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Khulani Nande – Grow More

By Carol Gorelick

Introduction

Settled into our airplane seats on the long flight from JFK to East London South Africa, in October 2007, Al Witten and I began the conversation that launched the ABC Connects project, a four-year school community improvement programme. In this project we see a school as a community hub that brings together many partners to offer a range of support and opportunities for children, youth, families, and the larger community.

The ABC Connects' goal is for the school principal and staff to engage with parents and other education stakeholders in a community to address the challenges of poverty, improve teaching and learning, and to support students' well-being and development transforming schools into vibrant centres of community life.

The purpose of this trip was to initiate conversations with two school principals about an action research project: Building Communities: Strengthening Schools.

Background

Al Witten, a former principal, in Lavender Hills Primary a township school,¹ in Cape Town South Africa, transformed the school by involving the entire community in creating jobs and eliminating crime. The successful programme expanded to 100 Cape Town schools and led to Al developing 'The School-Based Community Learning Framework', as a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

¹ Township – forced settlements created during apartheid. The Democratic Elections in 1994 legally integrated schools.

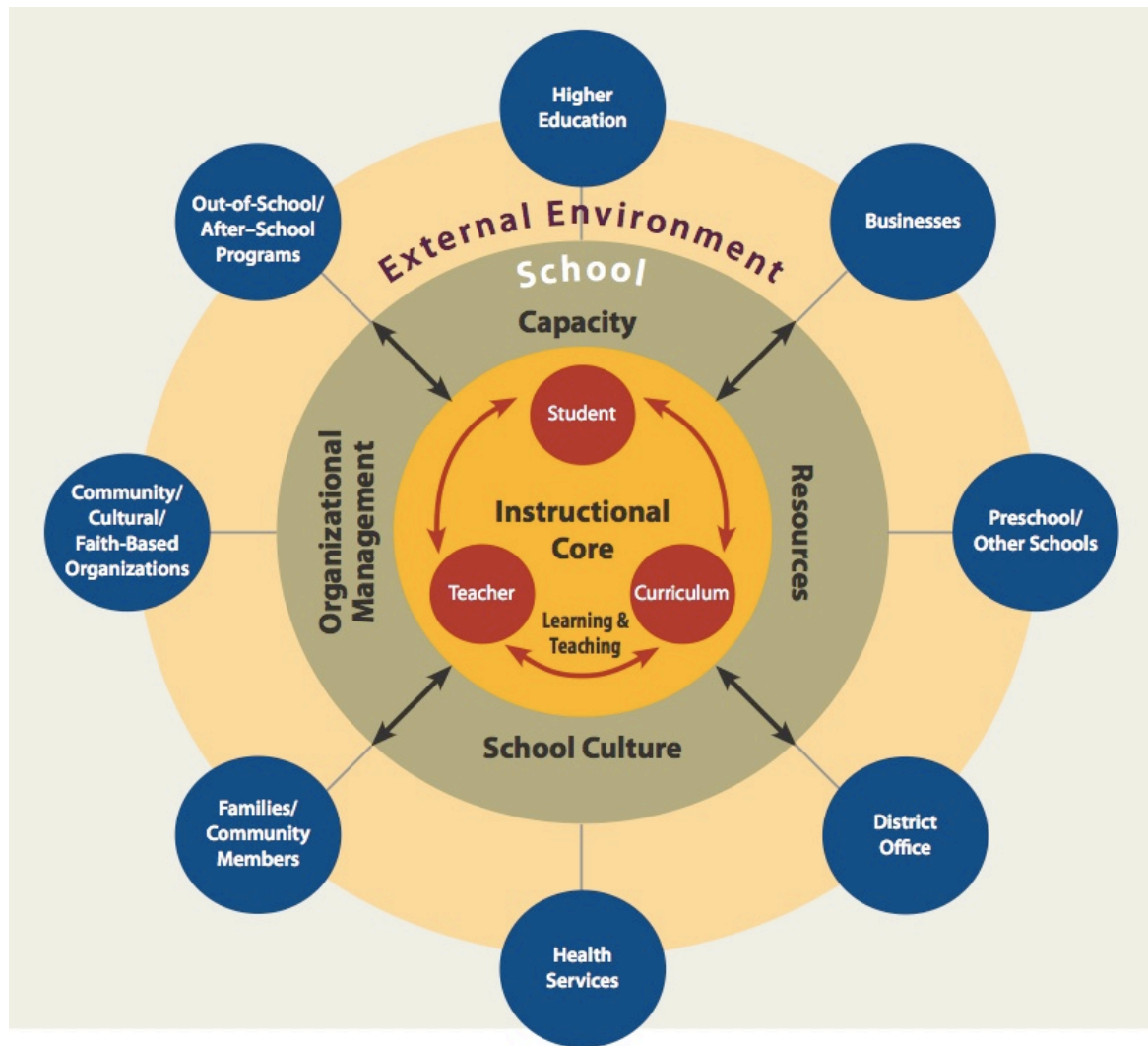


Figure 1 School Based Community Learning Framework

When Al and I met, through a Society for Organizational Learning colleague, we knew we had to work together 'on the ground'. For me it was about collaborative learning for social impact. For Al it was testing and validating his framework to improve schools and communities, ultimately at the national level in South Africa. We were both committed to 'nurturing the whole child through school communities'.

The opportunity came when we received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to implement the programme in an under-resourced school in South Africa and one in the US. In this article, I am focusing on the experience in South Africa.

South Africa – The Beginning

After visiting several schools, Al selected Pefferville Primary and Willow Park Primary as potential sites. Our assumption was that a principal's fundamental objective is to improve teaching and learning within the school. The reality in East London made it impossible for a principal to meet this objective without involving a broad range of stakeholders in the community.

The current situation included children coming to school hungry and living long distances from the school without dependable transportation; unemployment; unstable families (single mothers, grandmothers acting as mothers and fathers, alcoholism, abuse etc.); no electricity (how can children do homework at night without light?); parents with low literacy levels or who spoke isiXhosa but had chosen English as the language of instruction for their children; and teachers who neither spoke the indigenous language nor were trained to teach English as a second language.

Pefferville was representative of a post-apartheid township school. It is located in an urban area of East London which had been classified as 'coloured' under the apartheid regime. The principal and core staff had been at Pefferville since it was built in 1973 as a temporary school. For more than a decade there had been a steady decline due to a flood, poverty and violence.

Willow Park was very different. Prior to the democratic elections it was a Model C school (exclusively white). Post apartheid, it became predominantly African (80%) with some white and coloured students. Most of the students came from communities with high unemployment and poverty stricken informal settlements very far from the school. After the democratic elections, Mr Peet Swanepoehl, a white former government employee, became a teacher and then principal. At the time of his appointment the school was in disrepair and without parent involvement. He initiated significant change, involving community stakeholders.

Both schools met our selection criteria so we decided to keep both, certain that we could find funding and resources to create a community of practice for Pefferville and Willow Park to support each other.

Our first action was to meet separately with the principals, followed by a meeting with the teachers to assess their interest and willingness to participate. If the teachers responded positively the plan was to quickly facilitate brainstorming the desired outcomes with each school.

Pefferville Primary School

Approaching Pefferville Primary, I was surprised at the pleasant scene, a series of low buildings, surrounded by grass. The school itself was in a dismal situation due to a major flood almost a decade earlier. There was extensive infrastructure damage, part of the roof was missing, and there were no boys' toilets. To enter the school grounds you had to cross a 'stream' that was filled with trash. Crime was rampant. Teachers were demoralised. The principal, Mr Devraj Naidoo was cautiously optimistic about the project, saying 'If you want to change South Africa, you start here'. Before the meeting with the teachers we toured the school. Orderly classes had 60 children with one teacher, antiquated equipment (no computers, no microscopes). The bright spot was a library, which was built and supported by Room to Read, an international NGO.



Figure 2 Pefferville Entrance Before Renovation

Mr Naidoo introduced us by saying that he thought we represented an opportunity for the school to be 'uplifted'. He asked the teachers to decide if they wanted to participate in the ABC Connects programme. We introduced the School-Based Community Learning Framework and our approach. We wanted to work with the broad Pefferville community to determine their needs and wants to improve the lives of their children. Together we would create a plan to address their highest priorities using organisational learning methods and tools.

By the end of the meeting teachers expressed interest and cautious enthusiasm. Cathy Lessing an outspoken, experienced teacher said that ABC Connects was a gift the school needed. As the teacher representative to the School Governing Body (SGB) she committed her support and offered to invite parent members of the SGB to a visioning session the next day.

Pefferville Visioning

The teaching staff and six parents assembled. We started with a check-in to hear everyone's voice, asking each person to state their name and to answer in a word: 'How do you feel coming into this meeting?' At first there was silence, then Cathy began: *Excited*. Several people were sceptical or shy, a few passed. After an introduction to our purpose and the framework, everyone was asked to write a dream for Pefferville on an index card. Groups of 2-3 transferred dreams to post-its. Examples were: a brand new brick building; a fully equipped library with a programme to enhance literacy; a commitment to change; a computer room; a pool. One statement spoke to everyone:

To strive to make the community more aware of their roles, rights and responsibilities regarding the education of their children at home and at school.



Figure 3 The Vision Wall

The highest priorities were: infrastructure improvements; a fully functional library; a feeding scheme to provide a meal for each child each day. By the end of the meeting the group selected two doable projects:

- library and media centre to improve literacy levels
- refurbishment of flood damage and polluted stream clean-up

We followed the same process at Willow Park.

Willow Park Primary School



Figure 4 Entrance To Willow Park

Arriving at Willow Park we saw a modest and inviting school building, with at least 100 white vans on the perimeter of the school grounds. We entered a cheerful hallway filled with pictures of school activities, student art work and sports trophies. The principal, Mr Peet Swanepoel, told us stories of his beginnings in the school: paint was peeling off the walls, gates were hanging...it made a bad impression. He received a donation of pink paint which he used reluctantly – the school remained pink for several years. To accomplish the

renovations, he bartered with parents who had building skills in return for no school fees.² He then entered into a relationship with The East London Youth and Child Care Centre, a nearby NGO for homeless children. Fifteen, mostly special needs, children from the Centre attended Willow Park and the Child and Youth Care Liaison Officer was based at the school to provide psychological as well as educational support. A nearby farmer became a 'friend/partner of Willow Park' paying school fees for 20 of his employees' children and providing food together with other neighbours for the students. Peet demonstrated entrepreneurial skills when he contracted to park trucks on school property before they were shipped to buyers. For several years, this generated significant funds that were used to improve the school.

Listening to these stories it was clear that Mr Swanepoel understood the concept of a community school. He was willing to gather the teachers for a meeting but clearly stated HIS priorities. When we described the framework and our plan, most of the people immediately came on-board and agreed to attend the visioning session and to invite parents, members of the School Governing Board (SGB) and the Board Chairman of the East London Youth and Child Care Centre.

Willow Park Visioning

After the introduction, the dream exercise went quickly and the highest priorities were: more parent involvement; a feeding scheme so every child got one meal a day; a library; more access to sporting opportunities through a bus; staff development.

By the end of the meeting the group had selected two doable projects:

- start-up an organic vegetable, fruit and herb garden
- obtain a school bus for transport to sport and cultural activities

Creating An Infrastructure For Collaboration: The Projects Began

Before we left East London we asked Pat Goosen, a retired principal from an East London Primary school to join the ABC Connects team as the local project manager and to use his video and photography skills to visually document the project. He also facilitated the installation of equipment needed for ongoing communication His network and relationships, were invaluable to the success of ABC Connects.

ABC Connects was launched and we were ready to invite willing partners and stakeholders who could contribute resources: expertise, relationships, products, and funds. Stakeholders included parents, teachers, community members, NGO's, churches and government entities etc. We were committed to co-creating the next steps with stakeholders and partners, building internal capacity and capturing learnings throughout what became a four-year process.

² All South African public schools require parents to pay school fees based on the classification of the school. Both Pefferville and Willow Park were at the lowest level of school fees but many parents still could not pay.

The First Offsite – Launching A Community Of Practice

The first Bosbeerad³ was held at a beach resort, 90 minutes from town. The principals and all the teachers and members of the school governing bodies were invited as well as local partners (60 to 70 people). Several participants had never been to a hotel or beach before. The primary purpose was to build capacity in each school and to create a learning community between the schools. The goal was to encourage cooperation, collaboration and learning for individuals, each school and the communities.

The three-day event met the goal for each school: to develop a collective vision in a way that was safe, open, fun and included representatives from the whole community.

Pefferville's Vision Statement

We at Pefferville School strive to provide the learners with knowledge and skills, and a sound value system to enable them to reach their full potential and to enable them to take their rightful place in society.

We hope to change the mindset of parents regarding their responsibility towards their children and development of the school while building partnerships with all the other stakeholders involved in education.

Willow Park's Vision Statement

Khulani Nande – Grow More

To develop the children holistically, emotionally, spiritually, physically to be able to fulfil their role in our country as responsible citizens.

To be able to cope with their own challenges, educationally, now at home and later in life.

Bosberaad participants submitted positive feedback e.g. '...I left feeling enriched emotionally and spiritually. The commitment of everyone and the positive atmosphere in tackling the challenges and projects awaiting us left me feeling capable to aspire to do the best I can for my loved ones and in my workplace.'

It also was the beginning of a Pefferville, Willow Park community of practice. One participant wrote 'It was a great experience to share with the other school. We have gained a lot. I wish it could be our annual meeting'.⁴ Another said: 'You could place more people in one Cabana ...mix teachers from the other school with us so we know them better.'

³ Bosberaad is a South African term for a bush meeting-a strategy meeting held outdoors, for example in a game reserve. We saw it as an 'offsite'.

⁴ For two subsequent years we hosted and designed Bosberaads in January.

Pefferville's Projects

The first major project supported by parents, local church members, local businesses, faculty and staff renovated the dilapidated school building into a functional community centre. Less than a year after the first meeting invitations to another meeting were sent to all parents. A few minutes before the meeting was to begin, the room was empty. We had a momentary fear that no one would show up. Within 10 minutes there was standing room only; parents came and brought babies. The meeting was led in all three languages (isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English) and information was given about what had been accomplished and what was possible/planned. By the end of the meeting, over 70 percent of those present had volunteered for gardening, painting, feeding schemes etc.

Alicia Theron, a 2nd grade teacher in Pefferville, describes her experience as a long-term teacher at Pefferville in this video. She is representative of the committed teachers.

http://www.abconnects.org/news-and-media#!_news-and-media/alicia-theron

Timing and networking led to the biggest measurable success of the ABC programme. Pefferville was recommended to become the East London community, and Pefferville Primary School the centre for operations for the KWANDA project run by The Soul City Institute.

KWANDA⁵ was an initiative to mobilise local people to 'uplift' (look better, feel better and work better) their communities. Soul City contracted with SABC, a national TV network to create a reality show to document the KWANDA initiative that encouraged local job creation to reduce poverty and improve the community.

KWANDA was designed as a competition between South African communities from five provinces. The programme included skills training, at a 4-week rural Learning Camp. Altogether 100 people from the Pefferville community were selected to participate and were trained in gardening, building, starting businesses etc. The programme provided a small amount of money for applied projects when people returned from the Learning Camp, as well as coaching support. Each of the communities was the subject of 2 segments of the weekly reality TV show. During the final week the whole country voted for the winning community.

For Pefferville, the project created a working control centre from an unused and flood damaged room, installed security and equipment (an alarm system, computers, printers, a photocopier), and hired a security guard at night to protect the control centre (and school). All the equipment remained at the end of the project as a computer facility for staff at the school.

⁵ An article describing the Kwanda project in detail can be accessed at http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/362_ramafoko_andersson_weiner.pdf

By the time the Kwanda project team left Pefferville, there was a sense of pride at the school and in the community. The entire community had been cleaned and flowers planted. Crime was effectively eliminated. Children were fed daily through an expanded scheme; vegetable gardens on school grounds contributed to the feeding scheme. A screen-printing business was started by people who attended the Kwanda Learning Camp. A total of 2,500 local jobs were created through the Kwanda experience.

Willow Park Projects

ABC provided funds that helped Willow Park buy a used bus so that children could participate in more sports and cultural events. This contributed to Willow Park's being a major contender in netball and soccer within the province.

Willow Park also wanted a library to improve literacy. With Pat Goosen's assistance, the principal acquired a donated mobile library and created a reading programme for all grades, a major improvement in teaching and learning.

The school secretary was instrumental in having a mobile kitchen donated with on-going food deliveries, which provided a daily meal for each student. This was recognised as a primary contribution to each child's ability to learn.

Pefferville And Willow Park Launch

THE 'LAUNCH' – 1,000 Stakeholders and Partners Under a Tent

A milestone for Pefferville and Willow Park was the March 2009 Launch (Celebration) of the ABC Connects Program sponsored by PetroSA, the primary South African financial contributor.



Figure 5 The Launch

Speakers included the Deputy District Director from the Department of Education, A senior executive from PetroSA, as well as members of the school communities and the project.

Classes from both schools sang, recited poems in isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English, and danced. The pride and joy was palpable.



Figure 6 ABC Connects Song and Dance

A speech given by Akona Sokutu, a ninth grader at Willow Park, was touching evidence that we had planted the seeds to fulfil our objective of ‘nurturing the whole child through school communities’. Akona ended his talk saying: ‘We as children have power to change the world. Learn as much as you can. Be somebody in life. Try to change the world’.⁶

The Last Bosberaad – January 2010

The third offsite event took place on the beach in East London to develop a plan for each school to take forward and to launch a formal on-going community of practice. It ended with a braai (barbeque) for participants and their families. It was a productive and joyous event. Both schools celebrated their success, recognising how far they had come and left with a plan to continue the work and to support each other as a community of practice. A senior teacher, who had been at Pefferville Primary since it began, introduced her daughter and grandchildren to me, telling the beaming grandchildren that Pefferville had once again become a source of community pride.

Programme Results Overview

The programme began in 2007 and ended with external evaluations in 2011⁷. The goal of improving schools at risk by inviting the community in, rather than building electric fences to keep people out had been met. The schools were seen as an asset to each community, connecting parents and youth, alumni and community members. The approach and results varied at each school.

A first step at Pefferville was to create conditions that support teaching and learning. The external evaluator commented that ‘all around the school, scrub has been cleared and the

⁶ Akona Sokuto’s full speech http://www.abccconnects.org/news-and-media#!_news-and-media/akona-speech

⁷ “It Takes a School To Raise A Village” describing the project was published in *Reflections*, The Society for Organizational Learning Journal
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5trfye99nOoQURBY1hZSTFwRmc/view?usp=sharing>

grounds are clean, clear of papers and plastic. No one, learner or drug user, can lurk in the bushes because the bushes are no longer there. The school is fenced now, and a member of the community guards the gate in a friendly but watchful way.

The school buildings are still old and prefabricated, in need of repair. But they are well kept and tidy. The gardens in the central courtyard are now thriving vegetable patches maintained by the community, and the vegetables look good enough to eat. This means that you see members of the community constantly at work in the school. 'A student said "Now we feel safe...our school is clean".

In addition to the external changes, the evaluator noted substantive changes within the school culture. She saw Pefferville as 'a school located in desperately disadvantaged circumstances but nevertheless alive with a spirit of determination to run a safe, well-ordered institution. For the many who have worked so hard to achieve this, it must be a source of immense pride and fulfilment.'

Willow Park was already functioning with a strong leader involving the community, when ABC Connects arrived. It was an opportunity to join forces to continue the journey of transformation at the school. According to the evaluator, the principal said: '*...I looked positively at ABC as I do at every project. It was focused mainly on management assistance...I can always learn...but some of the staff were against it. If the school can benefit and I can...what a pleasure...*' He had understood that the focus was not on financial assistance, and that it was also aimed at reaching out to the community. The project wanted to support the school in implementing its own projects.

Since the school had regular staff meetings, as well as meetings with stakeholders Peet saw the management training as '*... a couple of nice planning sessions. The bosberaads were motivational. We looked at things collectively and it was more relaxed so we opened up....we grew closer together; I got to know them [the staff] differently.*'

The staff are aware that they now have more voice at meetings; they feel they are included in planning, and that there are more meetings. They all mention the team building at the bosberaads, and the approach of the project team as having had an effect on their own confidence in taking part in meetings. One staff member said '*I learnt that it was about team building as staff...I think it has had an impact on management...to me there is a difference. ...If there is a problem with a child they [a teacher] will go first to the Head of Department (HOD) before the Principal... before if you had a problem you didn't discuss it, you kept quiet....now we talk together.*'

In parallel ABC Connects had tried to run the same type of programme in two Detroit schools though with little success. In South Africa there were more local resources (people, organisations, products and funds) available than in the schools in Detroit. A critical success factor was, Pat Goosen, the local project manager, a resident and former principal in one of the school communities.

In Detroit there was less support from the schools themselves and much less involvement of local stakeholders, including parents. The bureaucratic pressures and local priorities in the city impeded the adoption of the programme and involvement of additional stakeholders.

After the end of the project, the work continued in East London. In Pefferville, the principal retired on disability and was later replaced by a deputy principal from a local school. The work continued due to the commitment of teachers and staff though it lost some momentum during the transition to the new principal. Willow Park's Principal who was already involving the community when ABC Connects arrived was able to continue the work with a more enthusiastic and skilled staff. Ultimately he was appointed Principal of a newly renovated rural school and took his experience and learnings with him.

Sobering final words from the external evaluator are a reminder that school-based community learning through active stakeholder participation can build communities and strengthen schools. 'I am one of many who claim that if you do not help to heal a very ill community, the children who come from it cannot focus on their educational goals.'

Author

Dr Carol Gorelick is a facilitative leader of systemic change. As co-founder and Executive Director of [ABC Connects](#), she is working to develop community partnerships. Having worked in large global companies, leading a consultancy and NGO, and taught at Pace University in New York City and the University of Cape Town, Carol bridges the worlds of practice, capacity building, and research.