

Louise van Rhyn's EDUCATION REVOLUTION



For Louise van Rhyn, returning to South Africa meant changing negatives to positives. The object of her goal? Our schools, one principal at a time.

I meet social entrepreneur Louise van Rhyn at Cape Town International Airport. She is flustered but excited. Her eyes are shining. 'If we don't deal with the education crisis in South Africa, we will have no businesses and we will, as a country, soon be functionally illiterate,' says Louise, who has a UK doctorate in complex social change, and whose NGO, Symphonia, has just received the Blue Dart Global Corporate Social Responsibility Award for Social Entrepreneurship in Mumbai, India. 'Everyone wants to look at systems and policies, but large





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Claremont High School

scale change doesn't happen through systems and policies, but through small scale projects where knowledge is shared and used to unlock possibility.'

Louise is founder of Symphonia, an organisation dedicated to strengthening the fabric of South African society. 'One of the ways we do this is through our work in education – by bringing positive change to our struggling schools,' she says.

Built on the ethos of Benjamin and Rosamund Zander's book *The Art of Possibility*, Symphonia brings school principals and business leaders together in a co-learning and co-action partnership. Together they deal with one of the biggest challenges in our schools: parental and community engagement. Through these conversations, the schools concerned become centres of their communities.

'Principals are not just responsible for academic outcomes,' says Veronica Wantenaar, a learning process facilitator in Cape Town. 'They are responsible for leading change in their schools and communities and they need to be adequately supported.'

Business leaders have a lot of experience in the art and science of leading change,' says Louise. What Symphonia hopes to do is to bring this expertise into the education system where it's most needed – around the principal, who is the change agent.

A school is the centre of a community. In an overburdened and under-resourced sector, teachers, particularly the principals and staff leaders, need to learn from other principals and teachers. They need help from leaders in business. They need parents to care and to give what they can. They need all of this so that children can grow. This is where Symphonia's Partner for Possibility Leadership Development programme comes in. 'It's about walking together,' says Louise, 'instead of apart.'

Bringing together those who have a stake in education means bringing together a diverse network of people who all have a common concern – educating the future generation. And when there's diversity, there's challenge. But where there's challenge, there's growth – on all sides. The

schools gain and so do the business leaders, not just BEE and corporate social investment kudos.

'Business people get the life-changing chance to learn about real leadership,' says Louise. But it's not an easy lesson. 'You can't go in wanting to fix a situation, thinking that you know how to do it,' she says. 'That can be disrespectful. There's a whole training process for business partners, where we have to alter the way they think about what it means to be helpful. Often, the most helpful thing we can do is to just be available to listen.'

Louise's ideas about change and leadership are on target with trends at Harvard Business School – and she was recently invited to speak at global talk platform TEDxCape Town.

But she's learnt from her own experience; it took some time before she was trusted by the teachers at Kannemeyer Primary School in Grassy Park, Cape Town, where she partnered up with principal Ridwan Samodien to put her theory to the test. 'I needed to continue to follow

through on my promises and be willing to show up authentically to be accepted,' she says. 'All my trappings of achievement, the things I'd been conditioned to believe were important, were not. I even had to change the way I dressed. But through it all, I learnt that who I am is enough.'

Louise, once a high-flying exec in London, came upon the Zanders book while she was completing her doctorate there. 'They talked about how everybody talked about South Africa,' she says. 'It was like a living, breathing entity, a symphony of voices. Reading it made me realise that I wanted to return to facilitate Symphonia, a space where all the voices could be heard.'

'I had to contribute to strengthening the fabric of SA society,' she says. 'I have been very privileged; so it is my responsibility to give back.'

'The whole notion of building relationships and making a difference, of growing the personality in a way that is about giving rather than taking, are lessons that are built into the sharing process,' says Symphonia's Gauteng leadership facilitator, Raphael Sher.

For outsiders, it can be difficult to understand what it actually means to be a principal. 'They have pressure coming at them from the Department of Education, from the pupils, from the teachers and from the parents – often all at one time,' says Symphonia's Gauteng coordinator Michel Joffe. 'The idea is to help create a thinking environment, where they feel supported.'

'What I really learnt,' says Mavis Khosa, principal of Bovet Primary in Alexandra, Gauteng, 'is that Nick, my business partner from Hollard, is really passionate about education. That came as a shock to me; I thought we were all on our own, and they were on their own. Now we have this common passion.' Now Mavis has moved from doing only daily damage control, to having

More ground-breaking partnerships

'I am excited to come here every day,' says Tracy-Lee Euley, a pupil at the newly established Claremont High School (CHS) in Cape Town. CHS is one of three school start-ups in the Western Cape based on an already established successful school, in this case Westerford High School in Newlands. CHS, by partnering with Westerford, is taking the policies and approach of a leading school to build another that will educate children from poorer areas to enter tertiary studies.

At Claremont High School, principal Murray Gibbon says staff on both sides of the partnership with Westerford – and pupils too – are learning all the time. 'In the beginning, we had to close a lot of knowledge gaps, so we had to develop learning modules to address specific areas,' he says. 'We also use pupils at Westerford to teach. They provide skills and act as role models – and already a couple of our kids are challenging the top Westerford kids.' Murray says the key to their school is a hard but fair work ethic, and constant communication with Westerford.

'It's amazing how strong and resourceful young people can be,' says CHS teacher Mandy Moyce.

Murray agrees. 'When given the chance, it's amazing the possibility that can be unlocked in a learner.'

Claremont High School is taking in 100 new pupils each year, and Murray is hoping the department will roll out their blueprint for schooling all over the country.

John Gilmour at the Extraordinary Schools Coalition (SAESC), a network of state and private schools, as well as outside business people, agrees that there is strength in sharing. 'Our coalition is about lowering the barriers to collaboration in education,' he says. 'When we work together, our work gains traction and strength. We share policies and classroom space. We have an ongoing peer review process, and there's no shortage of people who want to be involved.'

The SAESC is working on extending their collaborations to over 26 schools by the end of next year, and developing, with the department of education, what John refers to as 'better public-private partnerships and a third tier of school, funded by the state but run independently'.

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a plan in place to find and conscript old students in helping the school, running a monthly sports day, and using Hollard's technical expertise to encourage parents to vote in the school's upcoming governing body elections.

'Our children's self-worth has grown exponentially since we have been part of the programme,' says Ridwan, principal of Kannemeyer Primary School. 'We now have systems in place ... so children grow and learn as human beings and become better citizens.'

The response from the Department of Education has been positive. And there are hopes that these new paradigms will catch on throughout the country. 'We currently have 47

principals on our programme in seven leadership circles,' says Louise. 'We hope to have 120 principals (and schools) on the programme by the end of 2012, and then we hope to add about 300 schools next year.'

But most importantly, despite huge obstacles, Louise says there is more hope in our schools than we realise. 'A measure of a school is whether the children have a sense of future,' says Louise. 'The teachers should be energised. I always ask: do the teachers have shining eyes?' ❖

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