

Citizens, Community and Education in South Africa – *with Louise van Rhyn*

How can citizens create a culture of collaboration, lead lives of contribution and become social architects of the communities they envision? Organizational Development guru and thought leader Peter Block says Louise van Rhyn has "the passion to restore high performance and humanity to our organizations and communities. She is a national treasure."

Moderator: Welcome to the Plexus Institute Podcast Archive of our popular Plexus call series. Plexus Institute fosters the help of individuals, families, communications and organization and our natural environment by helping people use concepts emerging from the science of complexity. Plexus calls are made possible through the general support of Plexus associates and donors. Visit plexusinstitute.org to sign up for our mailing list and to find out more about joining Plexus Institute.

Today's call features [Louise van Rhyn](#) who founded [Symphonia](#), a group of organizations committed to sustainable transformation in people, teams, companies, organizations, and communities, in 2008. She has a doctoral degree in organizational change, and 25 years experience as a change practitioner with focus on large scale change in complex social systems. Through [Symphonia for South Africa](#), a community focused- NPO, she is committed to mobilizing citizens to become actively involved addressing the educational crisis in South Africa. She initiated the innovative [School@theCentreofCommunity](#) leadership development process that creates an opportunity for business leaders and school principals to develop their leadership skills in co-learning partnerships. Louise has studied complex systems with Ralph Stacey and Patricia Shaw. Following is her conversation with [Lisa Kimball](#), Chair Plexus Institute Chair Learning Programs.

Moderator: Louise, the world economic forum ranking of South Africa's education system is 140th out of 144 and says it is ahead of only Yemen in math and science. Where do you start on an issue so vast and what are your first steps?

Louise van Rhyn: I think those of us who are interested in this world of complexity have an edge because we understand that we can start with one school at a time. It is fun that the education experts agree that the largest unit of change in education is a school. We've got 22,000 schools [in South Africa] that are now being identified as failing. Of the 27,000 schools in total, 22,000 of them are not the assets that we need - the children are not able to read and write properly and they're not able to progress to the next grade. That's a big problem. We could easily get very despondent about that problem or we could get excited because we can begin with one school at a time and eventually get to 22,000 schools which is what I am committed to do. Not by myself - but I am about citizens getting involved and working in these schools across the country.

Lisa Kimball: Which is really exciting! I was thrilled that I had a chance to visit Louise and go visit one of the schools and, meet a number of the people that have been involved and really see the experience for myself - the shining eyes and other pieces of evidence that we found that

things were really going on in a big way. And, as Louise has already said, one of the things that I think is a contribution of using the complexity lens is that we have the ability to be helpful and optimistic that it's possible to start tackling such an intractable problem. One of the reasons that I was particularly interested in Louise's program is that we share so many of the same challenges in Washington DC where I live as she is facing in South Africa. Of course they've had some different historic challenges that have created some of these problems but there's an amazing resonance between some of the challenges we face and what Louise was facing in South Africa and I was so impressed by some of the things that were happening there. So Louise, I'd love for you to start by sharing a little bit about yourself. I know you're from South Africa but you spent some time outside the country. How is it that you ended up back there and looking for ways to contribute?

Louise van Rhyn: We lived in the UK and had a fabulous professional life. We had a wonderful time living in the UK and being part of an International startup of a complexity unit. I did my doctorate with Ralph Stacey - it was just wonderful professionally. But then we also had a strong sense that after we had children we needed to live in South Africa where their roots are and with family and with sunshine. Our 2-year-old daughter became very depressed after a holiday in South Africa when we took her back to the UK in horrible weather. So we decided to come back to South Africa. When we did that, as a mother I was confronted with the responsibility of that choice because living in the UK meant that we had easy access to good schools and it would not have ever crossed my mind to get involved in education. It's not my field, it's not my background. But coming back, returning to South Africa and realizing that I'm choosing for my children to grow up in a country with an education system that's broken, badly broken, I couldn't just sit back and hope for someone else to fix it. I had a very strong sense that I was being called to bring my knowledge and skills and all the things that I had the privilege to learn while I was in the UK and all the things I learned working with Ralph [Stacey] and Patricia [Shaw] and the people the Complexity Center in Hertfordshire. I was being called to this issue and it's an amazing privilege to be confronted with such a large intractable problem where everybody's made a decision that nobody can do anything about it. And here I am and I'm a citizen and don't have any specific education expertise but I do have this knowledge about large systems change and that's such a privilege because now I can practice everything I've been tracking and thinking about and learning about.

Lisa Kimball: I'd love you to share a specific example of how the first school and the first principal you worked with gave you the insight that maybe that kind of partnership could be the focus of change.

Louise van Rhyn: So I was looking around. I knew I wanted to be involved in the answer somehow and that I wanted to help my democracy work and it needed to be in the space of social change. So I looked around and saw that we have big social issues that are interlinked – unemployment and poverty and health issues. When you put it altogether what's at the heart of all of these special issues is education. So the first day I realized I needed to focus my attention rather than trying work across everything. The question then was, "But what do we do in education?" I had a sense there was an opportunity. I asked myself, "What do we have lots of in South Africa in addition to having a beautiful country and lots of gold?" We have lots of amazing well-trained business leaders. Our business sector is strong. That's partly why we have

enormous inequality in our country. We have business sectors that work. We have a First World Business Sector but we have a social sector that's Third World. I have personally been involved in developing the leadership skills of some of the leaders in business. And my question was, "Could we do something with all these business leaders?" I'm one of those. I've had the opportunity to be trained as a leader. So my thinking was that if we could somehow create a partnership between people like me and our school principals- maybe there's something in there. And that was actually all I knew.

You're reminding me of some wonderful moments here. I had the privilege of participating when Peter Block came to South Africa to teach us about community building and the six conversations the build communities. One of the people who was at this community building session arranged to invite ten schools from their little district and we had about ten people from every school so they had 100 people in the room. Ten principals, ten janitors, ten teachers, ten learners, ten parents, ten people for every school and they designed a process based on the six conversations. It was an amazing day and, at the end of this day, one of the men stood up and he said. "You know, what we need in this country is someone who can help us to talk to each other. We have lots of people who work with principals and we have lots of people working with teachers and we have lots of people who work with parents but we need someone who can help us talk to each other. Today was so powerful. The principal at our table and the janitor realized that they've never had a conversation with each other."

I said WOW that would be wonderful! Wouldn't it be wonderful if every school could have this kind of process, every school could have a liberating structure experience to build community around that school? But then the question was, how do you make that happen across all these schools? I said well, what if we could train some leaders in these ideas of community building with six conversations and we could send them in to schools and get them to go and do stuff? I'm going to have to test that idea.

So I went to someone in the Education Department and said would you be help me to get some principals. He invited ten principals into a room and we had a conversation with them. We asked these principals what would it take, what would need to happen in such a process for you to want to be part of it? So they said three things which became design principles of the program. One is they said we don't want to be anybody's project. Don't come to this program with the idea that you're going to fix the principals because that's demeaning and none of us want to be fixed. The second thing is that we don't want to become the dumping ground for your own broken computers and stationery - don't come and dump stuff on us and then feel good about the fact that you've been dumping all this stuff on us. And thirdly, and this is the most critical, we the principals would be very interested in being part of something like this but we want to know that the business leaders who work with us would be willing to consider the possibility that they will learn from us as well.

So I said okay - we can try that, we can take that seriously. And I started to work with the first principal who put his hand up and said I'm up for this. His name is Ridwan Samodien and he's from Grassy Park Kannemeyer Primary School which is a community that I would typically never spend any time in. It's an under-resourced community so it's a different race group from what I am and in a different part of Cape Town and I would certainly never have spent any time

in Grassy Park and Kannemeyer Primary. Ridwan and I started on a journey in April 2010. It's now four years later and, over the last four years, we have explored this idea of cross-sector collaboration. He knows it is a respectful and reciprocal relationship and my life is definitely different and better and more fulfilled and more purposeful than it was before I started to work with Ridwan. And we've seen amazing changes and we can talk about the detail around that but that's how it all started- one school and one principal who said I'm up for doing this. Both of our willingness to say yes to a journey that we had no idea where it was going to lead. And both of us are incredibly pleased to now see that there are 155 of these partnerships around the country and it's miraculous in all these schools as people start to explore leading change within the school rather than waiting for some top-down instruction.

Lisa Kimball: So how did you get the next group of people like you to be that kind of partner, to be the kind of partner who was open to learning themselves as well as “helping” the principal the way we usually think of that we're coming in from the outside to help.

Louise van Rhyn: Yeah. We've redefined what helping looks like, so that's been the big learning for me. I thought I was going to help by coming into the school with all of this package of ideas. I discovered that my helpfulness comes from my willingness to witness and to be interested and to be present. I learned from Peter Block that the delivery vehicle of my expertise is my humanity. And that's been shown over and over, time and again. When I go into the schools, they have no interest in where I come from, what my heritage is, how many degrees I have, what car I drive. What the people in that school are interested in is will I show up and be present and be interested and will I treat them with respect? And will I keep my promises and will they like being in my presence? That's the real question because otherwise I wouldn't be invited back.

So how we then got the next group is that I noticed a few things. I noticed that once I got working with the principal, I'd speak to everybody I could talk to about it. I said, why don't you guys be a partner with a principal and we'll do wonderful things and let's do this? But it didn't work - they walked away and nothing actually happened. So Ridwan and my partnership was amazing and there were all these others that really didn't go anywhere. So we realized that we needed to create a better structure - a kind of guiding, a container, we needed to build a container for this. So we put some thoughts together and we designed a process for what we would do in this community of practice.

We will invite ten business leaders and ten principals to be a community of practice. We call them leadership circles and we will have facilitators. The other thing we have in abundance in South Africa is we have hundreds and thousands of trained coaches and facilitators. So we thought okay well, we can do that. We can obviously train coaches and facilitators to become what we call a learning process facilitator. And the job of the learning process facilitator is really just to make sure that the process runs well and they do a little bit of coaching and they support the process and the partnership.

Then we brought in some specific interventions. We realized that the wonderful thing that happened is that we asked everybody to bring your partner into your life. If you're a business leader and you do things, invite your principal partner into your life and just cross that boundary

in whatever way is feasible. So I happened to facilitate a sort of consulting workshop one day and Ridwan and I had a conversation where I said, why don't you come along, come and do these two days of consulting with me? And it was breathtaking the impact of these two days on the school. Principals had never been exposed to any of this type thinking. So we decided that we're going to make peer consulting part of our presence.

Then we decided that we're going to use the six conversations community methodology in another two-day process and in a third process, Nancy Kline will come talk about Time to Think. So we created a whole program that is three workshops delivered at certain times. So now four years later we have a very good sense about what we're asking the business leaders and the principals to do that when we started we didn't know. In addition, we just said go and make stuff happen at the school and come back every six weeks to the circle and tell us what you're doing. And we learned so much from that kind of just stepping into that place. Now we have a process that feels very robust because it was informed by actual experience of what's happening in the schools.

Lisa Kimball: There are so many things I love about this program. One of the really compelling things is this notion that the old hierarchy of the helpers and the help-ees has become a peer-to-peer situation where they learn from each other which is so much less paternalistic. I think another thing that I love is that in so many educational interventions, someone has a great idea, some package of a new way to do things where they think if only everyone would install this, that would be the silver bullet to fix things. Instead this idea was that at Ridwan's school, they may have one set of things that may turn out to be good to work on but at the school across town it may be something else entirely. So it's not just one new practice where there's going to be a change in curriculum or a change in how you engage parents or a change in any specific thing. Can you give some examples of some of the kinds of things that emerged in the different schools as a result of having these relationships?

Louise van Rhyn: Yeah in the school where Ridwan and I are working, one of the things that was a big challenge for the school and specifically for Ridwan and the teachers was the fact that the parents weren't really engaged and that there was pressure on the teachers and not enough of a partnership between parents and teachers. So we started a program called Community of Committed Parents. We don't have a teacher parent association. We don't have any of the traditional structures because we found that the traditional structures were constraining what might happen and what could happen because the roles and responsibilities have been predefined, etc. So we came up with this idea of a Community of Committed Parents and started to explore what that might shift and what does it mean to be part of a community of committed parents and how would you show up differently if you were a Community of Committed Parents and how would that community then deal with teachers? So that became our project for the first few years and now we've moved on to different projects.

In another school, the teacher, the principal is a hard core community leader, he has worked at kind of ground level. He's worked in some unbelievably difficult areas in South Africa. He and his business leader partner didn't want to start with the parents; he wanted to start with the community leaders in the whole community. That school is based in a suburb [of Cape Town] called Bishop Lavis. So they had a meeting, called together what they called the Bishop Lavis

Community Development Forum. This is the outcome of their third year of their project. Every community leader in all different sectors has become part of that - they have all committed to the vision of creating a Bishop Lavis as a town of possibility and that the children in Bishop Lavis will live lives of possibility. So year one of the program then became all about how did they mobilize the community to take initiative for their future rather than waiting for someone else to come and tell them what the future should be about.

The stories are amazing - but one of the challenges for us has become the funders and educational experts who want to be able to say how we monitor and evaluate these projects. So we have become quite firm with ourselves to say yes, it's incredibly emergent and we want people to work on what they want to work on. But we also want to have a view on what we think would enable us all for change. Because the other thing I want to say is that we've been clear we facilitate year one of the partnership but the expectation is that there will be such a strong relationship between the partner and the business leader after year one that they will continue to work together. When we track that, we can see it's very good. And the schools where the partnership has survived year one into year two and into year three, there is a lot more activity and a lot more things happening at that school. And so that's our key measure - the quality of the relationship between the business leader and the principal.

I'm very comfortable with ambiguity. But we realized that in my initial response when I didn't want to give any guidance to the partner and the business leader and I wanted to say go and make stuff happen, that this very open-ended instruction became almost disabling for some people. So now we've given some guidance. We are saying that we are expecting every partnership to work on four levels of change. We want the principal to become confident and energized to lead. Because most of the principals were in a place where they were saying, "I don't want to be working in education anymore" and they're looking for another job. The second outcome is the school management team. Now you have to know that in South Africa that our school principals, 90 percent of them- have never been equipped for their leadership role so they are being promoted from being teachers to deputy principals to principal without any additional leadership development training or any kind of preparation for that task. So when we start to have the conversations around the school management team, most of these principals go WOW I never knew that that's what I'm supposed to be doing, I never knew that a productive management team will actually make a difference to my life because it's just never been part of the conversation because the conversation has always been about all-around curriculum and delivery on curriculum. So the third thing we wanted them to work on is the engagement of the teachers because we realized that our teachers are disengaged because everybody's been on their case. They've been told how useless they are for the most part for a long period of time. And fourthly we are encouraging them to engage the parents. But that's a loose guidance. If the principal and the teachers decide that's not what's important in our school that's ok. We want to establish an efficient mode of communication. They are adults and they can decide what they work on. If they want the guidance then we can provide the guidance.

Lisa Kimball: So in a minute I'm going to see if there's some people out here on the call who would like to press 1 on their phone so that we know they'd like to make a comment or ask a question. But one more thing before that. I know you've got some good stories, Louise, about

some of the ways in which the business partners have grown or applied some of these ideas back in their own organizations or with themselves. Could you give us some examples of that?

Louise van Rhyn: So there are a few wonderful examples. One of the people who has influenced our thinking a lot is a woman named Nancy Kline who writes this magazine called Time to Think. Time to Think teaches us about being all around thinking partners to each other. So it's not about seeing anybody as a coach or a mentor with the traditional power relationship and that's implicit in that. We are peers and principals being partners to each other, thinking partners. The business leaders really genuinely know that they don't know about education and that part of the magic of the process is bringing together two people who have no knowledge of each other's world. So the business leaders come in, they really want to make a contribution, but they don't know how. We train them in a thinking process so they can grab that and run with it. So that they really push themselves to learn how to listen well and then they go home and they listen to their wives and their children in the same way. And their relationships change. The one guy said since I've become part of Partners for Possibility, I've learned to hug my 17-year-old son. And nothing will ever be the same as a result of that. Or another guy's HR manager said I had idea what you're doing with A*** but he's just such a nice guy now. He wasn't always. So the business leaders really have been really challenged by their own experience and they suddenly realize that their normal way of showing up in the world is to come with answers and give direction and give guidance. But in the school when they actually don't know what to give direction on and they hold back and they just remain quiet and the listen, amazing things happen. So then they go back to their own organization and they start to listen and hold back. Day-after-day I get the stories where the business leaders say you know, I never knew how much my team knew. I never knew how much I was constraining them from making the contribution that they can make by me being certain and then having so many ideas and you know, being so directional. So all the business leaders, when I ask them a question such as, "Have you learned more from the principal or has the principal learned from you?" There's always little argument because the principals are saying they learn more from the business leaders but the business leaders are very clear that they have learned much more from the principals than the principals could ever learn from them. And it's so counter to what they expect. Even though we tell them that that's what's going to happen, they still don't really believe it until they experience it.

Lisa Kimball: There's the additional social cultural environment in South Africa where, as I recall, it seemed like in a lot of these partnerships, the business partner, as you spoke about yourself, wouldn't have had much experience going to some of the places where these schools are located. Are there some things going on that are kind of at a meta level in terms of how these relationships may be ultimately having an impact on the social system?

Louise van Rhyn: Oh, absolutely. So you know, we have a history of apartheid and part of our history of apartheid is that there's a lot of fear so white people are often very fearful of black people. And so white people who live in Sandton which is the very rich plush area in Johannesburg would never go to Alexandra 'cause Alexandra is where the black people live and that's where the scary people are and if you're going to go in there then you're going to be killed and there's a whole story around it. So, what happens through this process is that we are creating an entry point so the white very posh Sandton leader will now get the opportunity to be partnered

with a black principal in Alexandra which is a scary black area. But because of the relationship, they will start to feel comfortable to go into the area.

When they start spending time in Alexandra, they suddenly start to realize that in Alexandra, things happen very differently. For example, in Alexandra when things are very difficult, people sing. And when you sing when things are really difficult it's a very different experience from when you shout at people. So the business leader has the ability to say, "That's interesting. When we have difficulty in our organization, we shout at people. But in Alexandra, when there's a difficulty in the school they start to sing and I love being in places where people sing." So we have a wonderful video of one of the business leaders who said, "When we all talked about the New South Africa when democracy came in '94, suddenly, those of us who have benefited from the old regime became uncertain around how to live in this new world because we were never prepared for that. But through this process, business leaders are rediscovering their sense of belonging to this country." And actually, they cross boundaries that they thought were impenetrable and when they cross that boundary, they discover the joy of our diversity. So I believe that business leaders in South Africa will be in high demand in the next few years because we are grappling with diversity in a way that probably no one else is and we are falling in love with diversity and we are enjoying it and embracing it - especially these business leaders 'cause we try to partner business leaders and principals across many boundaries, agenda, race, social standing, gender, age. We have young people and old people. When we cross these boundaries regularly, it creates a new opportunity to learn that's just not available anywhere else.

Lisa Kimball: That just gives me chills. It's so exciting.

Prucia Buscell: Louise, can you talk about the singing- that is so fabulous. Do people just sing spontaneously or do they have songs that they've learned or how does that work?

Louise van Rhyn: The first time this happened to me it was amazing. I was invited to speak at a conference where there were 1,000 school principals in an auditorium. And, you know, I have issues with auditoriums 'cause we can't do liberating structures in auditoriums and we should be on a flat structure, so I kind of sat there with all my preconceived ideas about how things should be and not be. One of the presenters had a problem on the stage with the computer and things were taking a little bit longer, and then one lonely voice, but a beautiful black African voice, a male voice started to sing. And within seconds, that entire auditorium felt like a concert hall as these 1,000 voices started to just sing and harmonize for about five or ten minutes. So that just kind of speaks to the process. So in the schools, depending on which culture would be the present culture, there will be songs that they would sing. A lot of it is kind of religious songs but it's just that people just sing and until you've experienced it you don't know. That's why people fall in love with this country when they come here. I come from a white Africans community where singing happens but it doesn't happen spontaneously and it doesn't happen so beautifully. If there was a world cup for singing and the people in the street could participate, South Africa would definitely win the cup. We have these voices that give expression. So, you know we have our challenges with our current president. It's President Zuma and I'm, I'm not going to get pulled into any kind of session about him 'cause I'm not a fan but he can sing. So when he gets on the stage and he's trying to motivate the South African community, he starts to sing and dance and two minutes later, we're all on the same page. So even our politicians know how to sing.

Sarah Ferguson: I work for the National Education Association. We represent teachers and I keep thinking as you're talking how could we replicate this or would it work if we did it with teachers? If we matched up teachers with people in community? What do you see, does it have applicability in that, in a larger setting like that, a wider setting? Would it be too hard?

Louise van Rhyn: No, no, absolutely. One of the things that I do believe is that the place to start is with the school principal, with the leader because what happened in South Africa, what's happened traditionally, is that there have been many interventions where the school leaders were kind of ignored. The idea was that we're going to do this intervention but we're going to do it despite the principal and then those principals just feel disempowered and they start to rebel against the intervention and the whole thing just has no legs.

Now Ridwan feels support and he knows he's got a buddy and now he has someone who's in his corner and we've got a few other citizens who also surround him so he's got a financial guy that's working with him and there's someone else that's helping with HR and, you know, these other people are involved so Ridwan feels absolutely confident and comfortable. So then the next point was how we support the teachers. One thing that came out of that conversation is that one of the things that the Community of Committed Parents wanted to take responsibility for is teacher support. So it kind of made a priority that every teacher has a support system of some kind that is designed by the parents who have children in that teacher's class. So they would have an agreement around who's going to help with covering the books and who is going to help with sorting, making sure that the classroom is as beautiful as it should be and who is going to be responsible for, at the end of year a teacher appreciation lunch to ensure that the teachers, are appreciated appropriately. Lisa will know 'cause she was at the first ever teacher appreciation luncheon we had at Kannemeyer Primary and this has now become an annual event. It's a big deal and, and teachers are appreciated at Kannemeyer Primary because that's the commitment from the Community of Committed Parents. So I do think that the school community can find their ways of supporting.

Now, you know, we have very active churches in South Africa –we have something like 56,000 churches and 22,000 schools, so I'm challenging every school, every church to say we want you as a church to surround the school with love and appreciation and support, and make sure that these teachers know on a weekly basis that they are loved and appreciated and do whatever you need to do to make that happen. If that means that in winter they're going to get a cup of hot, hot chocolate on a Monday morning or they're going to get a shower or they're going to do whatever it takes to support these teachers 'cause they're doing the most important task for the future of our country. We're not where we want to be with that conversation yet but we're working hard to mobilize everybody.

So and the other thing, Sarah, is this, which is a bit interesting. Recently, I had the opportunity to tell the story about Partners for Possibility at an event where there were I think 75 different countries represented and people came and had conversations with me afterwards and almost every country said, you know what, this would work so well for us if we could somehow use it. So we were excited that, ten years from now, we will have partnerships for possibility across the

country, across the globe and hopefully we'll have some in Washington D.C. and in other parts of the, of the U.S. and across the world.

Lisa Kimball: And t, Sarah, you know I know where you live so we'll be conspiring to see what we can do in Washington D.C. So say a little bit more, Louise, about the notion of schools at the center of community because that's another thing that resonates very much with me in my area and I think is an important way of thinking about the school as not just being inside its own walls as part of your program.

Louise van Rhyn: It's interesting how School at the Center of the Community is just a thought that really has resonated with everybody. Because of our history we've had many calls to active citizenship over the last, few years where people are being asked to do it in honor of Mandela or do it to help make the national development plan work. People then kind of stand around wondering, what'll I do? How do I get involved? Where is the opportunity? But every community has one or two or many schools who are waiting to be used as a catalyst, as an attractor. It's a hub, it's a venue. We all care about the future of these children so when the principals first heard the idea "School as the Center of Community" they started to use that as a way of describing their role. So they said, "My role is to be the convener of the community and, we want to make the school the center of community because we know that if we can have community mobilized around the school, then the school will have a better chance of being successful." For example, we have a very big issue in some of our schools with schools being vandalized over the school holidays or weekends and, since we've started this idea of school at the center of the community, the communities have said, "This facility belongs to us as a community and therefore we, as a community, are going to make sure that we look after this community facility." So we don't have those issues in the schools where the communities have really been mobilized around the school. I mean I can say a lot more but it's interesting how a term can galvanize people's imagination and that's been one of the terms that has just had a really big impact on people's sense of possibility.

We've also had another idea that's been very, very important for us in this whole project. That is to shift the conversation from deficiency to possibility because the conversation typically in these under resourced communities is how bad things are and how nothing will happen. So the conversation shifted from deficiency to gifts. What are the gifts that you can bring – whether you are a teacher, a school, a principal, a parent. For example a parent will come to a principal and complain about the fact that they don't have money to pay the school fees 'cause most of these schools have a very small expectation of contribution from parents. So they'll come and complain why they couldn't pay the school fee 'cause they don't have money and now the first response from the principal will be, "But what CAN you do?" and they'll say, "Well, I can paint." And he says, "That's fabulous, so come and paint because we need the walls to be painted and that's much more valuable to us than whatever contribution you were going to be making monetary wise. Or would you be able to come and help us man the telephones once a week or can you become a classroom or teacher's assistant in the classroom where your school, your child is?" So there have been these amazing opportunities of people from the community to realize that they have a contribution to make. We have a wonderful story about Veronica. Veronica is a 65-year-old grandmother and she's in the situation where we have many grandmothers, grandparents in South Africa who look after their grandchildren because the

parents have died as a result of AIDS. Veronica can't read or couldn't read, so she came to Kannemeyer Primary and said to the Grade 1 teacher that she feels so out of place because we send all these newsletters home and she can't read it and she was complaining. So the teacher said, "Well, Veronica, I know you have such an amazing gift with children and the children so love being in your presence. Why don't you come be my classroom assistant and in return for that, I'll teach you how to read?" Now, three years later, Veronica is not willing to be promoted to Grade 2 because she loves being in Grade 1. Her whole identity has changed. She's now no longer Veronica who can't read, she's Veronica who's a very proud classroom assistant in Grade 1 and she reads very well.

Lisa Kimball: Wow. So tell us a little bit about what your hope is for where this program might go. You said you were at 155 schools or partnerships now. What's the next plateau, the next goal?

Louise van Rhyn: We have 155 partnerships right now. Some of them have been running for three years, some only started last October so they're in different phases of the whole process. We don't want any of these partnerships to come to an end until the schools have really excelled. When I have conversations with people and I ask, "Where are you with your relationships?" they'll all go, "I'm not leaving the school and I'm not leaving this partner and he's my buddy for life." So we love to say we've been promoted from partners for possibility to buddies for life. So firstly, our wish or hope is that in every one of the schools where we're working those business leaders will mobilize their own communities to get involved in the schools. So, for example, when I saw it at Kannemeyer Primary that there wasn't anybody who could help with finances, I realized that I happen to know someone who could help with finances. Now the next question is what are we going to do because the Grade 3 mathematics isn't at the level we want it to be? So I'm going to be looking very hard to see who are the real experts in Grade 3 mathematics who could potentially come and help with that? So that's the hope in the schools where we're currently working.

In 2014, we are hoping to add another 300 schools to the whole process and we will be expanding into quite a few new geographical areas. Partly what makes this project so fabulous is the fact that it's easy to expand into new areas because the process is so replicable. It's easy to launch a circle in Washington D.C. tomorrow because we know how to do that now. Hopefully in 2015 that number will go from a total of 450 to far more than 1,000 and we want in the next five years to get to at least 2,000 schools so that will be 10 percent of the total system of schools where there is a need.

We also are noticing how our activity in these schools is having an impact on the national conversation and those of you who may follow me on Twitter will know that there is a lot of activity around this at the moment in South Africa. We are watching with a lot of interest the social media effect of these conversations because a year ago there wasn't a national conversation around the importance of leadership development for principals. That's shifted. That definitely has shifted. So the idea of businesses leaders being involved with schools was a way-out idea a year ago and now, finally, people are saying actually, you're right, look at the possible benefits here. We've been complaining about the gap between industry and education and increasingly

now, we have these business leaders who have been living in education, spending time with principals who can speak knowledgeably about their experience.

Our hope is that, in the next two years, we will be really able to get our systems and processes and organization in place so that we can roll out across Africa and then maybe we can start to expand into other parts of the world and have a larger community. Our challenge, unfortunately, is that at the moment funding requires people working incredibly hard and so we are hoping to find a funder somewhere who can help us to just fund some of the kind of organizational costs that are associated with a project like this. That's our hope for 2014 -that a lot of those things we've been hoping to get to will fall in place this year.

Lisa Kimball: Another question that I think would be interesting to riff on is how the principals and the business leaders are funded to get this training and to participate?

Louise van Rhyn: So initially, the idea was that business leaders would be funding the participation of the principals and their own participation as part of either corporate, social, investment or leadership development. We had a figure, it was 38,000 rand, which is about \$3,500 (US) per partnership. But when we started to add up all the costs associated with a project like this - all of the stakeholder engagement and engagement with the department, we realized that we were completely underestimating the real cost associated with it. We were also confusing the potential funders because they couldn't know whether we were asking them to sponsor a school improvement project or a leadership development program. Now, we've become very clear about it. We are charging the cost for every participant to be involved in this project is 30,000 rand per person so that's about \$2,750 (US) per school principal and the same per business leader and suddenly it's really easy for people to get this. The businesses who want to sponsor their own leaders to do this program are sponsoring a leadership development program for the business leaders and they are paying per person for that. In the situation where they also want to sponsor the principal as well, they may choose to do that through the Corporate Social Investment budget. So for the people who look after the leadership development project it's very clear that they are looking to this program rather than to the traditional business school programs for leadership development for their business leaders and the fact that the business leader will be contributing to social change or to educational change is not their issue. And then the Corporate Social Investment people or the other funders and foundations and trusts who are interested in supporting school principals contribute to the cost of the principal doing the program.

Lisa Kimball: One of the challenges we have in Plexus with a lot of what we do and I know that you have as well is the whole challenge of measurement and evaluation because you need to be able to say something about how you know that what you're doing is valuable. Can you say a little bit about how you're thinking about that?

Louise van Rhyn: That's probably the most difficult part of it because we are clearly competing for funding with other programs that have a very clear outcome – such as an afterschool mathematics program. This was the academic results at the beginning of the year and at end of the year after this program these are the new academic results. It's very easy, it's numbers. Our program is creating the environment for sustainable change and it is not so easy to say how you

measure that environment. Anecdotally, there are all the indicators in the world to show that the schools are in a better place as a result of this program. There is more energy, there is more joy, there are more shining eyes at that school at the end of the year or two years that they've been part of the program. The principals feel more equipped to lead. There are more indicators of community engagements and parental engagement etc. But we're also learning to just wait. Two or three years after joining this program we start to see the impact on the academic results too. There's already an upward trend in all of our schools of academic outcomes. We're noticing and watching that with interest and we're saying that's exactly what we expected. But we're not claiming that it is a direct result of our program . But if anybody has any brilliant ideas about how we can do those differently, we'd be very interested to hear from them.

We in South Africa tend to have a much, much more cautious funding community and they're not always so forward thinking as my fantasy for funding community in the U.S. This project is, is so way off, it's so on the edge that most funders find it kind of scary which is why it's so important for us to capture the impact and tell the story and shout from the rooftops because it challenges all the assumptions that are around about what should be done.

Lisa Kimball: We're almost at the top of our hour but I want to say a couple things. One is that, I've been co-conspiring with Louise to try and get some more documentation of the story of this program. We've been working on some writing and maybe some documentary video to capture it because, of course, there's nothing like seeing a program in action to really see its power.

I think, Louise, it's hard to see when you're in the middle of it how important and really game changing what you've been doing is - not only for the direct results in South Africa but I'm absolutely sure it's going to have a big impact on people's thinking about the problem, particularly in urban education. In fact, in all places where highly un-resourced or under resourced community schools are struggling yet where there is so much potential and possibility for how they could be the thing that starts to turn the ship of all those other problems that you mentioned at the beginning - of economics and social unrest and all kinds of other things. So I want to thank you not only for spending this hour with us today but for everything that you're doing as a change agent and, particularly, as a fellow traveler trying to do this within the context of the complexity lens. So thank you very much!