order to change the culture, she believes, we need to change the stories we tell and the conversations we have.

Ridwan and Louise began to examine the possibility that the belief that parents are not interested and the story around that may have contributed to the lack of parental engagement at the school. If the teachers at the school believed that parents are not interested, they were going to act into this story and treat the parents as if they are not interested: **What if both parents and teachers started to see each other as partners in educating their children?**

In the early days of their partnership, Ridwan and Louise decided to start with a practical issue of dealing with discipline in the Grade 4 classes. The challenge would be to see whether it would be possible to initiate a conversation between Grade 4 teachers and parents. Ridwan lamented the low parent turnout at school strategy sessions and parent meetings. The approach was to meet with the Grade 4 learners, to talk to them about their hopes and dreams for the future and then asked them to invite a significant adult in their lives to a conversation with Ridwan and the Grade 4 teachers. The hope was that, by asking the learners to invite the adults, more parents /guardians would likely be present for the conversation.

This marked a turning point for all. To the surprise of all the teachers, there were more than 60 adults in the room at the first meeting. All were keen to be part of the conversation. Parents acknowledged that they had felt disengaged from the learning process. They indicated that they have left it all to the teachers. Teachers discovered that the parents care deeply about what is happening in the class and that they wanted to be more involved. The same process was subsequently followed for the Grade 3 learners and parents.



Bringing the community together – a catalyst for community action

Having attended a Community Building event with Peter Block earlier in the year, Ridwan was keen to host a community building event for members of the Kannemeyer community. Ridwan and Louise decided on the 17th July 2010 for the event. A long list of invitees was drawn up: past and present KPS educators and staff; parents of KPS learners; alumni; neighbours of the school (people living around the school and business people working at businesses near the school); staff of NGOs working at the school; government officials involved at the school (Education Department, Social Services, SA Police, Health officials, etc); and any other people involved with the school.



The event was named Madiba Day, given that the 17th July is just one day short of the former president's birthday.

The event was a massive success. For the first time, the community felt involved and valued. Many people discovered that they had a role to play and a contribution to make.

"Parents said that they couldn't believe that they could have a conversation with teachers and with the principal. They probably saw us as aliens or something. So really that barrier was broken down within the two sessions of the day... that is what we aim to do, to break down the walls, to break down the barriers and to get people to become connected".

Ridwan

They saw that the school needed them to bring their gifts and talents and be partners in the education process. There were many examples of this, for example:

- One of the men observed that since it is usually the women who are involved at the school, he thought that needed to change. He committed to start a men's group to take responsibility to build a school hall (KPS will be 50 years old in 2011 and has never had a school hall);



- Mrs. Chotia, circuit manager for Circuit 3, was also at the Madiba Day. She became emotional when she was asked to say something about her experience of the event. She explained that over the holidays in her circuit, four schools were vandalised. Members of the community watched this happen. She said that she knew that if they had done what the Kannemeyer community were doing on this day, they would have felt a much stronger sense of responsibility for their schools and wouldn't have allowed it to happen.

"The biggest thing was the parent's enthusiasm. It was just almost as if the flood gates were open. Almost as if the parents were given permission to offer their services. Where parents saw, 'my goodness, I didn't realize that I could do this or I could do that,' and it was a light atmosphere. It was engaging with lots of appreciation."

Desiree Daniels, the Pfp of the principal at Ottery Road Methodist School



Parents and teachers met each other as partners and discovered that they all care passionately about the children at their school. It suddenly became apparent that the children belong to the Kannemeyer community and that it is no longer acceptable to abdicate responsibility to the educators at the school.

All members of the KPS community saw that they need to work together to ensure that the children from KPS reach their potential.

Extract of a letter from Ridwan to Louise after Madiba Day:

"On Monday morning, Mr Koopman delivered the promised paint, brush, rollers etc. Yesterday three of the quiet ladies, who did not want to speak arrived and cleaned the windows of the entire Foundation Phase block.One of the aspirant teachers offered to donate curtains for the First Aid room. Good Hope FM will be doing a live broadcast tomorrow morning on the Breakfast club - about our partnership with the Peninsula feeding Scheme.Food and Trees 4 Africa phoned and will be donating 30 trees for the school. A grade 2 parent's boss is donating bits and pieces of computers. We with technical support will be able to assemble a few PC's from the discarded bits. So it is all happening. I am extremely grateful and appreciative to you for making all this happen."

Ripples from Madiba Day

An Extra-Mural Festival – building bridges into the community

The KPS team was so inspired by the community building event that they decided to hold an Extra-Mural Festival in October, in line with EMEP's philosophy of building bridges.



Parents from all the participating schools, descended upon Kannemeyer and a wonderful and most enjoyable day, was had by all. A particular point, worthy being mentioned, was the great buzz that prevailed in the computer room. Nail-biting, excited parents were on hand to see their children competing in a CAMI-maths speed test. Groups of learners from Grades R to grade 7 competed at grade level against each other. Kannemeyer won 4 out of the 8 categories and ended up runners-up in the other 4. A remarkable achievement indeed.

Ridwan



Ridwan now uses every opportunity to invite the community to become actively involved at the school. In his welcoming speech at the extra-mural day, he invited the broader community to get involved – to bring their gifts and talents to the school, to become involved in coaching sports teams. He called on parents and other members of the community to create a future of possibility for the KPS children so that they can reach their full potential.

"The community and parents need a structure for involvement, and S@CC offers this."

Kannemeyer staff member

SMS communication with parents

The partnership between Ridwan and Louise has meant that Kannemeyer now has access to resources that they did not have before. SMS communication with parents has now become possible thanks to SMSWeb agreeing to sponsor the school with free text messaging. This provides opportunities to enroll the parents and bring them into the conversation in a much easier and less time consuming way than in the past. It creates an opportunity for strong community involvement because the parents get the messages directly from the school.



Subsidised books

As a result of Louise's involvement with Pearsons (a publishing company), she became aware of the 'Smart Kids' range of books. These books were developed to give South African parents the tools to assist their children in literacy and numeracy in the early grades. The books are fun, inviting and colourful. As a result of the work with S@CC, Pearson will be sponsoring 60% of the cost of the books in 2011.

"You have a business partner with a business mind and she may you some ideas on how you can use less energy and have a bigger yield at the end of the day. It's not about hand-outs. It's about transferring skills and empowering people. But in that relationship there is a possibility for the business partner to know businesses and to speak to them."

Ridwan

More support

Following the meetings with the Grade 3 and 4 parents and the follow-up conversations at Madiba day, it became clear that parents from KPS learners wanted more support. They were enrolled in the idea that they needed to be a partner in the learning process, but they simply did not know how to do that. With the assistance of Wordworks, they offered a 7-week 'home schooling programme' to parents.

The focus for the PfP is to now work with the school principal to harness the wonderful energy generated and to ensure that the ripples from Madiba Day are sustained. This means that there needs to be an emphasis on increasing involvement from parents and the community in the life of the school.



Creating the space for conversations

Kannemeyer will be celebrating its 50th birthday in 2011. To bring the teachers on board in planning the event, Ridwan used the conversation techniques that he learned from being involved in the S@CC project to engage the teachers in the planning. Instead of seeing the parents as people that need to be given information, he engages them and encourages them to engage with each other. In addition to using the programme methodologies during Madiba Day, Ridwan has found opportunities to use Peter Block's methodology in building relationships with teachers, parents, and other people in the school district.



Projects in the pipeline

Ridwan has met with an architect to look at the construction of a multi-purpose school hall, library and quarters for a janitor. There is also the possibility of solar heating and securing a 50% bursary from an Austrian donor. He is exploring the development of further food gardens at Kannemeyer and the Grasslow schools as well as improvements to the soccer field and the possibility of securing a volunteer coach.

Lessons learned

Ridwan was the first principal ready to commit to doing a community building event at the school. Ridwan and Louise's relationship became the source of much learning. The key lessons learnt were:

- The need for adequate resources for the project. The role of a Learning Process Facilitator has been identified for 2011. This person will support the PFPs as they make sense of their role and what is being asked for them.
- The importance of regular community of practice meetings. An individual needs to ensure that these happen as they provide a crucial opportunity for communal learning and sharing.
- The need for clarity on the partnership's objectives. The core objective of the partnership is about getting the community mobilised around the school.
- The need for more time to be spent ensuring the internal cohesion of the principal, SMT, teachers and other staff before getting parents and the wider community involved. Without a well aligned staff team, things can become disjointed and fragmented.
- It is important to have access to other resource partners (e.g. the Coaching in Education Project, SMSWeb, CENCE, and others).
- There is the need for a high-level structure for the year (to provide structure to the partnerships).



"I discovered that I could make a contribution simply by being available as a thinking partner to Ridwan was a contribution in itself. I don't need to know in order or have answers for these sticky questions – being available as a thinking partner and creating an opportunity for Ridwan to do his best thinking and then being willing to respond to this has more value than answers and questions could ever have."

Louise

Conclusion

There have been many successes at Kannemeyer. Much of it has been driven by Ridwan's clear commitment to development and to people and his visionary leadership of the needs of the school. As an individual, Ridwan has benefited enormously. He now has someone he can turn to and who is there to affirm and support him.

When we asked Louise what her most important learning was, she responded as follows: "My ability to influence in situations where I have no control or authority and my capacity to cope with ambiguity, complexity and 'not knowing'".

For Louise, being Ridwan's PfP was the most powerful leadership development experience she has been involved with – more impactful and more meaningful than doing an MBA or a Doctorate.

Madiba Day was a very important catalyst in building the sense of community and encouraging parental involvement. Ever since the event, Ridwan and the people at KPS have taken complete ownership of the idea and have been working on it tirelessly since they have committed to **change the story** at KPS (from parents not being involved to parents becoming key partners in the process).

Although it is very early to assess the longer-term efficacy of these early successes, it is clear there have already been differences made in the attitude of community members and for Ridwan and Louise. The challenge will be to maintain the momentum that was generated through Madiba Day and the various conversations that have taken place with parents.

"The reason I am on board is that I looked at the Dinokeng Scenario and the three options facing our country, the doom and gloom. We as citizens have to make a conscious decision to try to save this country and to build citizens...we want to get the literacy levels right and the numeracy, but in its essence, we want to build citizens, people who can hold their own, who can do with their hands and not become consumers...If we build citizens, then the future of this country will be secure."

Ridwan

