

Executive Summary

Independent evaluation of Symphonia for South Africa's Partners for Possibility Programme

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Background to study

Partners for Possibility is a programme that enables co-learning and co-action partnerships between school principals of under-resourced schools and business leaders.

Through this formal programme, which is explained in more detail at the end of this summary, business leaders and school principals join in a formally managed partnership programme designed to improve both partners' leadership skills and address the unique challenges facing each school.

Since forming the first partnership in 2010, Partners for Possibility (PfP) has been scaled rapidly across South Africa, growing to over 430 schools by the date of the publication of this research in June 2016. During the first five years, the programme has also expanded its reach to include the Western and Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, gaining both local and international recognition from organisations such as the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, the global WISE Awards, HR.com and Unashamedly Ethical.

Amid the recognition, PfP realised the importance of an external evaluation and independent validation of the programme and its effectiveness. This was made possible by the D.G. Murray Trust, which committed funding for the study and commissioned Dr Andrew Hartnack of the Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation to conduct the research. Dr Hartnack was supported by Mr Anthony Muteti, a researcher at the same foundation.

As part of the study, the research team conducted an in-depth review of 20 schools that had participated in the programme. These schools were chosen by the researchers based on a number of selection criteria. In addition, the researchers evaluated data on 288 schools that had completed the PfP process by May 2016 to gain a broad a perspective of the programme's achievements and dynamics to date.

Highlights from the study

The in-depth evaluation of the 20 schools found that participation in the PfP programme had been overwhelmingly positive for principals and their schools. These 20 schools were measured on leadership impact, the success of the partnership in working together and addressing the challenges facing each school in the first year, and on the existence of a successful on-going partnership after the formal programme ended. The study also evaluated beneficial spin-offs to the school in the form of improved educational outcomes, community and parent involvement and school direction, and whether the PfP values remained apparent at the school after the partnership had run its course.

The study also found that most participating schools in the wider cohort of PfP schools that had completed the programme had benefitted. Of the 288 partnerships for whom tracking data was available, 84% had completed the formal, year-long PfP programme successfully and 88% of successfully participating schools found the programme beneficial.

It was also found that of the most successful partnerships, 68% (196 schools) continued their partnership for a second year beyond the formal intervention by PfP and 63% of partnerships completed three years together. The success of the programme in the majority of schools, as well as in the sample of 20 schools, points to a sound theory of change and a successfully implemented programme.

Methodology

At the core of the study is an in-depth qualitative analysis of 20 schools that have participated in the Partners for Possibility programme. These schools were selected by the researchers to be representative of various socio-economic and demographic scenarios and to represent a full range of both older and newer partnerships.

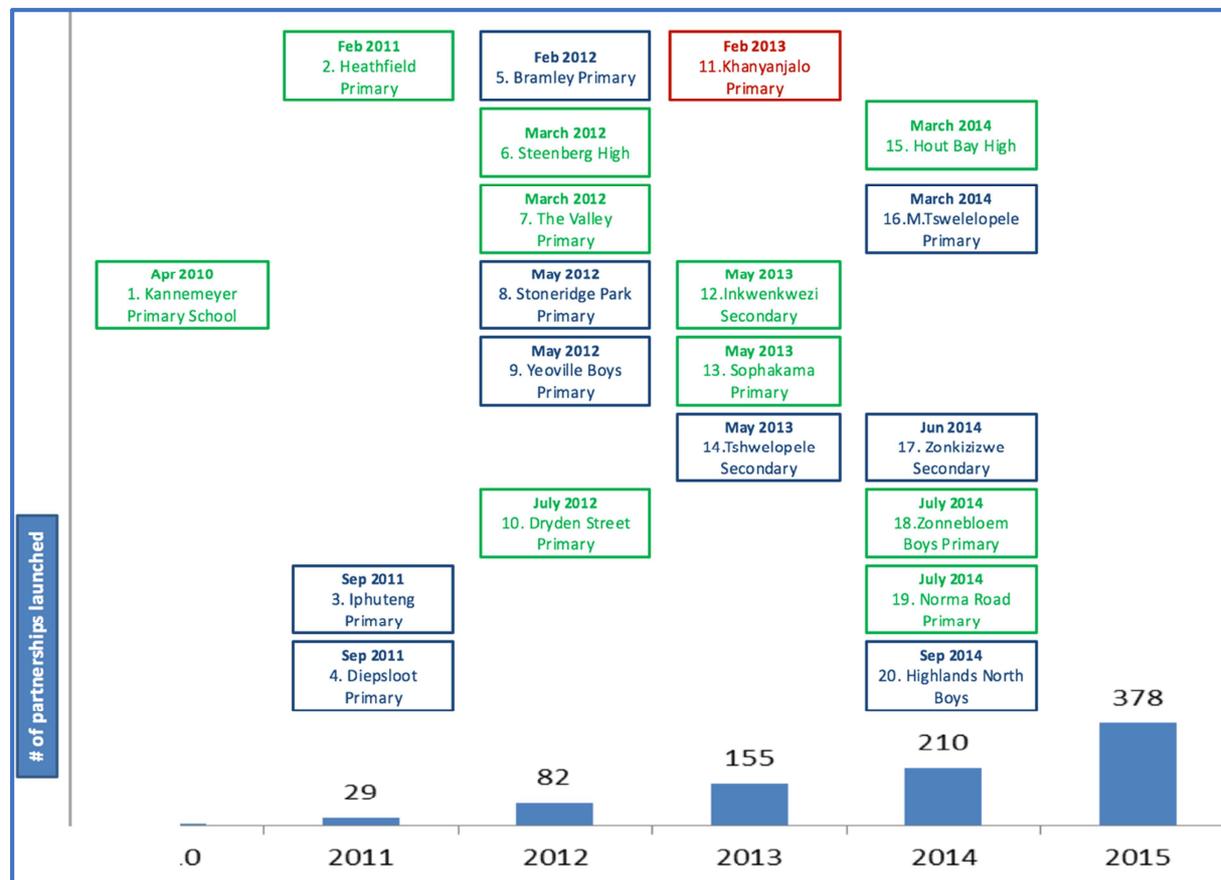
Of the selected schools, 10 are in the greater Cape Town area, nine are in Gauteng and one school is in KwaZulu-Natal. All of these schools, like other schools on the programme, are challenged by social problems such as general unemployment and poverty in the community, gangsterism, teenage pregnancy and drug abuse. Selected schools also faced operational challenges prior to joining the programme, including overcrowding, a lack of adequate infrastructure and a general loss of class time due to teacher morale or other factors.

Each of the selected schools was visited by the evaluation team between February and April 2016 and 120 people were consulted through structured interviews and focus group discussions.

The 20 schools were evaluated for potential impacts using the following criteria:

1. Leadership change (Principal)
2. Leadership change (School Management Team (SMT) and School Governing Body (SGB))
3. A change in vision / ethos at the school
4. Impact on educational outcomes at the school
5. Parent and community involvement
6. Material gain or a connection to assistance with the school's physical needs
7. Continuing supportive partnerships

Listed below are the participating schools, represented by province and year of joining the programme. Included on the x-axis is a representation of the organisation's growth over the first five years of its existence, measured on the number of schools that have participated.



■ Cape Town
 ■ KwaZulu-Natal
 ■ Gauteng

Summary of findings

The feedback from school principals at the 20 schools was overwhelmingly positive. All participating principals found the programme highly beneficial in assisting them to manage the schools better for the benefit of the schools' learners and staff.

The study found that:

- 100 per cent of the 20 principals interviewed enthusiastically reported that the programme was relevant, stimulating and beneficial for them and their schools;
- 100 per cent of the 20 principals were very positive about the content and experiential learning workshops;
- 100 per cent of the 20 principals found value from being part of a Leadership Circle and attending Community of Practice sessions;
- 100 per cent of the principals found value from having a business partner.

The following improvements in the seven areas of focus were recorded:

1. Leadership impact (Principal)

Across the board, principals testified that their participation in the PfP programme has assisted them to become better leaders. The benefits of these improvements in leadership skills were evident in the more effective management of the school, better staff morale and the esteem with which the school is viewed by the community.

Principals reported becoming:

- Better listeners;
- Active contractors of teachers and community;
- More open to new ideas, more democratic/less autocratic,
- More relaxed and able to delegate;
- Less threatened, more nurturing; and
- Better organised and more confident.

2. Leadership impact (School Management Team and School Governing Body)

The programme aims to make the SMT more cohesive and aligned and to ensure that teachers are energised and motivated, leading to improved curriculum coverage, less absenteeism and more participation in extra-curricular activities.

About half the schools reported a significant improvement in the leadership and coherence of their SMTs, while the other half reported that they had not (yet) experienced this outcome to a significant degree. The same percentage of SMTs (50%) reported benefitting directly from leadership training exercises.

All the schools reported a positive outcome, albeit of varying significance. All senior teachers and SMT members interviewed reported benefitting through lessons shared by principals, through changes in leadership style and re-visioning and planning exercises.

3. A change in vision / ethos at the school

Many schools reported that positive changes to their vision and direction had occurred as a consequence of improved leadership. In some cases, these beneficial developments built on pre-existing plans and programmes, but it was found that 55 per cent of the schools had reworked their vision and mission, drawn up strategic plans, formed committees and enhanced the skills of SGBs.

Specific activities that contributed to a positive change of direction include strategic planning and goal-setting initiatives, co-opting the business leader on to the SGB, improving administrative and planning processes and adapting the school vision to align the aims and activities of teachers and SMTs.

4. Impact on educational outcomes at the school

An evaluation of the educational impacts of this programme was hampered somewhat by limited hard data on measurements such as teacher absenteeism and curriculum coverage, but improvements were reported by teachers, the SMT and school principals.

While analysis of standardised test scores such as ANA or NSC results was possible, comparative pre- and post-intervention evaluation were clouded by macro-level changes, such as departmental decrees to advance all students to a higher grade, which negatively influenced subsequent measurement scores and changes in curriculum.

Notwithstanding these limitations and caveats, it was found that the programme had a strong positive impact on the holistic educational environment of over 70 per cent of the schools, while 30 per cent of the schools reported that their school results were directly positively influenced by PfP involvement.

Principals, SMT members and ordinary teachers at most schools felt that, due to the positive impact of PfP on the school leadership, management, vision and resources, there had been a resulting positive impact on the educational environment and the performance of teachers and learners.

5. Parent and community involvement

Three-quarters of the schools in this sample reported that whereas they had previously, struggled to encourage involvement by parents and community members, since participating in PfP, they were doing much better.

This was due in many cases, to a change in approach from simply informing parents about meetings to inviting them properly, holding exciting events; making meetings more meaningful and engaging parents through techniques learnt in PfP workshops.

In the most successful schools, those schools have become effective ‘community hubs’ and the community has benefitted from being part of those schools. In the example of Yeoville Boys Primary, the school arranged for Department of Home Affairs’ officials to regularly help immigrant parents to obtain their required documentation and thereby built a tight-knit community around the school.

6. Material gain or a connection to assistance with the school’s physical needs

Material gain is not a focus of the PfP programme, which explicitly focuses on supporting and equipping school principals and mobilising active citizenship around the school. Despite this, the connection between the school and business leaders often generated material gains.

These benefits were very important for nine of the schools, while another five received a modest benefit and six received minimal or no material gain as a result of their PfP involvement.

Material benefits recorded at the schools include: computers, musical instruments, playgrounds and equipment, Internet access and Wi-Fi, food gardens and feeding schemes, overhead projectors, white boards, libraries, science equipment and fully equipped science laboratories, sports equipment and building materials.

Importantly, many of the schools also reported forming many more partnerships with other organisations and sponsors who could build on the fertile foundations laid by the PfP programme.

7. Continuing supportive partnerships

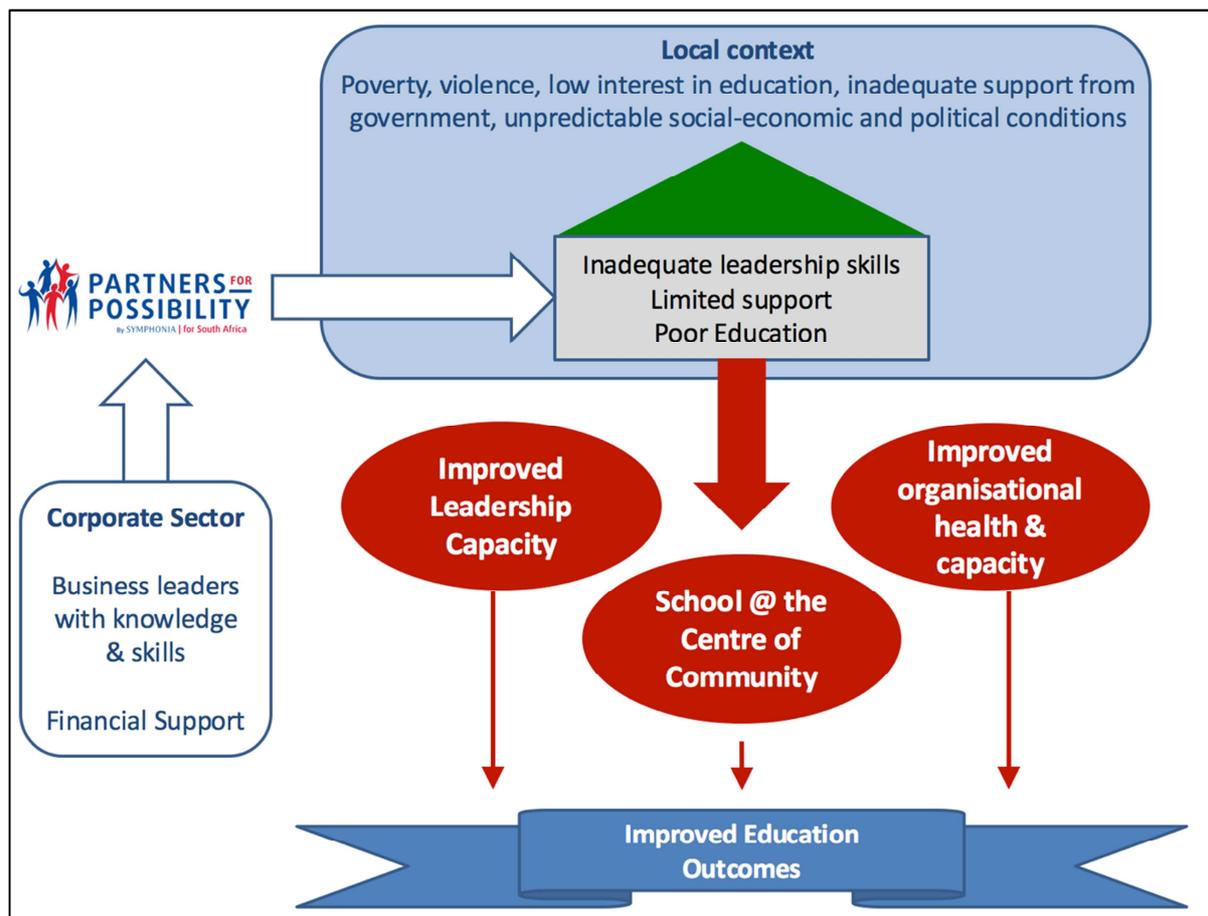
All of the 20 partnerships lasted the full official year of the PfP programme, and in only two cases among these 20 did the partnership not continue meaningfully beyond that.

Over half of the schools still enjoy very supportive and beneficial partnerships, although not all of these are in the “very active” category. It seems that the “very active” partners enjoy a particular kind of chemistry and commitment to their friendship and each other’s lives which has sustained them, despite other commitments and the passage of time.

The closest relationships, which kept going after the PfP year ended, were able to transcend the challenges of distance, busy lives and professional commitments, difficult local conditions, and differences in approach or opinion.

Validation of the Partners for Possibility theory of change

The study has essentially validated Partners for Possibility's formal theory of change:



By drawing on the corporate sector and effectively bridging the gap between under-resourced schools and this well-resourced sector, Partners for Possibility is able to drive improved educational outcomes, despite the often challenging local context.

Evaluating the PFP methodology

Structured as a leadership development programme, Partners for Possibility connects business leaders with school principals in under-resourced schools in a year-long, part-time leadership development process consisting of formal training, action learning and coaching.

The programme comprises several components that strengthen the leadership capabilities of both principals and business leaders. This generates improvements at various levels in schools and ultimately contributes to improved academic outcomes and future prospects for learners.

The elements include:

1. PFP content and experiential learning

This includes five full days of formal training in internationally recognised content, including *Time to Think*, *Flawless Consulting*, *The Art of Possibility* and *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

2. Being part of a learning community and attending Community of Practice (CoP) meetings

These groupings of partnerships, which are formally managed and facilitated, are reported to be crucial to the success of the programme.

In all cases, principals found it extremely valuable to leave their school environments, go to other schools, meet and build relationships with other principals and other business partners, share problems and solutions together, and offer support to one another in these learning communities.

The principals were also overwhelmingly full of praise for their respective coaches, known as Learning Process Facilitators (LPFs), who ran these circles and also met regularly with each partnership throughout the year.

3. Action learning

As part of their programme, principals and business leaders were required to create partnership plans on which their action learning programmes were based. These led to many different activities, including workshops with staff and involving corporate evaluation and facilitation functions to improve aspects of the school leadership and management.

In many instances these action learning programmes laid the foundation for the trust and long-term relationships between the Principal and business partner.

4. Reflection and Sense-making

Partners are required to reflect on their learnings and keep a journal and a compilation of their activities, in a Portfolio of Evidence. The Portfolio of Evidence is presented for evaluation at the end of the formal year. The evaluation found that this aspect of the programme could be strengthened in order to realise the full potential of reflection as a learning process for partners.

5. Being in a co-learning and co-action partnership

This varied significantly between partnerships and included some partnerships that met weekly and some that met far less frequently. The frequency and nature of meetings strongly influenced the nature of the partnership, which varied from close-knit thinking partnerships to more task-orientated partnerships focused on specific improvement plans.

Conclusion

Partners for Possibility clearly has a well-articulated and successfully executed Theory of Change. The programme draws on the leadership capabilities and resources of the corporate sector and leverages the power of partnership to effect change at under-resourced schools.

The closest relationships, which kept going after the PfP Leadership Development and Principal Support Process ended, were able to transcend the challenges of distance, busy lives and professional commitments, difficult local conditions, and differences in approach or opinion. Schools where partnerships had not continued at the same level were still found to have benefitted, but not to the same degree or to their full potential.

This independent evaluation has found that the PfP programme has had a very positive, albeit varied, impact on participating schools. There is no doubt that principal support and leadership development, along with the creation and support of partnerships between under-resourced schools and sectors of society that have access to skills and resources, is a crucial catalytic intervention in the education system, which can have profound positive impacts on struggling schools. The PfP model is a very sound, home-grown and affordable intervention that seeks to achieve these goals and has enjoyed considerable success so far, as this evaluation has found.

As PfP pushes towards its goal of involving 10 per cent of schools in South Africa in its programme, it is hoped that many of the lessons emerging from this evaluation will feed positively into the process, and PfP will be able to build on the successes of its model to date and mitigate any limitations effectively. It will also be crucial as the organisation seeks to take the programme to scale to hold on to the key ingredients of what makes partnerships successful in each local context, so as not to sacrifice quality in the quest for quantity and a more systemic impact.