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# The value of a shared vision at the school of opportunity

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# Chapter One : Introduction

## 1.1 The Origins of My Research

Growing up in a middle-class, white family, born in the time of Apartheid, but schooled in a time of historic, national and educational change, I have witnessed the development of the educational system from varying perspectives along the way. I attended state schools and, in both my primary and high school years, was in the particular grade where the first black and coloured children were admitted into our classes. In primary school, three black children were admitted into my Grade 6 year in 1990, and in high school, the first three black girls were admitted into our school in my Grade 10 year in 1994.

I knew that I wanted to be a part of the educational system from an early age, as I come from a family of many teachers. I was the first and only member in my immediate family (parents and siblings) to have gone to university, and I have been interested, for a long time, in "what has made my experience of education in South Africa such a positive one, while so many others have such a negative outlook?" This research is an attempt to explore this interest in how my experienced view of education is in such conflict with those of the public, in general, and whether there are other views of the system.

## 1.2 General Problem Statement

Background: Challenges That Schools Face

South Africa's political history of segregation and inequality is well documented. It is a country whose people were previously given or denied opportunities based on the colour of their skin or culture. Prior to 1991, during the era of Apartheid, the South African population was divided into racial categories: "blacks, whites, coloureds and Asians" (Bureau of African Affairs, 2012, p. 1). Education in South Africa during this time was a tool used by the government to segregate people, and it aimed to perpetuate the subservience of selected groups through limiting the educational content, resources and opportunities of black, Asian and coloured learners. This resulted in diminished opportunities allowed to these racial groups. It defined their level of education, their trade or business opportunities and, in turn, how they lived. The Bureau of African Affairs (2012) reports that the segregation of schools under the Apartheid system facilitated the significant inequality of both the quantity and quality of education that was delivered to the different racial groups, and since the abolition of this segregating approach, the ongoing process of restructuring the country's educational system has been long and laborious (2012, p. 1).

The Bureau of African Affairs (2012) specifies that the challenge that this country is facing, is to create a single, non-discriminatory, non-racial system that offers the same standard of education to all people (2012, p. 1). However, this challenge also incorporates a deeper need to help previously

disadvantaged schools to bridge the significant gaps that are evident in the way of school leadership, and the teaching and learning that is required to successfully implement the educational system described.

Moloi (2005) argues that, despite the significant changes that South African education has undergone since the inception of the new schooling system in 1994, the country's educational system is "still confronted with serious problems in many public schools, especially those in historically black areas" (Moloi, 2005, p. XV).

The Ministerial Report on "Schools That Work" (2007) substantiates this with its findings that, while South Africa has provided improved access to schooling, it has not yet provided access to "quality schooling for the majority of the population" (Christie, Butler & Potterton, 2007, p. 37). The report states that, "in the aftermath of Apartheid, poor performance of the system could be interpreted as an historical problem of effectiveness following the racial ranking of schools, with white schools being the most effective, and African schools the least" (Christie et al., 2007, p. 38).

Fleisch (2008) purports that between 70 and 80 percent of primary school children (where the majority of those have been identified as having come from disadvantaged schools), have completed primary school without being able to read fluently in their school's instructional language. He also reports that their mathematical skills and knowledge is a very limited understanding of the content, with little proficiency in the most basic mathematical skills (Fleisch, 2008, p. V).

South Africa's political history has directly affected its educational system and, subsequently, created challenges in providing an effective, quality education to all of its learners. South Africa has a distinct history of political influence that may have moulded what education in South Africa has become today. However, while the reasoning behind the ineffectiveness of the South African Schooling system has to be studied and recognised, there is also benefit in studying the vision of a better system that will propel the progress and implementation of higher quality education and learning in South African schools.

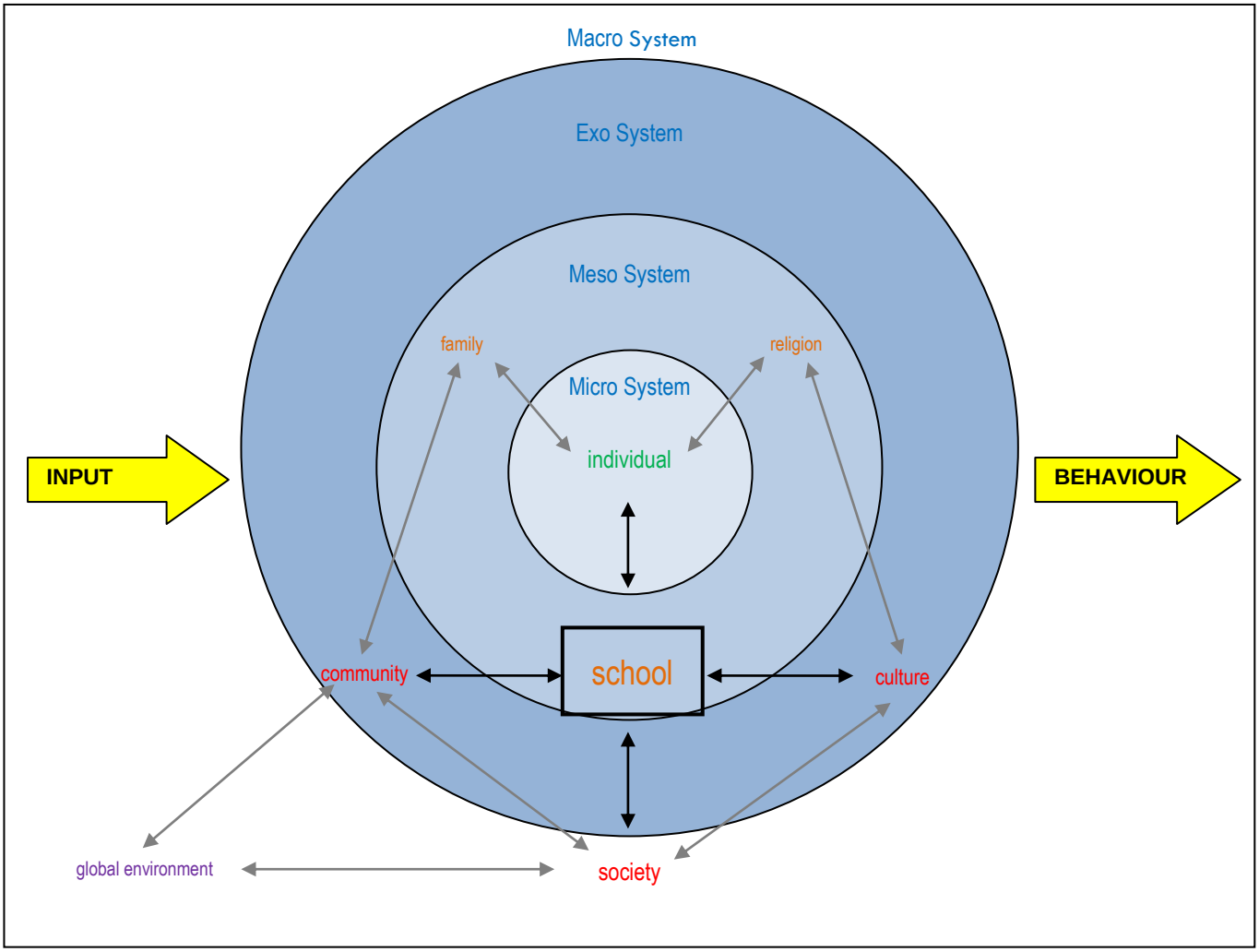
In order to attain the full potential of schooling in all sectors and communities of South Africa, the standard of education needs to be raised. It is not necessarily only schools in the previously disadvantaged areas, that is, areas where resources and funding were previously limited, that need to become more effective. All schools in all areas need to commit to improved standards of education, and all schools need to be prepared for change. This is because the environments in which all schools exist are continuously changing, not only the environments of previously disadvantaged schools. South African schools need to look past the history which moulded the current education system and focus on the environments in which they are functioning today, and how they cope with the changes within these environments, if they are to move towards greater success.

Changes for improvement in schools cannot simply be made out of context. Moloi (2005) states that, "like all organisations, schools operate within a specific environment made up of different interdependent and integrated

components... and in order to make schools work, it is important that a close relationship between the internal and external environments is maintained" (Moloi, 2005, p. 4).

Bronfrenbrenner (1979) and Narayanan and Nath (1993) explore levels of the environment in which organisations and individuals function. While the terminology varies, the concept remains similar: no one and no organisation exists in a vacuum, completely unaffected by its surroundings (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979, p.1; Narayanan & Nath, 1993, p. 216-217). Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) "Ecological Systems Theory" underlies Narayanan and Nath's (1993) explication of organisational environments and Moloi's (2005) "Systems Approach", describing the relationships between micro-, meso-, exo- and macro systems. Although designed to explain the environments in which individuals live, it provides an easily interpreted visual representation of the position that a school holds in the individual learner's environment and, more importantly, the school's impact on the environment of the individual and the community (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979, p. 1).

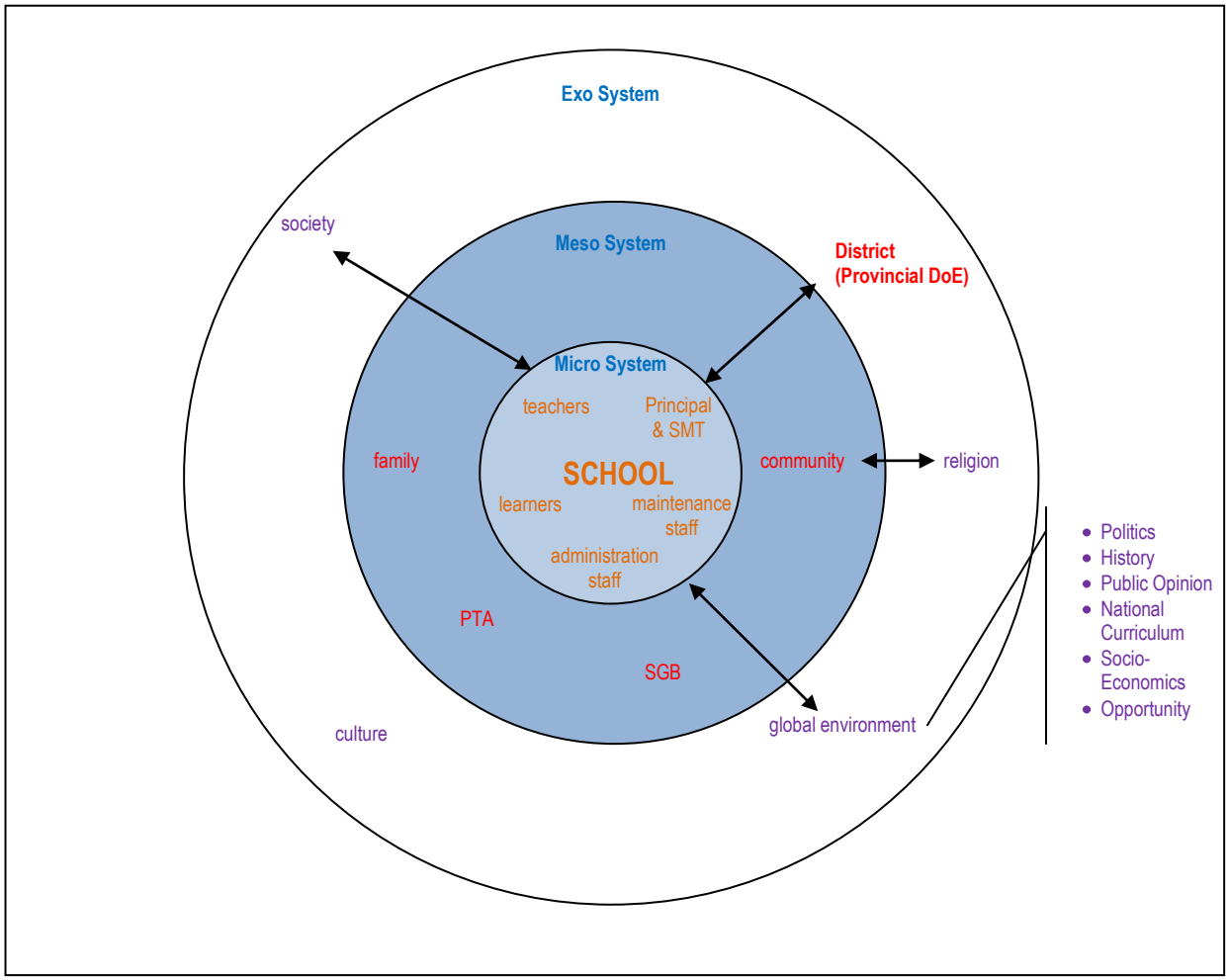
**Figure 1.1 Bronfrenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Model (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979, p.3)**




In Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) analysis, he explains that the individual is affected by school, family, religion, community, culture and society. It also demonstrates a model where the school does not exist as an isolated entity; it is situated within a context where it is influenced by the individual and teams of individuals that are linked to it (teachers, administrators, the educational department and the community of learners and their families). It is influenced by society and the cultures associated with that society and, in turn, all of that is influenced further by the global environment in which it stands (Bronfrenbrenner, 1979, p. 2).

The layers of the environment indicated in the model above are all interrelated, and changes in any one of those layers would affect the other layers. Just as the layers are all interrelated, so are the different components of those layers, and through an analysis of the model, it is evident that the school, its community and society are woven together by the influences that each has on the others. In this study, the aim is to investigate the environment of the school, and as such, the school represents the unit of analysis. Using Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) model as a guide, I created a similar archetype which places the school in the centre of the model:

**Figure 1.2 : Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory Model : Adapted**



The most prevalent influences that affect South African schools now include: cultural diversity, community values, leadership and management approaches, interpersonal relationships, the motivation and work ethic of teachers, learners and administration staff, departmental pressures and requirements on schools, a shifting National Curriculum, the training that teachers have had, the number of teachers available and classroom sizes, the political history that overshadows these institutions, and the economical situations of the families that attend these schools.

Moloi (2005) describes, “the environment in which schools work is becoming more and more complex, uncertain and challenging, due to, inter alia, the changing educational legal framework – for example, *the School Education Act*, 1995, and the *South African Schools Act*, 1996, which regulate how schools should function” (Moloi, 2005, p. 4).

City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel (2009) describe a model for school change and improvement, which they term the *Instructional Core,* as the interactions between the student, the teacher’s pedagogic and content knowledge, and the content itself. They explain that “making meaningful and productive changes in instructional practice requires us to confront how they upset... and reprogramme our past ways of doing things” (City, Elmore, Fiarman &Teitel, 2009, p. 22). If a school is aiming at improving its current achievement records or instructional approaches, or, if the curriculum is modified, these changes are set to displace the existing practice, engagement and methodology in schools. Change is unavoidable and a significant contributor to some of the challenges that affect the progress of many schools.

City et al.'s (2009) *Second Principle* states that, "If you change any single element of the instructional core, you have to change the other two to affect student learning" (p. 25). That is, to focus on just one of the three elements of the instructional core is not enough. In order for effective change and progress to be made in one area, the impact and expected changes required in the other two elements of the instructional core should be planned and prepared for.

> Much of what well-intentioned policy makers and administrators do in the name of school improvement never actually reaches the instructional core. Much of it does not even reach the classroom, much less inside the classroom; …our best ideas about policy and management do not cause student learning to increase (City et al., 2009, p. 25).

With all of these underlying challenges that influence and inadvertently affect the everyday challenges of a principal, school leaders are forced to research, adopt and adapt a suitable leadership approach that will help them to succeed in raising the educational standards of their schools. In such a dynamic environment, a principal cannot simply rely on the implementation, execution and management of governmental policies to succeed.

Loock, Campher, du Preez, Grobler and Shaba (2003) argue that educational leadership encompasses "the ability to manage change; the ability to create a vision for the future; the insight and understanding with which the vision is communicated to followers, and the ability to motivate followers to achieve this vision, despite the presence of obstacles" (Loock, Campher, du Preez, Grobler & Shaba, 2003, p.48). In order to be effective, a principal in a South African school in the twenty-first century requires more vision than execution of policy. With the number of environmental factors affecting learning,

teaching and administration within the school increasing, principals are forced to adapt their leadership styles, accordingly. They need to become more personally involved and invested in terms of creating a vision and a strategic way forward for their schools that will ensure improved quality in the education provided at the school. This will not only ensure the school's success as an organisation, but it will also ensure the success of its learners in their futures.

In order for schools to achieve this, they need to be able to adjust towards demonstrating qualities of a "change capable organisation", as this type of organisation is more likely to manage, and be able to adjust to, the demands of an environment that is continually shifting in expectations and requirements. McLagan (2003) purports that simple change management alone is not sufficient in the transformation of an organisation, and that, with the increase in the complexity of change in which organisations find themselves, change should be accepted as a way of life and not an isolated action (McLagan, 2003, p. 2).

The principals of previously disadvantaged schools would, therefore, need to extend their leadership beyond managerial input and "take a new view of how their organisation works and must work every day so that it is not constantly trying to override the usual organisational processes" (McLagan, 2003, p. 2). In order to prepare the school for this kind of transformation, the principal would need to ensure that their organisation is prepared for the kinds of changes that would, potentially, need to take place. The school would need to develop a capacity for change. In addition to: making learning a way of life, actively supporting and encouraging day-to-day improvements and changes,

ensuring diverse teams, encouraging mavericks, sheltering breakthroughs, integrating technology, and building and deepening trust, McLagan (2003) includes “linking the present and the future” as one of the eight qualities of a change capable organisation (McLagan, 2003, p. 2-5).

The Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990) is an organisational model with similar ideals. It is designed to enable organisations to evolve and adapt to, and within, their environments. Hoff (2007) and Senge (1995) describe the Learning Organisation as an organisation that fosters communication and openness, enquiry and feedback, mutual respect and support, and one that allows adequate time for reflection and flexibility (Hoff, 2007, p.2). A Learning Organisation is defined by Senge (1990) as “an organisation where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (Senge, 1990, p 3). These organisations are most likely to excel in environments of change because they are flexible and adaptable. The mindset behind a learning organisation is such that: the environment in which the organisation functions is continuously being evaluated and reassessed, and personal goals and a shared vision of excellence strived for.

In order to tackle the continually changing environment in which South African schools operate in the twenty-first century, it is necessary for principals to consider new leadership practices and techniques. To lead their schools to improved quality of education and success, while being able to adjust and manage the changes of their environments, is imperative. Transforming the

school into a change capable organisation and adopting the practices of a Learning Organisation can allow for this, particularly for previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa, as these schools are currently at a greater disadvantage, due to their having fewer resources and lower performance results. This may provide a platform and strategy that will assist the schools, principals, teachers and learners to succeed while having to cope with the many environmental challenges and obstacles they confront on the journey to school improvement.

## 1.3 Research Question

*How can the principal of a previously disadvantaged South African school use the vision and mission statements, in combination with a purposeful leadership strategy, to help the school to make progress in the face of continually changing and challenging circumstances?*

This study will investigate how a school's vision and mission statement, linked to the creation, activation and visible implementation of a shared vision, can create a platform from which a previously disadvantaged South African school can succeed against all odds.

Sub questions that will be investigated include:

- How is the school vision and mission statement interpreted by the different stakeholders in this school organisation?

- How does a shared vision contribute to the sense of purpose in a school, as expressed by various stakeholders?
- How is the purpose of the school vision explained and disclosed to new members of staff and learners, and how is "buy in" to this vision achieved?
- How does the school vision become visible through the work of the teachers, learners and administrative staff of the school?

All of these questions will be linked to the leadership approach of the principal of the school, as the director and facilitator of driving the vision. Bush and Middlewood (2005) emphasise the importance of a leader moving beyond implementation of bureaucratic management and implementation of the governmental routines:

> Leaders operating in such controlled systems experience particular problems in developing a distinctive vision for their schools; when heads and principals are *reduced*[1] to implementing directives from national, regional or local government, they lack the scope to articulate school goals... (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 5).

Therefore, the leadership approach of the principal, alongside the development of the school vision and mission statements is key and warrants close examination.

Christie et al. (2007) describe "schools that work" as having organisational cultures that support a sound work ethic, expect achievements and acknowledge success; cultures which carry out tasks with competence and confidence; where the principal shows commitment to the community, and

[1] What a powerful and descriptive term, I found.

where members have an understanding of the history and identity of the school. These schools also focus on their central tasks of teaching, learning and management with a sense of responsibility, purpose and commitment (Christie et al., 2007, p. 77-78).

Therefore, during the course of this study, one would expect to see how a school's vision and mission statement can support each stakeholder's work ethic and commitment to the school: whether it is a learner taking responsibility for his own studies, or a teacher taking responsibility in teaching the learners and doing his or her own part in sustaining a school of excellence. An "expectation of achievement" is vital. This provides a sense of purpose and direction. It gives the learners and teachers a goal and vision to strive towards, and it can be personal and shared.

Senge (1990) describes "Personal Mastery" as one of the five disciplines of a learning organisation: it is the discipline of "continually clarifying and deepening one's personal vision, of focussing one's energies, of developing patience and of seeing reality objectively" (p. 7). He argues that personal mastery "fosters personal motivation" (Senge, 1990, p. 12). This type of personal motivation is required if stakeholders are going to buy in to a collective goal and vision for the future of the school. A shared vision of excellence for the school and, in turn, the community, is a vital starting block for a school vision and it can further be achieved through each stakeholder's sense of personal mastery and commitment to the vision of the school, and hence, the community.

## 1.4 Significance of This Study

This study presents a portrait of, and, an in-depth look at a school that embodies elements of the "Learning Organisation" and one, which either purposefully or perhaps, intuitively, has benefited from a process like this. This school will have used these elements to suit their needs within the shifting environments in which they exist. My focus of this study is on how a principal's vision of excellence has motivated and moved the school towards providing a higher quality of education to its learners, despite the disadvantages of history or the turbulent environments in which the school exists. This study will illustrate the importance of a vision that is acted upon; a vision that plays a part in the decision making processes, and one which serves as a baseline standard that guides all aspects of the running of the school towards achieving sustainable quality of service, linked to the leadership approach of the school's principal.

Christie et al. (2007) report that one of the dynamics evident in the "schools that work" included the schools being "focussed on the central tasks of teaching, learning and management, with a sense of responsibility, purpose and commitment" (p. 5).

Responsibility, purpose and commitment are three of the most important attributes that teachers can hold in their positions as effective contributors to education in South Africa at this time. One could argue that these characteristics are the driving force of personal mastery, mental models and

shared vision. The other dynamics, presented by Christie et al. (2007), are that all of these schools had organisational cultures that supported a developed work ethic, expected achievement and acknowledged success. These schools carried out tasks with competence and confidence, and they all had strong accountability systems in place, which enabled them to meet the demands of external accountability, particularly in terms of senior certificate achievement (Christie et al., 2007, p. 5).

With the introduction of the new incremented standardised assessments in the lower grades as well as the continued senior certificate examinations receiving a lot of attention in the year ahead, one could argue that South African schools will benefit from this study. Assessments such as these would provide concurrent, real-time data feedback for schools at necessary levels of the education system so that they can combat obstacles, such as illiteracy and insufficient number skill ability, and so that they can be addressed.

The implementation of standardised assessments at Grades 3, 6 and 9, means that more schools are going to be accountable for student results, whereas previously, only secondary schools had external measurements through their learners' senior certificate examination results. Now, potentially, all schools will be assessed in a similar fashion. There will be a lot more pressure on the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, for example, as the Department of Education will have a comprehensive report on the progress of education provided at all levels of schooling, across all schools in South Africa.

This study will contribute to the research of schools as learning organisations in South Africa, particularly as a platform for previously disadvantaged schools to prosper in the face of adversity. While each aspect of the learning organisation concept has a role to play in varying capacities and situations which could support the development of education in South African schools, without a shared vision and direction, the school community, teachers, learners and parents would lack the goals and, possibly, motivation needed to propel them beyond their challenging environment and provide a platform from which a quality and meaningful education can be given.

## 1.5 Rationale

This study will investigate how a school's vision and mission statement, and the degree to which it is visible, can create a platform from which the school can prosper in the face of adversity when combined with a strong leadership approach. A single school and principal shall be identified as the subject of this study, and a qualitative analysis of the data prepared.

I believe that a study like this is vital in the context of understanding education and educational context in South Africa. There is a significant amount of literature research based on the post-Apartheid educational circumstances, where statistic quantify that education in South Africa requires improvement. This study will show *how* a previously disadvantaged school has taken it upon themselves to strive for improvement and excellence, and to provide for their learners the best opportunities possible, despite the adversity that they had

previously experienced and the current challenges of operating in an informal settlement that they have now.

While it is a study based on how just one school has created and is striving for its vision of excellence, it is a portrait of hope and opportunity, and one which will demonstrate that with a sound leadership practice, a vision in which all stakeholders can strive towards, and a great deal of commitment, a school from a disadvantaged background can “work”.

## 1.6 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to create a portrait of a “School that Works”(Christie, 2007), as an example of how a previously disadvantaged school in challenging circumstances, has, through a strong leadership approach, consistency and commitment made significant progress, despite the obstacles that it faces.

The qualitative study will be presented in the methodology of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann-Davis, 1997), which aims to establish an holistic record of the activities and daily leadership practices at one school in Johannesburg that exemplifies the characteristics described in Christie et al.’s (2007) article. This methodology will result in a rich, intimate exposure of the school and its principal, and the way in which this school functions.

Through a series of interviews with the principal, teachers and School Governing Body representatives, a visual rendering of their personal

experiences and vision for the school will be created so that the reader can appreciate the great adversity and challenges that the subject school has overcome and how much progress it has made through the period of leadership under its current principal, as well as the leadership style she has modelled and the way in which she and the staff have used the school vision, as a tool, to achieve this feat .

# Chapter Two : Literature Review

## 2.1 Leadership Practice and Theory Linked to Change Management

Khoza (2011) refers to the role of “Ubuntu in leadership” in the introduction to his explanation of, what he terms, “an appropriate organisational leadership model for modern South Africa” (Khoza, 2011, p viii). In a country whose educational system is continually changing in order to try to meet the needs of a recovering nation, passion, understanding, empathy and commitment are required if a leader is to drive his or her team through effective change.

The CORD Model of Change, presented by Maringe (n.d.) refers to four factors which determine an organisation’s ability to monitor and manage change. They are:

***C****ontext analysis* – that is, the organisation should be able to examine and comprehend the context in which the change is being envisaged.

**O**rganisational readiness – the financial, human and material resources of the organisation, along with the skills, competencies and attitudes of the people within the organisation is assessed and deemed ready for the process of change.

***R****esearch* – enough research has to be done before an organisation can leap into action, and this research should include data such as, which other

organisations and with what success have done what we intend to do?, as well as the needs of the various members of the organisation. The change must be of value to the organisation as a whole.

***D****evelopment* – It is important that the change be effected successfully, and in order to achieve this, targets have to be identified and then achieved at various stages along the way. This can be done through the shared development of targets on a small scale, to start, so that they can be redeveloped, if necessary, and success should be rewarded periodically. (Maringe, Wits Executive Leadership Programme in Education, no date, p. 31 – 37)

Just as in Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, the CORD Model of Change is developed around the idea that a person or an organisation does not exist in isolation and is directly affected by the internal and external environments in which it functions. In the process of understanding and evaluating the context in which the organisation operates, Maringe (n.d.) provides a "frame" of context for the evaluation, specifically identifying the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors in the environment which affect the organisation, while linking this framework to the specific needs of the organisation. These needs, according to Maringe (n.d.) comprise more individualised aspects of evaluation, like "why the status quo is no longer adequate, what the mission and purpose of the organisation is, as well as what the aims and outcomes of the intended change for the organisation are" (Maringe, no date, p. 33 – 34).

Christie (2008) discusses the changes in South African schools according to a series of scales which, too, can be linked to Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) theory that the individual exists in a series of environments. Bronfrenbrenner's model was based on three systems, the micro system, the meso system and the macro system, and Christie's (2008) four scales can be placed into Bronfrenbrenner's systems:

**Table 2.1.1 Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) Model Systems and Christie's (2008) Educational Change Scales (p.5)**

| Bronfrenbrenner's Systems | Christie's Scales |
|---|---|
| Micro System | The scale of the school and the classroom |
| Meso System | The scale of state policy |
| Macro System | The scale of nation state development, and<br>The global scale |

In order for a principal to be able to manage change in their school according to this extent of transformation, all of the systems within which the school functions would need to be analysed and prepared. Christie (2008) describes the impact that the different scales of change have on the school:

The global scale refers to the impact that globalisation poses for educational reform (p. 5). It is linked to areas such as the movement from books into the digital arena and the implications that this might have on school competition. It is also based on trends in schooling around the world, the current trend being the importance of cognitive education and the development of thinking skills in the curriculum.

The scale of nation state development refers to how decisions about economy, society and government pose their own challenges for educational development and change in this country (p. 5). While education is currently the largest piece of the South African budget, the challenges of identifying the needs of all of the thousands of schools is great.

The scale of state policy refers to how the policy process of modern states opens possibilities for educational change, but faces limits in how it can change schools (p. 5) School performance is being closely monitored, and while the school may be continually evaluating their progress and adjusting their approach to learning and teaching on campus, the educational department is doing the same. This means that changes in school policy and practice is made on a provincial and national scale beyond the particular changes made at individual schools, and this creates a more complicated dimension of change for schools.

The scale of the school and classroom, according to Christie (2008), refers to "the importance of providing learning experiences of high quality to all students so that the doors of learning are opened" for each of those students (Christie, 2008, p. 5). This is what Moloi (2005) would refer to as the internal environment of the school, and the way that the school determines its path forward is based on immediate environment challenges. These are often similar in schools of similar backgrounds, but the range and extent of the various challenges are unique to each school, and should, thus, be treated according to the individual needs of these schools. One could argue that an important aspect of this scale is the relationships created between the leader

and the members of staff in each institution, as well as the relationship fostered between the educators and the students at the school.

In the following two sections, I shall describe the value of interpersonal relationships within the school context as a theory of leadership practice, and the creation of an organisational learning system to facilitate the response to continual change in the school environment.

## 2.2 Leadership Theory Based on Relationship Development

Hargreaves (2011) argues that "one of the most important functions that educational leaders perform is developing their staff", and that in an effective and enriching school, teachers are prone to exceed expectations (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 315). He argues that the emotional aspects of teaching and learning are often minimised and yet, it is crucial to acknowledge them and to cultivate their development in the schools, as this will develop a higher quality in the education being provided at the school (p. 316).

His conceptual framework argues the following: that teaching is an emotional practice; that teaching and learning involve emotional understanding; that teaching is a form of emotional labour; that teachers' emotions are inseparable from their moral purposes and their ability to achieve these purposes; that teachers' emotions are rooted in and affect their selves, identities and relationships with others; that teachers' emotions are shaped by experiences of power and powerlessness; and that teachers' emotions vary with culture and context (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 319).

These components of Hargreaves' frame (2011) describe the characteristics of teachers and how they approach their professional life, and he shares with the reader a notion that in order to lead these professionals effectively, a principal must have an understanding of their approach to their task. He adds that the emotions of teaching "are deeply intertwined with the purposes of teaching, the political dynamics of educational policy and school life, the relationships that make up teaching and the senses of self which teachers invest in their work" (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 330). He argues that the implications that this holds for school leaders are such that the discourse of educational reform and school leadership must acknowledge and make allowance for the "centrality of emotion to the processes and outcomes of teaching, learning, leadership and caring in our schools" (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 331). While it can be argued that the school is another type of business organisation, in that it has standards to meet and professional obligation to its stakeholders, it has to be noted that leading schools requires a more relationship based approach.

### *Attuned Leadership, Holistic Leadership and Passionate Leadership*

In a unified effort to realise the vision and goals of an organisation, Khoza's (2011) theory of *Ubuntu* in leadership practice, where he states, "good governance and democratic participation need to find their roots in community" (Khoza, 2011, p. xii) highlights the value of relationships within the organisation in determining effective governance. Without the participation

and action of a team under the guidance of a leader, progress will not be made.

Khoza (2011) expresses this theory in, what he terms, “Attuned Leadership” based on African humanism beliefs, while Brighouse (2001) explores “Passionate Leadership”, and Loock, Campher, du Preez, Grobler and Shaba (2003) present “Holistic Leadership” as a practice through which the subordinates within the organisation share the principal’s core values.

Khoza (2011) reflects that up until the 1950s, the usual approach to school leadership had always been a top-down model of management where the school leader’s administration was based on their authority over the rest of the staff members, and that these processes then facilitated the movement forward of the organisation (Khoza, 2011, p. 126). However, leadership practice has moved beyond this type of model and, in the twenty-first century, adapted to a more relational model, where the social dimensions of organisations are more recognised. Khoza (2011) highlights three characteristics that are now central to organisational leadership, and they include: sound technical skills, above average cognitive ability and emotional intelligence (p. 127).

He argues that effective leaders of today collaborate with their followers rather than dictate to them, and that this form of transformational leadership practice results in the elevation of every staff member’s consciousness to higher levels of psychological and ethical maturity (p. 128).

He adds that “in place of simple target there needs to be an all-encompassing vision” and that the “visionary, moral component of leadership is paramount” (Khoza, 2011, p. 128). With this form of leadership practice in place, Loock et al. (2003) would argue that an holistic approach to leadership practice has been adopted. The principles of this theory are based on the ideals that care, equity, high expectations and achievement are nurtured in this model, and that leaders following this model promote improvement, collaboration and continuous professional development. The vision of the holistic leader, according to Loock et al. (2003) is one of excellence, and this is shared by his/her staff members (Loock et al., 2003, p. 52).

The shared commitment of the staff to this vision of excellence is nurtured through the seven core components of an holistic leadership approach: a professionally inviting culture, effective communication, an ethical foundation, a vision of excellence, the empowerment of followers, striving for personal mastery and collaboration between all staff members of all levels (p. 52). These components of the holistic approach to leadership, you will see, later in this chapter, can also be closely linked to the characteristics exhibited by the “schools that work” discussed in the report of the same name by Christie et al. (2007), as well as the principles of Senge’s (1990) “Learning Organisation”.

The professionally inviting culture, described by Loock et al. (2003), describes one where respect, trust, optimism and intentionality are fostered within the working environment. Communication is key to the creation of a value system that can be shared by all members of a community, and open communication is central to the development of a relationship between members of staff, and

the members of staff and the school principal (p. 53). Loock et al. (2003) particularly mention the formulation of an effective mission statement to support and develop a vision of excellence, which should describe where the school as an organisation is headed and what it intends to be (p. 53-54). The mission statement should also be designed in such a way that it provides a sense of direction and purpose towards achieving the vision (p. 54).

Empowerment of the followers within the organisation flows from the bottom up as well as from the top down, in Loock et al.'s (2003) explanation of this component. In order for this to be effective, the managers need to be able to delegate responsibility with faith in their subordinates and the subordinates must be prepared to accept these responsibilities (p. 54). While there are many theories linked to this style of leadership, in this context, this is just one aspect of the holistic leadership approach that works in conjunction with the other six components of this model. Collaboration, explained by Loock et al. (2003) is more than just the establishment of teams within the workplace. It promotes negotiation, commitment, problem solving and joint decision making towards the accomplishment of a goal which has been set out for a specific purpose (p. 55).

All of these components are based on a foundation of ethics, that is, "behaviour that is accepted as good and right". In the context of this leadership approach, Loock et al. (2003) argue that this is linked closely to the characteristics of integrity, which a 'good leader' could base on the following: regarding others as equals, being emotionally cognisant, taking factual

knowledge into consideration (as opposed to a biased perspective), and making decisions and following through with them (Loock et al., 2003, p. 53).

The model of an holistic leadership approach is, therefore, very closely linked to the relationships that are shared between different members of the school, and it provides a framework for the collaboration, communication and empowerment of these members of staff towards achieving a number of set goals towards the achievement of the collective vision of excellence. In order for this type of commitment to be made by each member of staff, their individual senses of personal mastery will have to be developed, together with the self-motivation and willingness to improve on their own abilities and strengths.

One could argue that personal mastery and passion can be considered counterparts to each other. Personal mastery can be likened to an intrinsic motivation that propels an individual to continually evaluate their current position in relation to a goal that they have set for themselves, and this will be discussed, in great detail, as one of the principles of the Learning Organisation. However, in order to self-motivate and self-regulate oneself, a passion for the job that one is undertaking is required. Brighouse (2001) posits that, in any setting, commercial or educational, there are six leadership tasks that stand out, and these include: creating energy, building capacity, meeting and minimising crisis, extending the vision, securing the environment and seeking and charting improvement (Brighouse, 2001, p. 2). Of these six tasks, most, if not all of them, would rely on a relationship based leadership approach, and they bespeak similar characteristics to the holistic approach.

The activities that Brighouse (2001) aligns with ‘creating energy’ include: learning from and with colleagues, communicating with staff and involving staff and colleagues in the processes and functioning of the organisation, all the while identifying energy creators and potential within them. He also advocates the sharing of responsibility amongst the staff members and rewarding them for their achievements, showing appreciation, and inspiring staff members through guiding them and sharing with them all aspects of the expectations and tasks at hand (p. 2). In securing the environment, Brighouse (2001) lists tasks such as improving the staff and ensuring that teaching and learning materials are well organised (p. 3). These tasks advocate a sense of responsibility amongst the principal, the staff and the learners within the school environment, as Brighouse (2001) reflects, “the classroom teacher would recognise those (tasks) as much as the head-teacher" (Brighouse, 2001, p. 2).

Brighouse (2001) argues that often Passionate Leadership is misinterpreted in expecting the leader to be particularly charismatic, and that this is not the case. This model embraces periods of quiet and “many reflective one-on-one engagements”, and that it can support many different “styles of leadership”. What is crucial to this form of leadership practice, and evident in the “understated” and “flamboyant” leader is that they will “be good with language and, especially, with imagery which captures the imagination of the community they lead” (Brighouse, 2001, p. 4).

Each of these different styles of leadership practice reflect a model that promotes and nurtures the relationships between the different stakeholders of

the community, and they all display aspects of having a clear vision and a sense of personal mastery. They describe the collaboration between all members in an effort to achieve set goals which will progress the organisation towards the shared vision of excellence, and all of these are qualities of the Learning Organisation.

## 2.3 The Learning Organisation

A Learning Organisation is described by Senge (1990) not only as an organisation where all of its members continually strive to better themselves and their practices, but one where thinking and new ideas are nurtured, and where all members aspire to a shared vision while being able to look at the organisation as a whole system and not just in parts (Senge, 1990, p. 3). Learning Organisations adapt and prepare for change through the practice of its members adopting a “continuous learning” approach. Because they are open to new learning, they become flexible and change-capable. In order for schools to better themselves and their practices, they could implement the practices of the learning organisation as a strategy to do this.

Senge (2005) isolates five characteristics or “disciplines” of a Learning Organisation, and these include: Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, Team Learning and Systems Thinking. They are widely considered the fundamental pillars of a change capable organisation (Senge, 2005, p. 6 - 8).

Senge (2005) describes personal mastery as an increased level of proficiency, allowing one who practises this, and who is committed to life-long

learning, to achieve that which one strives for. He depicts mental models as the deeply engrained thoughts and ideas that shape one's understandings of the world and, as a result, how one reacts to it. A shared vision is explained as the capacity to envisage a communal view of a future that each member of that community seeks to create, whereas, team learning encapsulates the notion of a team learning together and, as a result, each member of that team grows, personally, within that frame. He describes systems thinking as the state of businesses existing as a structure, where the members of the organisation need to have a "systems thinking approach", that is, looking at the organisation or school as a collective, in order to see the whole picture, and thus, to overcome obstacles that may be faced. He argues that if one focuses only on isolated problems within the organisation, the whole system cannot move forward (Senge, 2005, p. 6 - 10).

Moloi (2005) describes learning organisations as living systems: it is the individuals within the organisations that have the capacity for change; the systems alone cannot change themselves. However, she adds that this is only possible if the individuals reflect a self-understanding of themselves, and they commit themselves to life-long learning. It also requires individuals to be self-managing in a flexible environment while sharing the vision of excellence on a personal and systemic level (Moloi, 2005, p. 3-5).

Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002) and Moloi (2005) characterise schools as learning organisations where: schools scan the environment to contribute to broadening the scope of the information, policy, theory and practice that would influence the school's development; a climate of collaboration and trust

is fostered, where staff members are involved in the functioning of the school; staff members commit to a vision that is continually created and recreated to guide actions and decisions, and to provide a framework for long term planning; staff are open to change and are free to experiment while taking professional risks; programmes and practices are continually reviewed, and evaluated; value is placed upon good efforts and achievement is recognised; continuous professional development provides encouragement, opportunity and resources to enable staff to learn and develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes so that the school's performance, as a whole, is enhanced (Silins, Zarins & Mulford, 2002, p. 26-27; Moloi, 2005, p. 9).

Hammonds (2005) puts emphasis on school collegiality, where each staff member is given the opportunity to commit to the success of the school by sharing in the vision of the principal, and argues that this is reliant on each staff member committing to the values of the school and being accountable and appraised against these values (Hammonds, 2005, p. 1). Moloi (2005) concurs, and describes a learning organisation as a vision of excellence, as it amounts to "best practice" (Moloi, 2005, p. 12). Silins et al. (2002) argue that "in order to be relevant, schools must become learning organisations where the rate of learning within the organisation must be equal to or greater than the rate of change in the external environment" (Silins et al., 2002, p. 31). In order to achieve this, a school needs to also be able to anticipate change and prepare for the pressures that the environment will place on them.

MDK12 is a data based website funded by the Maryland State Department of Education (1997) to facilitate organisational learning and school effectiveness. It proposes that:

> the first step in developing more effective schools is to describe the school you seek to become... because identifying where you want to go in relation to where you are is the key to identifying those areas where you need to improve. (MDK12, 1997, p 1).

Senge (1990) suggests that it is "openness, reflection, deeper conversations, personal mastery and shared visions that uniquely energise change" (p. 1), and that identifying where you want to go, in relation to where you are, is a fundamental aspect of personal mastery. He describes people with personal mastery as those who continually expand their ability to create the results in life that they seek (Senge, 1990, p. 131), and this could be directly linked to principals describing the school they seek to establish by identifying where that school needs to go in relation to the reality of where that school is at present.

It is through a strong vision that direction of the school, boundaries and foresight for growth are created, where the school members and teams can be guided and led towards greater success and improved education. Fullan (2001) stresses the importance of the community being able to buy into a vision of learning that can be articulated by the school's leader. He posits that leaders need to encourage a unifying school culture, incorporating an academic programme that is conducive to student learning and a mentality of staff growth, and in this way, leaders are more equipped to promote the

success of all students because safe and effective learning environments will have been created.

## 2.4 Vision and Mission Statements

The focus of this study is to investigate how a school's vision and mission statement, and the degree to which it is visible, can create a platform from which the school can prosper in the face of adversity. The mere formulation of a mission and vision statement is not enough to ensure school improvement. Continuous implementation and dedication, and evidence of the vision and mission statements being upheld by all members of the school community, is vital, as, without this, there is little meaning behind the words and little follow-through of the principal's vision towards school improvement.

If one reads the current public opinion of the South African schooling system, one will read comments like the following:

> "This education system is not doing our children any favours."
>
> "How do you think with 30% for English, Maths "Literacy" (what a joke) and science, a black kid from some shocking public school is going to have a remote chance of employment?"
>
> "Whether school leavers obtain the A-Level results they hope for today or not, almost half of employers do not believe that they have the necessary skills to work in a business environment."
>
> (Public Response: News 24, 2012)

Judging by the statements above, South Africans need to have an educational system and schools that they can believe in and buy into, if progress is going to be made. Schools are not independent or isolated organisations that exist in a parallel plane to the rest of society. They are organisations that affect, and are affected by, the environments in which they function. There is a multiplicity of stakeholders which are, and should be, invested in the success of their schools.

Mission and Vision statements provide a basis for long term planning and for strategic development of businesses. As one of the most successful businesses in the world in the 21st Century, Coca-Cola's 2020 mission statement and vision statement (2010) includes: "looking ahead and understanding the trends and forces that will shape their business in the future; moving swiftly to prepare for what is to come; getting ready for tomorrow today". (Coca-Cola, 2010 p. 1-2).

As a successful business which reaps extensive profits, Coca-Cola uses its vision and mission statements to best develop this company in a fast-paced society. Coca-Cola's vision and mission statements stipulate the driving forces of the company that steer this success. They are optimistic and positive, and provide a vision which all Coca-Cola company employees and subsidiary companies can strive towards. Their 2020 Vision creates a long term destination of where they would like the company to be, but their mission is to remain open to change and adjust to the requirements and needs of the market in order to progress to that point of increased success. Their mission declares the purpose of the company and serves as the standard against

which they will weight their actions and decisions, thereby guiding all aspects of their business by describing what they need to accomplish in order to continue achieving sustainable quality and growth (Coca-Cola, 2010, p. 1-2). But how does a company translate its vision and mission statements into operational practices that lead to change and strengthen its market position, and what significance does this have for school vision and mission statements? Melinda Gates (2011) suggests that there is a great deal that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), educational departments and schools can learn from a successful business such as Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola, Gates argues, utilises three main operational strategies which promote the success of its company, which can be linked to the vision and mission of the company: that is, they take real time data and feed it back into the product immediately; they tap into the local entrepreneurial talent and they utilise an aspirational marketing technique that associates the product with how people want to live, while taking a local approach (Gates, 2011).

By taking real time data and tapping into the local communities, the Coca-Cola Company understands the trends that shape their business. They are able to react immediately and be flexible and adapt their product, as the need arises, to ensure continued success of that product. For example, when World Cup sporting events or Olympic Games are held, the Coca-Cola Company fuels excitement and enthusiasm in their product by printing trivia questions or information about participating countries on their cans. They run competitions that might offer a trip to the hosting country to see “the big game”, and they endorse advertising and music linked to the hype of the sporting occasion.

This is all a result of understanding the consumer, and linking into what is important to the consumer.

If one takes these strategies and applies them to schools in South Africa now, taking real time data (such as continuous assessments, shared assessments, international benchmark tests etc.) and acting immediately on the results would promote an active response to the functioning and progress of the school, instead of waiting for a response to the matriculation examinations, or for the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) documents to be fully implemented and incremental assessment results to be released.

Tapping into the local community and getting it involved in the school's functioning will promote interest in and value of the school to its community. As the restructured Bronfrenbrenner model (refer to page 7) describes, the school exists in an active environment, affected by, and affecting, a number of community groups and members. These interrelated stakeholders can be utilised in such a way that action is taken in response to the real time data (or reality) in which schools are functioning.

Where classroom sizes are growing and the teacher: pupil ratio is increasing, utilising community members to come and read to the learners or listen to the learners read, and getting parents, grandparents and local businesses involved could result in boosted results from the learners. With a strong school vision and mission statement, the school could market itself in such a way that the aspirations and visions of the community for the school would be shared and seen as an obtainable goal for the future. The school, and

education itself, could be marketed in such a way that the learners who attend it and the families who choose to send their children to that school will have the expectation that education and their child's success in education will take their child to a successful future. However, this will be developed only once the mission and vision of the school has been established, and this idea can only really flourish once the community and stakeholders of the school have bought into, and follow through with, the principal's vision and the mission statement of the school.

Aspiration builds a vision of what one wants to strive toward. From what she has seen in her travels around the world and in every developing country that she has visited with the Gates Foundation, Gates (2011) imparts that, "people want their children to be successful, to be healthy and to have a successful life". She has identified these as the personal visions that people have for their children. Education plays an exceptionally important role in providing success for children so that they might reach their true potential as adults. It provides them with the necessary skills, attitudes and values to prepare them for an uncertain future. It prepares the learners for an environment of uncertainty and change, and the school, as a learning organisation environment with a vision to looking ahead, and understanding the trends and possible environmental influences that may change, and preparing for that change, models this approach.

The Maryland School System, through MDK12 (1997), argues that the school community would benefit from creating a shared vision that is aligned with the core beliefs of the school and the community so that all parties are able to

commit to them, and that the school improvement policies need to be linked to this vision and these goals as well (MDK12, 1997, p.1). In their work with schools, Gabriel and Farmer (2009) propose that if a group wishes to move forward, it needs to have established a purpose that is supported by all of its members, and they provide four basic guidelines: “what is the purpose?”, “what are the goals of the individuals?”, “what does everyone envision from the process?”, and, “has everyone shared their ideas with each other?”.

Gabriel and Farmer (2009) maintain that a team is more likely to achieve its objectives if the individuals are aware of and support the collective goals of the institution (Gabriel & Farmer, 2009, n.p.). These are the collective goals and which are in the best interest of the school and the community that the principal has to identify and prioritise if he or she is to create a vision and mission statement that is truly going to propel the school towards greater success and school improvement.

## 2.5 The School Vision and Mission Statement

### *The School Vision and Mission Statement*

Hammonds (2005) argues that the vision statement of a school should be one, good, encapsulating statement, and the mission statement should be the same. Within the encapsulating statement, however, the possibility for further development and explication should be offered. While the statement encapsulates all that the school will strive towards, the values and understanding of this vision will be suggested and further explained in

supporting documentation (Hammonds, 2005, p. 1). Gabriel and Farmer (2009) explain that the school vision is the goal of what is being strived for – where the school will be in the future, whereas, the mission statement provides the plan of action towards achieving the school vision (Gabriel & Farmer, 2009, page unknown). See Table 2.5.1:

**Table 2.5.1 : Comparing The School Vision To The Mission Statement**

| School Vision Statement | School Mission Statement |
|---|---|
| • Concise<br>• A single, encapsulating Statement<br>• A projected goal of what the school is striving for or to become<br>• A common understanding of the vision amongst stakeholders is crucial | • Further development and explication of the school vision is offered<br>• Step by step processes of how the vision is to be achieved are described<br>• Incorporates what the school is striving towards<br>• Describes the values behind the school vision<br>• Understanding of the mission statement and the way forward for the school by the stakeholders is crucial |

## *Factors Which Might Contribute to School Improvement*

Christie et al. (2007) reported the following factors which seemed to contribute to the success of the "schools that work" which were studied for the 2007 ministerial report. All of these "features of effective schools", as reported and tested by Christie et al. (2007), coupled with "positive reinforcement and professional leadership", provide a strong foundation for a successful path towards school improvement (Christie et al., 2007, p. 58-97). The links between these factors and Senge's (1990) five disciplines of the learning

organisation are noted in Table 2.5.2 and detailed in the paragraphs that follow.

**Table 2.5.2 : The Five Disciplines Of The Learning Organisation And Schools That Work**

| Senge's (1990) Five Disciplines of the Learning Organisation | Christie et. al.'s (2007) Characteristics of Schools that Work: "Features of Effective Schools" |
|---|---|
| • Personal Mastery | • high expectations<br>• continual monitoring of progress |
| • Mental Models | • concentration on teaching and learning<br>• purposeful teaching |
| • Shared Vision | • shared vision<br>• home – school partnership |
| • Team Learning | • creation of a learning environment |
| • Systems Thinking | • pupils' and teachers' rights |

Personal Mastery:

In Christie et al.'s (2007) report, "schools that work" display an environment of high expectations. There is a sense of high expectation placed upon the teachers, and, even more so, on the learners, and competition is seen as a way of stretching learners' capabilities (p. 79).

They describe enthusiastic and motivated teachers, with positive attitudes and values, who show confidence, competence and sound subject knowledge, and schools where working towards continuous improvement is a motivator and attraction to staff and learners (p. 97). They argue that "there is no doubt that the good results of these schools (that work) are produced by the commitment of principals and teachers" (Christie et. al, 2007, p. 58) because

teachers with a passion for their subject motivate and enthuse the learners with the same passion. This notion of “high expectations” is a value that one would expect to see underpinning a principal’s meaningful school vision.

The “continual monitoring of progress” is another factor that Christie et al. (2007) attribute to schools that work, and one that can also be linked to Senge’s (1990) principle of ‘Personal Mastery’. It involves the teachers and learners setting personal goals for themselves, the teachers taking responsibility for their roles in the performance of their students (Christie et al., 2007, p. 97), and the ‘schools that work’ not only monitoring end-of-year exam results, but monitoring progress with quarterly assessment result analysis (p. 68). Christie et al. (2007) also report that there is a procedure of positive and constructive criticism given, followed by support and assistance where necessary (p. 76). In this way, Senge’s (1990) principle of continually reassessing the balance between where the school (organisation) is, in reality, and where the school will be (the vision and the goal) is followed through with.

Mental Models:

‘Concentration on teaching and learning’ is evident in the schools that work, according to Christie et al. (2007), as the importance of holding a steady focus on the primary tasks of teaching and learning are continually illustrated, bearing witness to what can be achieved through commitment and a sense of responsibility (p.106). Like a school vision should be, this quality of a “steady focus” translates as a foundational mindset of the teachers and students at the schools that work. It is evident in the way that the individuals approach

their work (whether they are teachers or learners) and in their commitment to the quality of education at their school. In these particular cases, the follow-through of each individual's commitment to teaching and learning was evident in a range of extra lesson and class schedules: early morning lessons, afternoon classes, evening classes, Saturday classes, winter and September schools and holiday teaching programmes (Christie et al., 2007, p. 66).

In these lessons, purposeful teaching is vital. Christie et al. (2007) report that good time management and careful use of time is evident (p. 66). The engrained commitment to education that the teachers and learners have at the "schools that work" is practised every day in their actions and it seems to be their mental model (Senge, 1990) of what a quality education involves and looks like, in practice.

Shared Vision:

Christie et al. (2007) convey a shared vision and a home-school partnership as contributing factors towards successful schools in South Africa. A school vision that is not visible in the actions and procedures of the school is negligible. The "schools that work" displayed a strong commitment to the vision of the school (p. 59), where individuals cohered around the central tasks of their schools. They defined this task in terms of "hard work and achievement, and they structured their time and curriculum coverage to meet this... and operated in self-sustaining ways..." (Christie et al., 2007, p. 105).

It is also imperative that all members of the school community commit to the vision of the school, as the relationships between all stakeholders and each

other is crucial to the success of the school. This is supported, again, by the model on page 6 of this dissertation, and the interrelatedness of the school within its environment. Therefore, a partnership between the school and the community, and the school and the home is also required, so that the values and underlying principles of the school vision is reinforced in all aspects of the students' (and communities') lives.

The shared vision of the school and the goals for school improvement need to be visible in all aspects of the community if it is going to develop into a reality, and this vision requires the commitment of each individual to actively participate and engage in the tasks required in order for the goals to be achieved. In other words, the principal's vision of school improvement and success needs to be shared by the other stakeholders if it is to come to fruition.

Christie et al. (2007) explore the custodial and reciprocal responsibility at the "schools that work":

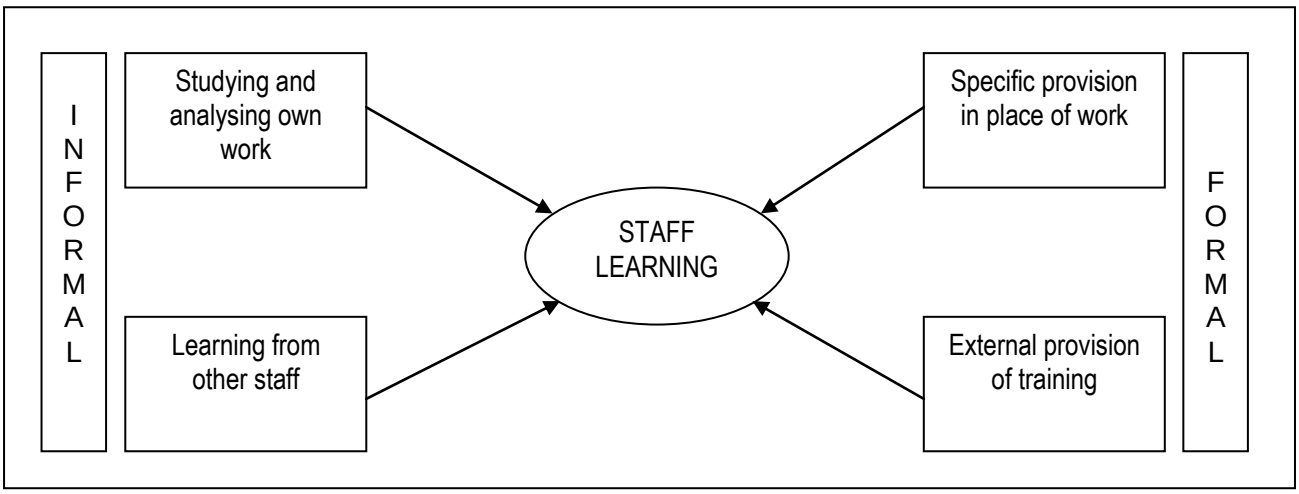
The school does not belong to the principal alone. Collectively, parents and teachers own the school... and this notion results in support from the community. "The community understands the vision and the culture of the school, and if there are parent meetings, they attend in large numbers" (Christie et al., 2007, p. 59). In this way, the school development and improvement plan (the vision) is "owned" by all members of the community, and they actively take responsibility for what they can do to make that vision a reality. It seems as though, in these schools, there is a personal commitment from all stakeholders to enforce the school vision.

Team Learning:

In the “schools that work”, Christie et al. (2007) reported evidence of “excellent teams” (p. 59) and an environment of learning, explaining that teachers shared their professional excellence and learning with each other and with the school (Christie et al., 2007, p. 105). “The provision of high-quality teachers to under-privileged areas bears consideration in the South African context” (p. 20), and with the changes to the National Curriculum, and the requirements thereof, it is vital that teachers remain “up-to-date” in their abilities to present the changing aspects of the curriculum. Those teachers that require further training will need to attend courses, either run externally, or provided by teachers at their schools who are so trained. The teachers at the “schools that work” utilise resources such as libraries, newspaper supplements, and resource centres (p. 69 – 70), and they engage with current affairs and the news. They utilise strategic networking in collaborative projects with other schools while offering support to other schools in their areas of strength (Christie et al., 2007, p. 80). In this way, the teachers are continuously aiming to further improve their abilities and strengths so that they may help others to improve as well, for the good of the school and their community.

As Bush and Middlewood (2005) propose, “any organisation where the staff are neglected as adult learners, will reduce its potential to be effective for those who attend it” (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 192). The different methods in which staff can learn in this way is coherently represented in a simple flow chart, provided by Bush and Middlewood (2005):

**Figure 2.5.1. Informal and Formal Methods of Staff Learning (Bush & Middlewood, 2005).**




Systems Thinking:

The “schools that work" exhibited “well organised planning systems for every aspect of the school’s activity” (Christie et al., 2007, p. 77) which suggests that the leadership of these schools is not conducted as managing isolated areas of need and focus, but rather a whole-school considered approach, where the responsibilities of each department and individual has been directed towards their functioning as part of a whole, in other words, how each individual contributes towards the achievement of the school vision. In the cases of the “schools that work”, Christie et al. (2007) describe for the learners, an environment where the pupils’ responsibilities include respecting their teachers and acknowledging the responsibilities that they have for their own learning, and they are encouraged to participate and engage in their school life (Christie et al., 2007, p. 66).

The five disciplines of the Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990) are a useful template for a school leader who is planning to propel their school towards improvement. It provides the fundamental aspects that a principal might consider when beginning to formulate a school vision and path towards achieving that vision. As Christie et al. (2007) have argued, these disciplines support the effective characteristics that the South African "schools that work" have exhibited.

In order for a principal to incorporate an approach such as this, he or she would require a plan of how they would achieve this. To transform an organisation like a school into a "Learning Organisation" would require a series of strategies, input and staff development meetings that would engage the rest of the team so that the school vision becomes one that is shared by all stakeholders.

## Creating a Vision and Transforming a Vision into Reality

Public schools in South Africa usually have a vision and mission statement. While there is no evidence that this is a governmental requirement of school leaders, it is widely considered a mandatory aspect of leadership and management today. However, there is a vast difference between a generic vision statement that just "exists" on paper and a vision that has been created based on an invested interest in the future of a school; one that is shared by the staff and pupils who work at that school and the community of that school. In order to be effective and to have a real impact on the progress of school improvement, the vision statement and mission statement need to be

connected to what is practised at the school; the purpose behind the vision needs to be translated into action. This requires the vision to be shared by all stakeholders, and it also requires self-discipline and commitment from each of the individuals, a critical aspect of personal mastery.

Hammonds (2005) articulates that a vision initiated by the school leader, a vision that is shared by the community, that is comprehensive, yet detailed, and that is positive and inspiring, is a powerful vision (Hammonds, 2005, p. 2). A powerful vision is more likely to inspire the stakeholders of the school and community to buy into it and to practise the principles of it, thus transforming it from words on paper into action.

In a time where Departmental requirements, curricula and short-term deadlines can easily bog down the progression of a school, a powerful school vision is needed that drives the "living system" (Moloi, 2005) through these required protocols without losing sight of the goal. Teachers, administration staff, learners and parents will invest themselves towards achieving this vision because it provides an avenue for them towards achieving that which they all aspire to: success in their learning and a "successful life" (Gates, 2011).

### The Vision and Mission Statements of the Gauteng Department of Education:

Fleisch (2008) discusses the "crisis" in education, particularly with regard to Reading and Mathematics in primary schools. The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) has two strategies in place to address this "crisis", namely

the Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy, 2010-2014, and the Gauteng Mathematics, Science & Technology Education Improvement Strategy, 2009-2014. In both of these documents, the vision and mission statements of the GDE are stipulated. The vision of the GDE is to “ensure that every learner in Gauteng does well at school and leaves our institutions with the knowledge, skills and qualifications that will give them the best chance of success in adult life” (GDE, 2010, p.4), and their mission statement goals are to “ensure” that Gauteng has effective schools, to provide necessary support where needed, to enable young people to make the transition from schools to further education institutions and to strengthen the GDE’s partnerships with all stakeholders (GDE, 2010, p. 20).

While these statements provide a hopeful vision, and a necessary ideal, of the kind of future in education that all stakeholders are striving for, they are very broad, and it is challenging to adapt and follow through with them “on the ground”, at school level, where action towards the goal needs to take place. At the moment, there seems to be little congruency between the vision stipulated and the capabilities of most schools of being able to fulfil that vision. Perhaps, one should consider a school vision that would, concurrently, promote school improvement and support leaders in adapting and being aware of environmental trends and practices that will allow change, when necessary, so that the school can cope with both expected and unexpected obstacles.

## 2.6 Obstacles That Schools May Face

Schools exist in environments of continuous change, and beyond that, different schools experience different obstacles. However, the following factor may have a considerable impact on the ability of leaders to implement a shared vision which is shared by all stakeholders in the school: failure to commit by some core members: Senge (2005) acknowledges that “people let us down” (p. 146). Just because the principal may have a ‘clear’ vision in his head, this does not mean that everyone else in the school will just “jump on the bandwagon” and commit to it. One has to believe or promote their sense of personal mastery for members of staff to strive to better themselves and the school through their commitment to the shared vision of the school.

Patience is also important. Positive results are not going to necessarily be seen straight away. Elmore and City (2007) report that through their observation and research it has been noticed that “there are no “breakthroughs” or dramatic “turnarounds” in the improvement of low-performing schools.” There are, instead, “intermittent periods of significant improvement, followed by periods of relative statis or decline, followed by periods of improvement again” (Elmore & City, 2007, p. 1). It would require a lot of belief and trust behind the principal for the majority of the staff to overcome their doubt in the process, and it would require a tool such as a vision or mission statement as a support, motivation, or reminder for all members that can help them overcome the periods where progress has slowed down or is static. Senge (1990) describes the tension of structural conflict that exists between the vision and belief in powerlessness or

unworthiness, but adds that despite this, success is sometimes observed, and that willpower plays an important role as well (Senge, 1990, p. 147-167).

He adds that “starting where you are with whoever is there” (p. 292) is the greatest challenge when integrating a learning and working approach in any organisation, because the possibility of fragmentation exists (Senge, 1990, p. 292). It is important for stakeholders at all levels to understand that strategic thinking and implementation is crucial at all levels. This will encourage the transformation of the leader’s vision into a shared vision throughout the school and the community.

With the subject of this dissertation being a previously disadvantaged South African school, which, as Moloi (2005) stated, may refer to any school in historically black areas, Christie’s (2008) description of the “Culture of Poverty” warrants exploration. It should be noted that, as the aim of the Apartheid government was to perpetuate the subservience of the particular racial groups through the limitation of educational content, job opportunity and resources (as explained in the introduction), the way that these communities lived was limited. Generally, they were poor and did not have the means afforded to them to better their circumstances.

The “Culture of Poverty” theory is one that explores the effect of home backgrounds on student achievement, and is based on the principle that “a culture of poverty traps poor people into cycles of low achievement and low expectations which are passed on from generation to generation” (Christie, 2008, p. 169). Thus, poor school achievement features as a part of this cycle

and social inequality is perpetuated. According to Christie (2008), this theory, applied to the educational realm, requires that learners be compensated for their ‘deficient’ backgrounds. However, she argues that, while basic needs, such as food, clothing and health services may need to be provided for these children, this should not be confused with the fact that they may have a capacity of learning, as well as the ability to contribute to the system of learning in the school, and that they should not be devalued based on their home circumstances. She argues that the school should look beyond their social context, and while certain scaffolding may need to be provided for these children to understand better, their personal deficiencies to learning are a result of conditions beyond their making, but are not necessarily limitations to their learning ability (Christie, 2008, p. 169 – 170).

# Chapter Three : Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction : Qualitative Research

This dissertation is a qualitative study of one, previously disadvantaged school in Johannesburg and the way in which the principal has used the vision and mission statements of the school as a tool towards creating change and sustaining success at the school.

Why look deeply at a single school?

A school is a myriad of interpersonal and professional relationships that exist between each of the individuals and teams of individuals that work there. Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that “qualitative data are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts” (p.1). The “living system” (Moloi, 2005) of a school cannot be represented only as a set of statistics and an analysis of school results, as these results could not adequately tell the story of the individuals that have affected the changes that the school has witnessed under the leadership of its principal.

Miles and Huberman (1994) consider that qualitative data allows the researcher to explore the sequences and events that led to certain consequences, “preserving the chronological flow” of a narrative that “derives fruitful explanation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1).

"Words … have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour that often proves far more convincing to a reader… than pages of summarised numbers" ( Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1)

The characteristics of qualitative research include the following, as discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994):

- It is conducted through intense contact with a 'life situation';
- The researcher gains an holistic overview of the context and investigates through a process of attentiveness and empathetic understanding, the perceptions of the 'local actors' from 'the inside';
- 'A main task is to explicate the ways that people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations';
- The researcher is the primary 'measurement' instrument in the study;
- Most analyses are done with words, as opposed to numbers and statistics, and these words are organised in such a way that allows the researcher to "contrast, compare, analyse and bestow patterns upon them"; (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 5-7).

As a teacher, I am acutely aware of the environment that a school offers. Having either taught at, interacted with or visited many different types of schools over my study and teaching career, I have come to understand that each school is different to the next. Each principal and school management team has their own leadership style, based on their school's needs and requirements. Two schools that might, statistically, appear similar could, in fact, be completely disparate in the daily functioning and relationships that occur there. The nature of schools is such that each is as unique as the individuals that comprise the staff or student bodies, because, as individuals, we are each affected by, or even, a product of, our own environments as Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) model makes clear.

Qualitative research allows then for more nuanced and in-depth illustrations of the facets of a particular person or organisation. There are many different forms of qualitative research and the selection of any one technique carries with it opportunities and constraints. In her study of narrative analysis, Riessman (1993) suggests that an appropriate metaphor for narrative analysis research is *story telling*. "The story metaphor emphasises that we create order, construct texts in particular contexts"(Riessman, 1993, p. 1).

In seeking to research a relatively uncommon occurrence (the use of mission and vision as a motivating force in a school), I was drawn to interpretive forms of qualitative research. Maxwell (2005) describes how the researcher's attempt to understand the meaning of their research participants' lives, actions and behaviour is central to this approach to Social Science research:

> Understanding the meaning for participants in the study of events, situations, experiences and actions they are involved in or engage in... you are interested not only in the physical events and behaviour that takes place, but also in how the participants in your study make sense of these, and how their understanding influences their behaviour. (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22)

This search for interpretive forms of research led me to find the particular form known as Portraiture.

Henning (2004) argues that if the data indicates that a theme lies in the traits of a person (or, in the case of this study, both the traits of the leader and the traits of the "living system", or organisation, itself) then the course of action would be to compose a portrait (p. 111). She argues that in Portraiture composition, the central

characteristics are isolated as the primary concept, and these are then linked to the activities, events and encounters which are presented as an amalgamated picture, rather than a narrated story (Henning, 2004, p. 111). She stresses that the emphasis is on the "connection of data" where the connections between the data become as important as the data itself (p. 111).

The process of creating a portrait in qualitative research "combines inductive and deductive thinking", according to Henning (2004), and "while the data may inform the concept mapping, the mapping itself informs the analyst to select data for the next connection to the network... and the logic is… different to that of conventional content analysis" (Henning, 2004, p. 112).

## 3.2 Portraiture

> "Portraiture" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997) is a combination of systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression ... where the portraits are designed to capture the ... complexity of ... human experience in a social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who "negotiate those experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 3).

Human experience provides access to the "soul" of the subject, which is why, through a Portraitist approach, the functioning of one school can be distinctive and different to that of others in similar circumstances. Just like a portrait, one's vision and sense of expectation or achievement is personal. Each principal's vision for their school is going to be based on the needs of that particular school and its circumstances, and those circumstances and needs will be different for different subjects, or schools.

For a portrait to be created with depth, the elements of light and dark colours are used, and the same applies to a written piece of portraiture, it is both sceptical and receptive (p. 4), it presents a balance between aesthetic and empirical approaches, “merging rigor and improvisation, and appreciating both the details and the gestalt” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 6).

Portraiture is a selection of one angle that is intended to transform one’s vision of the whole (p. 5). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) explain that, especially in the area of research in education, the tendency is, most often, to document failure, rather than to describe examples of success, and they argue that relentless scrutiny of failure results in the following:

- We begin to get a view of our social world that magnifies what is wrong and neglects evidence of promise and potential,
- This focus on failure can lead to a kind of cynicism and inaction,
- The documentation of pathology often bleeds into a blaming of the victim. Rather than a complicated analysis of the coexistence of strengths and vulnerabilities, the locus of blame tends to rest on the shoulders of those most victimised and least powerful in defining their identity or shaping their fate,
- It seems to encourage facile inquiry.

Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis (1997, p. 8)

There are a number of different kinds of portraits created, depending on their purpose. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) describe that, like a

painter painting a portrait, or a photographer setting the lighting for a photograph, the intention behind the methodology of Portraiture is that it is designed to present the subject at its best, yet remain true to the realistic qualities of the subject (p. 9). Throughout history, paintings and photographs (including portraits) have been used to record history and present the subjects at their “most true”, and that was my intention for this study.

It should, however, be acknowledged that the portrait is a reflection of the perceptions of the portrait painter, and that this process requires a fine balance of what it true to the subject and what is perceived by the portraitist. The process of Portraiture begins by searching for what is “good and healthy, and assumes that this goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (p. 9).

This is exactly why I was drawn to this style of academic writing. While there is a great deal of literature researched and written about what is wrong with the South African educational system and the failure of schools, and although I do not discount the importance of this, I found myself enjoying the *“Schools That Work”* document far more than the other literature that I was engaging in, because it was looking for, and displaying, the positive. I felt that I could connect to it more, personally.

In my experience of studying teaching and from working in South African schools, I have witnessed for myself many dedicated teachers and learners,

exhibiting aspects of personal mastery, who commit themselves towards a better educational system in South Africa. I have seen individuals who strive to improve themselves by studying further, and I have attended schools which have reached out to other schools to pool their knowledge and resources so that everyone may benefit. My personal exposure to education in South Africa has been a positive one, and I really felt that I could commit myself to a research project that illuminated what is good about schools in South Africa, particularly through presenting an analysis of a school that has, against all odds, propelled itself to success amidst a range of challenging circumstances.

Hackmann (2002) reports that, by embedding one's own voice within the text (in a Portraiture methodological approach), the researcher enables the reader to experience a deeper level of understanding and empathy that would be exceedingly difficult to achieve if they were writing as a dispassionate, detached observer (Hackmann, 2002, p. 53). Portraiture aims to reshape the relationship between the researcher and the audience, and by engaging in metaphoric and symbolic narrative, it aims to produce text that will "seduce the readers into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 9-10).

As previously stated, the general public hold the current educational system in South Africa in very low esteem (refer to page 35 and Appendix 1- my diary entry), and through this study, my aim is to reconnect the reader to the fact

that there are some schools which are achieving amazing feats and overcoming great challenges every day.

Coupled with the intention of reconnecting the public to the findings of the research is Hackman's (2002) relevant observation that, "school leaders are often reluctant to draw upon the findings of traditional research reports" for reasons which may include the fact that traditional academic research may seem generalised and, somewhat, removed from the practice of what they feel is happening in their schools; or, that the formality of academic research with its "research jargon" renders the reports overwhelming and cumbersome to read, and therefore, they are avoided (Hackman, 2002, p. 57).

Consider a school photographer that has been invited to take the annual school photographs. The photographer first takes a formal class photograph of each of the classes. With the learners all in school uniform, these different class photographs would look fairly similar, and to anyone who did not know the students in those classes personally, there would be no distinguishing between one photograph and another. To me, this could be likened to how the South African schooling system is currently viewed, schools clustered together, with little distinction between individuals. Compare that to the individual photograph of the child, still in school uniform. While the subject is still identified as being a part of the cluster, as they are wearing the school uniform, when one isolates that individual child, one is able to identify distinct qualities and characteristics of the child. The child's personality can shine through in the portrait. The rich colours of the photograph are revealed close

up, developing greater tone and depth. One can relate to the child, study the expression of the child, and imagine what the child is thinking, or what their hopes and dreams might be. Through writing in the Portraiture style, the reader is able to develop a more intimate, and, perhaps, more complex, connection to the subject of the study.

I believe that Portraiture was the most appropriate approach for this study, as the purpose of this research project was to find a rare example of how one school is overcoming the challenges that it faces; to find that unique school that has a story to tell, a story that would otherwise be lost in the annual array of “class photographs”.

Davis (1997) describes the challenge of balancing the tension between the need for reasonable research and the artistic expression that will still portray an accurate, yet poetic, piece of writing… as the “portrait that tells the story faithfully” while providing enough interest for the ‘general as well as specialised reader’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 37). As the researcher, I was exposed to an explosion of visual and auditory stimuli that, had I been painting an artistic portrait, I might have found myself uncontrollably spreading thick, bright colours across the canvas, in broad, over-exaggerated sweeps, to start. The excitement of what I had found, and what I could not wait to report on, fuelled my passion for the piece that I was writing. However, I accepted that this excitement had to be reigned in and strategically sequenced in order to get ‘my story’ faithfully told and within the constraints of writing what was true to the study.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) discusses the 'search for goodness' in the portraitist's journey of data collection and interviews, where she illuminates the researcher's stance as being one of "acceptance and discernment, generosity and challenge, encouraging the actors in the expression of their strengths, competencies and insights" (page 141). I mentioned, previously, my personal connection to teaching in the South African education system, and my positive experiences leading me to a heightened desire to tell this story of hope. I found myself easily relating to the pride that these teachers feel for their school and the passion that they have for their learners. I had to continuously remind myself to look for the different tones and colours that would render my portrait an authentic reflection of the subjects that I was exploring.

As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains, I, as the researcher, was keen to investigate the personal experiences of the people that I interviewed, as it would be through "the roots of *their* knowledge, and the range of *their* perspectives" that I would be able to create and present a true representation of the *soul* of the school that I was studying, which was personified by the rich expression of the teachers, learners and management team who transform the shell of this institution into the hard-working living system that it has become. She also, however, reminds us, that the tones of the portrait should be balanced, and that the allowance must be made for the expression of

vulnerability, weakness, prejudice and anxiety which can provide a grounding counterpoint to the strengths of the subject and "actors" (page 141).

During the course of my research, I came across a book report of Lawrence Lightfoot's initial work, written in the style of Portraiture, "The Good High School" (1983), a book that painted three portraits of three different high schools, in different areas and economic contexts of America. While Krilanovich (2007) had highlighted all of the advantages of presenting the findings of her observations of the three high schools in the methodology of Portraiture, she criticised Lawrence-Lightfoot's focus on the leaders of the schools, explaining that the reader might have made a more emotional connection to the piece if she had included more characters that the readers could identify with, and those who could present a more lucid image of what life is really like at the school (Krilanovich, 2007). While this review may not have been a published reflection of Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) report, I understood her criticism, and it motivated me to try, through my observation and research approach, to connect more with the teachers and staff of the school in order to forge a greater connection to the reader, sharing their perspectives, as well.

It was through this type of preparation that I was able to formulate my approach and consider, carefully, the types of questions that I was going to ask, as well as the mode of my interviews. Rather than approaching the individuals as a "foreign, official researcher", I introduced myself as an

educator who also happened to be a student of the university. I felt that it created a more relaxed environment in which the “actors” would feel free to share their stories more readily. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) expresses that an early, self-reflective, self-critical exercise such as “articulating the contours of the framework, discerning her anticipatory schema and registering her preoccupations” increases the portraitist’s consciousness about the lens that she brings to the field, opening her eyes, mind and heart to the reality that she encounters and records (page 213).

It was through the writings and reflections that were based on my observations that I was able to identify the emergent themes that have, since, been used towards the creation of the aesthetic whole, which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) describe:

> The presentation of emergent themes, and the interrelationships among them, illuminates the structure of both the site and the portrait – the parts of the interpretation and their necessity to a view of the whole. (p. 231)

## Selecting a Subject for the Portrait:

As a qualitative research study, this work will investigate one school intensely and take an in-depth look at the school as a whole. The aim was to identify a particular school with a clearly articulated mission and vision statement and whose results, when compared to the results of other schools with a similar contextual background, are superior.

The premise to be investigated is whether, and to what extent, the principal's shared vision and mission statement is understood to have a played a role in its ongoing success. The school to be selected would be a previously disadvantaged public school in Gauteng within the second or third quintile, where, against the challenges that their environment suggests, this school has developed a workable policy through the incorporation of aspects of a learning organisation, including having a shared vision.

The study aims to investigate the typical activities and processes, the people who work at the school, and the extent of their involvement in the planning and implementation of the shared vision. The selected school's members were chosen for interview based on their experience of the context in which their school operates, and the journey that the school has gone through to enact the school's vision.

The purpose of this study was to understand how one phenomenon: the extent to which a strong vision and mission statement can have encouraging effects on school performance. It will investigate: how a principal, utilises the school vision to contribute to the sense of purpose in the school, and how this vision motivates teachers, learners, pupils, community members and support staff towards achieving the overall collective goal of school improvement.

Through interviews, conversations and observations, I sought evidence of the visibility of the goals and vision of the principal; whether the school vision is, in fact, followed through in action and beyond the plaque in the reception area;

and I inquired how each stakeholder interprets the vision and how it pertains to their specific contribution or area in the school.

## 3.3 The Research Process

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) provide a beautiful metaphor for the way in which the research process comes together, and that is, through the imagery of weaving a tapestry, which reflects the “structure, texture, colour, design, and the images of spinning a tale, telling a story and shaping a narrative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p. 247). In the methodology of Portraiture, four dimensions were identified by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997), and they comprise: conception, structure, the form, and cohesion.

### *Conception*

When studying for my Honours Degree at the University of Johannesburg, in the field of Leadership and Management in Education, I was introduced to a course presented by Professor KC Moloi. She presented “The School as a Learning Organisation” in the first semester of my first year. During one of her lectures, she described a school that she had lead in Vereeniging, and she expressed to us details of how she was able to guide that school to great improvement and increased stature in its community, through the application of the disciplines of the Learning Organisation, based on the work of Senge (1990). She described to us how the pride in, and respect of, the school grew as the mindset of the individuals who worked at and attended the school changed. Their ways of thinking developed from self-centred and personal to a “systems thinking” based approach.

The coursework content thrilled me. I was enthralled by the idea that a "simple" five-step approach, such as this, could create such effective results. The optimist (idealist, rather) in me believed that if all of the schools were exposed to this information and adopted this practice, that the education crisis in South Africa would be solved... of course, this was just an idealistic view, but it fuelled my interest in the topic, and motivated me to want to study it further.

For the research report that I completed, we were allocated a specific aspect of the "Holistic Leadership Approach" as presented by Loock, Campher & Du Preez et al. (2003), which included aspects of Senge's Learning Organisation. My research report was based on "Personal Mastery", and, again, I was motivated and encouraged by what I had researched.

Since my introduction to the Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990), I have wanted to share my passion for what I have learned, with other teachers and school leaders, who might, then, develop their interest in this topic and use it to the benefit of their schools, and they, too, might become passionate about the topic, and share what they have learned with others. Of the five disciplines of the Learning Organisation: Personal Mastery, Team Learning, Systems Thinking, Mental Models and a Shared Vision, I had to identify one that I would choose to research in depth. While one could argue that they are all inter-linked in many different ways, when reading through the "Schools that Work" report (Christie et al., 2007), it became clear to me that in order for schools to progress and "move forward", they require a "map", or, a plan of action to get them there.

## *Structure*

Before I started the observation process, I had prepared a basic outline of how I was going to develop this report, focussing on the background of the school, the physical observations that I could see, and then breaking down the key words from the vision and mission statements of the school. I expected to observe elements that were highlighted by the “Schools That Work” and the Learning Organisation literature, and I was keen to identify which leadership strategy or strategies, or combination thereof, the principal made use of. However, as the data collection is a series of stories and experiences, and not responses to restricted questionnaires and polls, I found a far richer story told of this school than I had anticipated, and it stretched beyond a particular leadership practice and the meaning behind the words written on a plaque. In Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation, you may notice that, much like an artist creating a work of art, the original structure and planning of this Portraiture account has wound up not resembling the original idea that I had imagined. Instead, it has developed through the experiences and personal stories of the people that I interviewed to be a more ‘impressionistic’ as opposed to theoretic observational piece, which I then was able to link back to the literature that I researched before the study.

## *Form*

The themes that emerged included the shared vision and the principal’s leadership practices, but the observation report transformed from a case study into a true *portrait* of a school. Instead of investigating “one of many” subjects in “the class photograph”, I was, instead, investigating the rare example, the “individual” with all of the characteristic features, and the living “soul” of it. In

my writing, the specific areas of the school vision and mission statements and theory of leadership have provided the aida cloth into which the personal experiences have then been embroidered. The different themes that emerged could be likened to the different colours of embroidery cotton, which blend together to create the whole piece at the end. Unlike a more academic style of writing, I found it difficult to isolate the themes into demarcated categories, as the different people's experiences around the same topics caused them to blend into the story.

### *Cohesion*

In Chapter Four, I will discuss a very special scrapbook that the team of educators and principal of the studied school have created. This scrapbook encapsulates everything that the school, as a living system, stands for and values. It has been created with painstaking care, as you will see, from my observation. My intention, for Chapters Four and Five, is to present the portrait of a previously disadvantaged primary school in the midst of continuously challenging circumstances in such a way that the reader can identify with this institution and recognise that it is not just another individual blending into a team of similar schools in "the class photograph". It has an identified purpose and the determination and commitment of dedicated staff members who share in the vision of the principal.

The cohesive factor in the story is not only the vision statement, as I had originally anticipated. It is also the school principal. The way that the report will come together in the end, will be a unified, and comprehensive reflection of the primary school at its best and its most vulnerable, and it will be a true

account of the individual and collective stories that have been shared during this process.

## 3.4 Data Collection Strategies

Personal interviews with key informants formed the basis of my data. I interviewed a range of educators at the school, the principal, and a member of the school governing body. I had a written, personal reflection of the school principal, authored by the deputy principal. Due to the nature of the method, the interviews were unstructured, but the themes and topics that were touched upon can be found in Appendix E. The method attempts to set the stage for respondents to reveal the story in their own words and provide their own understandings of their reality. My observations stemmed from numerous visits to the school, guided tours of the school, interviews of personal accounts, reading through minutes of meetings, school and principal profile reports, statistics of learner achievement, and through observations of awards functions from a respectful distance. Data was collected using field notes, and interviews were all consented to being audio-recorded. The expected length of observation was two weeks of continual observation at the selected school. However, because the observations were scheduled later than anticipated, they were recorded over a series of visitations in the fourth term of 2012 and in the first term of 2013. All information was recorded and archived timeously. Recorded interviews were transcribed and typed out for further analysis and arrangement to support the structure of this study.

*A Record of my Visits to the School*:

I made a number of sporadic visits to the school to retrieve different sets of data. It had been my intention to conduct my research in August, 2012, which would have been in the third term for the government Primary School and in my independent school holidays, where I would have then been able to have observed the school environment all day, every day, for a certain number of days. However, when I met with the principal, she respectfully asked me if I could do my observations in the following term, as the school was in the process of preparing for, and soon writing, the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) for Grades 3 and 6.

My first visit to the Primary School was in August, when I drove through to meet the principal, in person, for the first time. During that initial meeting, we discussed my intentions for the study and whether she thought her school was a suitable subject. It was then that she first showed me the scrapbook and we discussed the school's vision and mission statement. After that first encounter, I left the school with the conviction that it was an ideal subject for my portrait.

The school then was on September break and the following month was too busy for both of our schedules (the principal's and mine), and I was awaiting ethical clearance from the University. It was mid-November when the principal confirmed that the school was ready for me. I conducted five visits to the school in the end-of-year period before the Primary School was dismissed for the holidays.

On my first observational visit, I was fortunate to witness the end of the achievement assembly, and I was escorted around the property to take some photographs of the layout of the school and the offices. While my intention had been to interview the principal (as per her invitation), she was, understandably, otherwise engaged, and so I was happy to wander around and soak up my first observations.

Upon my following visit, I drove to the school the following Friday and met the principal again, in the parking lot. Unfortunately, she had been called away from our engagement to discuss bursaries of some of her students for high school, and she was off to meet with the sponsors and to go and collect their uniforms. I left the school straight away.

Upon my next visit to the Primary School, the principal was available to see me and was able to give me a lengthy, informative interview. It was the same day as the Grade 0 Celebration Assembly.

On my next visit, I was introduced to Faith[2], an Intermediate Phase specialised subject teacher. I sat with her for about an hour and a quarter, interviewing her about her experiences at the school and her understanding of the school's vision statement and the principal's role as a leader. After that, I met Mr Ngubane[3], a member of the School Governing Body (SGB), who shared a dual view of the school: one as an SGB member and the other as a grandfather of a number of children who attend the school.

[2] Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.
[3] Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

When I went back to the school in the last week of their term, there had, unfortunately been a mix up with the school's submission of the ANAs results and the teachers were in "crisis" mode. While I waited a long time in the reception area I was able to record a sense of the input that these teachers have towards the running of the school. While at the time I felt that I had wasted my time, in hindsight, and with reflection, I found that it was actually a good opportunity for me to see how the school functioned in a realistic circumstance.

On my last visit to the school for the year, I met with the principal again, this time in the deputy principals' office (they share an office). She and I discussed the end of year rounding ups and the preparations that had already been made for the following year. We discussed the successes of 2012 and the plans for 2013. It was then that she gave me the portfolio that David[4] had prepared about her, together with the SGB report and other timetables which had already been drawn up for 2013.

It was in the December holidays that I wrote up most of my research on the school. I typed up most of the portrait and was able to identify where I felt there were necessary inputs missing. I contacted the principal a week before the school opened again and made arrangements for a few more visits, so that I could clarify some of my observations.

In my first visit to the school this year, I observed an energetic start to the year and met with the principal again. She answered some of my questions and made some suggestions of two more educators that I might like to speak to for

[4] Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

different perspectives. One of them, Sydney[5], who teaches in the Intermediate Phase, and the other a Foundation Phase teacher who has been with the school for the entire duration of the current principal's tenure.

I went back to the school to interview these teachers and had a very interesting interview with Sydney, but was saddened to hear that the other teacher was not available to be interviewed due to personal reasons.

## 3.5 Limitations Of The Design

While a semi-conventional "case-study" approach in the collection of data was executed, the data will be analysed and presented in such a way that the relationship between the researcher and the reader will be heightened. Just like the vision of the principal and the learning organisation is shared with the community, that essence will be echoed through the presentation of this study to the reader by the researcher. With this in mind, the formulation of the questions and the depth of exploration into the topic, which can be more personal to some of the subjects, will be affected.

In an effort to ensure validity of the data, a selection of data-collection techniques was used, and an extended period of observation was followed. Participants will be quoted verbatim and as little inference as possible made to reduce bias of the researcher. However, with a methodology such as Portraiture, the nature of this writing approach is a more personal one, and so, a fine balance between these tenuous principles will be maintained.

[5] Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

## 3.6 Ethics

The University's code of ethics regarding informed consent, deception, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and caring will be upheld at all times by the researcher, and all data and information gathered, as well as the final research report, will be made available to the school after completion, with the understanding that the school or participants can retract from participation at any time.

The names of the participating educators and heads of department have been altered, to ensure anonymity and privacy. As it has been argued that the reasoning behind the methodology of Portraiture is to present the portrait of the rare and exceptional, to move beyond the anonymity of the "class photograph" and connect the reader to the subject, it was my intention to divulge the name of the school and its principal, with the consent of the relevant parties. However, this would jeopardise the anonymity of the other participants, and so, I have elected, rather, to give the principal and school each a suitable metaphorical pseudonym instead. I will refer to the principal as "Constance", aligned with the traits of faithfulness, loyalty and fidelity that she exhibits in her leadership practice; and I shall call the school "The School of Opportunity". I chose this name for the school for two reasons: namely, that "giving each child an opportunity for success" is the underlying principle of the school's vision statement, and because I have heard testimony to substantiate that this school goes out of its way to provide a host of opportunities through its teachers and across a range of activities to its pupils.

# Chapter Four: The School of Opportunity

## 4.1 Introduction

Nestled in the heart of an industrial area, East of Johannesburg, is an informal settlement, bustling with thousands of people going about their daily activities. Braziers line the littered sidewalks of the poorly tarred road, producing the smell of burning chemicals and melted waste that I tend to associate with industrial parks. I had no idea of what to expect, but was clinging to, and placing all of my faith in, the "Google Maps" directions that were leading me to my destination. Rather than relying on absent street names, I found myself counting meters on my odometer (as indicated by my tightly clutched directions) before turning and praying that I had not previously made an incorrect choice in roads.

I drew a big sigh of relief as I rounded the bend of what I had hoped was 'A' or 'B' Street and saw the large "School of Opportunity" sign that identified that I had reached my destination. While waiting for the, somewhat, wilted security guard to take my details, I allowed the first imagery of the grounds to seep in: The school is cordoned off by a concrete palisade fence and a black, steel, motorised gate. Behind the gate, and to the left, stands the tiny security hut, which was, on that day, crowded with a handful of unidentified people seeking conversation and a smidgen of shade. As I drove onto the property, I was greeted by a blisteringly hot, paved parking lot, lined with the staff members' cars, parked along its perimeter.

I turned off the ignition and looked through the fencing that embraces the school, and which, protectively, wards off the encroaching environment. The homes of this community comprise congested shacks and huts, built from corrugated sheets of metal, signboards, plastic sheeting and ropes. These abodes are modest and small in size, assembled almost on top of each other. They have no grass or gardens, and no playing areas that I could see. I noticed two little boys, pre school-aged, playing with stones in the sand, clad only in their underwear as the scorching sun beat down on their neighbourhood. They were crouching below a tree which was wedged between one of the shacks and the concrete fencing. The security guard had made her way to where I had parked and, smiling, offered to escort me to the offices, so I gathered up my bag, stationery and notebook, and followed her.

We made our way through a pedestrian gate to a prefabricated building. In this area of the grounds, there is a collection of stand-alone buildings, mostly prefabricated with small windows, and one bricked building, which encloses a small, beautifully manicured, rose garden. I was unable to tell which, if any, of these buildings were classrooms. While we walked through to the offices, I noticed that all of the doors of the administration section of the school have security gates.

When I entered the reception area, my shoulders dropped as I felt an overwhelming sense of welcome. I had expected to see the governmental posters about admissions for 2013, special concessions and pupils' rights, which I saw were mounted along the facing surface of the reception desk. However, I had not expected to see the myriad of photographs and smiling faces lining all of the free spaces on the walls. On one wall, mounted and framed, with brass plaques under each of the pictures was a large collection of portrait photographs of each member of

staff at The School of Opportunity, proudly presenting a unified team to its visitors. These portraits were arranged and labelled in such a way that it was easy to identify the School Management Team (SMT), the Heads of Department (HODs), the various teachers in the different phases, the administrative staff and the support staff. Every member of this team was smiling at me as I perused their pictures and read the corresponding names.

Also on display are individual portraits of national and educational officials and role models, whom the school has acknowledged, including President Jacob Zuma, Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, former President Nelson Mandela, MEC for Education: Gauteng, Barbara Creecy, the Minister of Basic Education, Angelina Motshekga, and the Gauteng Premier, Nomvula Mokonyane. Alongside these dignitaries is another inspiring set of photographs – the school's top boy and girl achievers for the year, framed, with their names beneath their photographs. These photographs, in particular, are placed above the doorway which leads through to the accounts offices and the principal's office.

Included in the exhibition, on the walls of the reception area, are the following: a summarised history of South Africa poster, entitled "The Road to Democracy", school participation certificates in sport, photographs of the principal with a number of pupils, a map of the school premises and an example of the Foundation Phase timetable.

Apart from the large frame of teachers and school staff, there are two items that, in size and stature, outweigh all of the rest of the welcoming pieces on the walls of that room, considerably. They are: the school crest, with the motto inscribed below it, and

the school's Vision and Mission Statements, neatly and legibly published and framed, together with the Vision Statement of the Gauteng Department of Education.

The School Vision Statement mirrors that of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). The School of Opportunity aims "To give every learner the opportunity to develop his/her talent and leave our institution with knowledge, skills and self esteem that will give them the best chance of success in adult life."
The Mission Statement declares that The School of Opportunity is "Dedicated in creating an effective and efficient working school by providing quality teaching in every classroom everyday".

The grass green and canary yellow colours of the school boldly unify all of the items on display, and my eyes were drawn to the great crest, fronting the reception desk. The 'edged' shaped shield is divided into three parts. In the top left partition lie a pick and shovel, crossing each other in an upward direction. To the right of this, in the second partition, is a flaming torch, burning bright. These two images rest on the foundation of an open book, in the last partition of the shield. My initial, personal interpretation of this shield was "hard work and enlightenment is based upon the foundation of knowledge". However, I later discovered that the school's formal dictum is actually, "Working Together, Bringing Light, Through Education."

The school's official motto, underlying their crest reads "Deo Volento", which, translated to English, means "God Willing". Interestingly, Wikipedia ® (page 'updated' 15 December 2012) explains that this phrase, "often found in personal letters (in English) of the early 1900s, was employed to generally and piously qualify a given *statement* about a *future planned action*, that it would be carried out, so long

as God wills it." With the purpose of my study and the school's vision statement in mind, this is a relevant description (a vision- a future planned action) of the term.

At first sight, I was pleasantly surprised by the pride and self-worth that this institution presents to its visitors. This was the first of my many visits to The School of Opportunity, and the subsequent visits and interviews that took place there painted an intricate portrait of this school's functioning and unique path of progress, overcoming the challenging environment in which it operates.

Upon my arrival at The School of Opportunity, I was made to feel like a guest. The offices are professional and inviting, where people and queries are attended to immediately. The staff members are friendly and greet visitors with a smile. Any teachers that entered the room acknowledged my sitting there and offered their own assistance. The rapport between the educators and the administration staff is friendly, yet appropriately business-like. I could not help but compare this environment to my own school's offices, which, at that moment, I considered to be rather relaxed and informal. While I was waiting for my appointment with the principal, there were other members of the community also waiting for assistance in various matters. I observed, silently, how each person was helped and given the necessary information that they had enquired about before leaving, seemingly satisfied.

The reception area and school offices are clean and tidy. I could not see a paper out of place, indoors or outdoors. There was not a scrap of litter to be seen …

anywhere![6] The educators' lockers, positioned against the far wall, underneath their portraits, were tidily arranged and not overflowing with paperwork. At first glance, this school appeared to be a haven of organisation and order, situated in an environment that is its antithesis.

I became aware of the fact that each member of staff that walked through was wearing a black outfit, accentuated by a touch of bright, lime green. Some of the ladies were wearing an artificial, ornate corsage or light scarf tied beautifully around their necks, complimenting their black dresses or lacy tops and knee-length skirts, whilst the gentlemen all donned a uniform, shiny, green tie with their black suits and polished shoes. They all looked incredibly smart and seemed to have dressed up for something in particular. I sidled over to the receptionist and asked her about the occasion that might have prompted this attire, and she replied that the staff always dress up like that for formal events and that, on that day, they were celebrating the graduation of the Grade R classes.

## 4.2 Celebrating Learner Achievement

This school, like many others, also hosts a "Celebration of Achievements" assembly at the end of the school year. I happened to be at the school on the Friday afternoon of this much anticipated event, where the learners were recognised for their outstanding performances in a range of subjects. I intercepted a Grade 4 girl who had been awarded a smart, laminated "Certificate of Recognition, awarded to (her name) for Best in Maths in Grade 4" while she was walking out of the grounds. She

[6] The references that are made to the extraordinary cleanliness and pride of grounds at the School of Opportunity are not meant to read as condescending. Rather, this is made with regard to my personal reflection when comparing this school, in the middle of a Johannesburg township, to the very privileged school where I teach, and where, the state of litter and care for the school grounds by the children is, very much, the opposite.

was so proud of her achievement and happily posed for me, not even knowing who I was, or why I might have wanted her photograph. The certificate was printed in colour, and was titled “The School of Opportunity Awards 2012”. On the side of the certificate, in the top right hand corner, was the School Crest, and at the bottom of the certificate, in large writing, was the Hollard: “live.work.play” slogan, with their logo to the right of it. This was the first branded item I saw which gave an indication of the corporate partnerships that the principal has secured for the school.

There was a large Nandos marquee that had been erected in the courtyard outside of the hall. As each learner filed out of the venue, they collected a sponsored, brown, paper bag of a delicious smelling lunch and continued on to meet their parents, who had, also in their best attire, flocked to the assembly. In a school with a number of learners that exceeds 1300, where fast food, in disposable packets and containers, was being handed out, I had expected to see at least one stray piece of a straw wrapper or a serviette glide past, carried by a breeze. However, there was none. The grounds were spotless and, with big, black bins well distributed, (as well as recycling bins alongside the parking lot), they have been spotless every time that I have visited, since.

## 4.3 What You See Is What You Get

Upon looking at the skeleton of The School of Opportunity, I observed that the paint on the walls was completely faded and stained by, what looks like, previous water damage. Despite being in desperate need of some paint, the walls are clean, and all of the windows are intact and spotless. I have, subsequently, learned that some of these structures are the original buildings that were placed here in 1940, when the

school was opened. The map of the school in the reception area informed me of the number of classrooms and the layout of the school:

There is a set of 14 classrooms in the top section of the school, which neighbour the hall. A separate, mobile classroom, the boys' and girls' toilets, the newly established Grade R classrooms and a kitchen complete the perimeter of a small courtyard. There are only 5 girls' toilets and 5 boys' toilets for all of the children who attend this school. The parking lot divides the property, with the computer room on the side, and two detached, prefabricated classrooms are situated across it from the main section. Adjacent to that prefab is the modest, but newly built brick building that provides, what the school map terms, an "Aid classroom", an HOD office and a storeroom.

This small building forms one side of the undersized, triangular rose garden that beautifies the entrances to the offices. In this lower portion of the school, the library-come-staffroom, offices, feeding scheme kitchen and one storeroom are housed. At the very bottom of the school's property, adjacent to the offices, is one more block of classrooms. This block used to be the building of the municipal clinic in the area, which has recently been adopted by the school and partitioned for the creation of another five Foundation Phase classrooms.

There are no gardens, fields or patches of lawn decorating the school, other than the one beautifully tended space at the entrance to the school offices, and the only reason that this small area has been turned into a garden, is that it is too small an area for another building or playing section for the learners. Every square meter of grounds is utilised, to its maximum potential, for learning spaces; so much so that there is no staffroom for the teachers to take their lunch or cup of tea in. Instead, the

educators make use of the library, a well utilised teaching space with groups of tables and chairs, for their meetings and break-time gatherings.

On the afternoon of the Celebration of Achievements assembly, the library was transformed into a cosy function venue. The groups of ordinary classroom tables had been, much like the teaching staff, dressed up for the occasion, set with black tablecloths, each with a piece of burnt-orange shaded organza which had been artfully arranged around a pot of similarly coloured chrysanthemums. On the issue desk was a selection of appetising cocktail style treats, consisting of what appeared to be chilli-bites, mini pies and sausage rolls, and sandwiches. It seemed as though the school had gone to a lot of effort for this occasion and used the space very effectively, transforming it from a staffroom-come-library into a function venue.

It is in this venue that I conducted most of my interviews with the educators and member of the School Governing Body (SGB). Upon close inspection, it is clear that the resources in the library, while limited, are valued. The books are all wrapped in protective plastic. They, and the shelves, are clean and organised into the appropriate sections. The space is inviting, with bright, stimulating colours, and the chairs are comfortable.

The first educator that I had the privilege of interviewing was Faith[7], an African woman who appears to be in her late 40s. She has a kind face, a big smile, and she has an approachable and convivial nature. Her voice is soft, with warm, comforting

[7]Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

tones. Faith was transferred to The School of Opportunity by the Department of Education some time ago:

> I was at another primary school[8], and with these things of the government, I was moved from that for only one month to another school, early in January, when they were doing this shuffle, and then, because I was in excess, I was phoned by the then principal, and he was in need of teachers, then I started here, and then Constance [the current principal] applied after, for a post here and she became the principal.

Sydney[9], an Intermediate Phase educator who has been working at The School of Opportunity for a number of years, described his relationship with the school:

> I like this school, despite the way it is: because when you look at it from the outside, you get a negative attitude, but when you get into the school, you see the atmosphere is quite friendly, we are working as a family [he laughs], actually, I enjoy being at this school.

He said that he adapted easily when he came here, even in the new areas that he was assigned to, not only because he was confident in the subjects that he was teaching, but also because he was assigned two mentors, consecutively, who helped him.

Faith spoke to me about her role, not only, as a teacher at this school, but also of how she and the other educators are sometimes mothers and fathers to the children at The School of Opportunity, too. Most of these children stream in from the surrounding informal settlements. When I asked about the history of the people in these settlements, I was told that some are immigrants from other African countries, like Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana and Lesotho, and there are also a lot of families that

[8]Details omitted to preserve the anonymity of Faith
[9]Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

have moved to this area from Polokwane and KwaZulu Natal, looking for better opportunities in Johannesburg.

She added that, while there has been some difficulty with the language barrier experienced with these children from other countries, there has been quite a lot of progress in this area for the following reasons: even though it is difficult for the children to adapt at first, they are able to communicate with older children who, previously, had come from those countries too, but, who have learned English over a course of a number of years at that school. These older children are able to translate instructions to them and interpret responses so that the teachers can communicate with them. She added, that, during this process, the educators are also becoming familiar with some of "those foreign languages", and that the children and the teachers are able to learn from each other.

> We have a big language barrier because when they come, at first, it is difficult for them to adapt to the situation, but as time goes, because they communicate with the others because there are those that were here a long time ago, now they understand our language, they can inform them what is it that we are saying in their own language. And you find out, Wow! It is so interesting because you even want to know more "What are you saying when you say this?" so at the end of the day there are languages that, even you, as a teacher, learn.

> It is difficult even with them because to talk in front of a class, you have to make them come in a group for them to just do it as if they are talking and say "just talk to her, say anything" and let it be. It's like whenever they alone they start and some of them have developed this thing of just be vocal and talk whatever, and they can now even, most of them, we have this problem of, as we said, the language barrier and some of them can't even read some of the words, they are struggling, but, with a peer next to her, she can [more] easily cope with everything.

The way that she described the school's role in this community is such that the school acts as a support structure. She explained that many of the families in this

school community do not have jobs, and so, as a school, the principal, with the support of the SGB, goes out and looks for sponsors which can assist the school. She used an example of the school being able to provide food for the children, as The School of Opportunity is on the list of the government feeding schemes, and this is provided through the assistance of an organisation that comes in and cooks for the children. She explained that, because of the environment that these children come from and where they are staying, they are, generally, seen as children who do not have the same “standard” (of living) as other schoolchildren. She added that the community sees the school as a place where their children are being provided with everything, and when they come to school, it is like their second home because they get loved and provided for.

Faith explained that it was not always like this, though. The community used to dismiss the value of the school, but they have grown to understand that even though the educators and staff of The School of Opportunity come from different backgrounds and are “outsiders” to the community, they are not there for their own purposes; that they are there for the children. As this realisation has grown, the community is approaching the school more, and when they have problems they reach out to the school for assistance.

Mr Ngubane[10], a representative of the School Governing Body, confessed that the value of education in the school, previously, was “low, low, low, low, low” in the early 1990s, but added that he has, since, seen the commitment to education from the community grow as the number of learners and grades have grown over the years. The school has more enrolments and has prepared the community’s children better

[10]Name has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

for formal instruction by opening four Grade R classes. The principal added that the school has become the only real resource that this community has, where more than 20 different churches use the hall and classrooms every Sunday, and political organisations use the school as a venue when addressing the people in the area, because of its accessible hall. Community graduations and weddings are conducted on the property. As a result of this, there is an established synergy between the school and the community. The school also provides services like the photocopying of Curricula Vitae or Identity Documents for community members who request this when they are seeking employment.

With regard to value for education, the principal explained that they still find that a percentage of the community does not send their children to school, or they will go through Primary education and when they complete their Grade 7 year, they drop out of school. The largest contributing factor is lack of money. In addition to this, there are also too few secondary schools in the area, they are situated much further away from the settlement, and the parents are not used to paying school fees as The School of Opportunity is a no-fees school. The school fees for Secondary school are, therefore, too high for the majority of the parents in the community to afford and they are unable to pay. However, she added that there are a number of their learners who are fortunate enough to go on to high school.

Another reason for children leaving school prematurely, which was highlighted during the interviews, was the issue of parental deaths. According to Faith and the principal, the children who lose their parents think that they have to drop out of school so that they can look after themselves, forgetting, as Faith explained to me, that if they go to school, there are parents at the school (she was referring to adults, teachers and

staff) who can help them. She expressed that the school looks towards the future of those children, but they, themselves, tend to start withdrawing from everything:

> We do have dropouts. And some of them it is because of these abusers that are in the community or whatever, otherwise there are these children who lose their parents and they just sit down and say that they have to now take care of themselves, forgetting if ever he do come to school the mothers are here. We do assist and look toward the future of that child, but then they start withdrawing from everything. We do have drop outs. Others, after Grade 7, they just stay away from the school, because the other challenge that we are facing, they don't have the near high school that they can be sent to for their further education from Grade 8 upwards… they have to travel long distances, while parents don't have money while others are travelling by the trains, whenever they walk [and are] late, they are not going to school and are running around at the end of the day. Then they miss a lot and they won't go next year because they say that now they are going to be at school with their brother.

However, Sydney commented that the expectations that the educators have of the learners is that they are well behaved and respectful of the teachers. He expects them to show a level of understanding of the work that is "delivered" to them and that this is shown in the tasks and activities that they are given to complete. He wants them to even try to implement what they have learnt at home, as there are valuable lessons to be learnt through the Economic Management Sciences lessons and the Natural Sciences lessons.

When I asked him about how the children's outside community, and the background that they come from, affects the educators' expectations of these learners he had this to say:

> Outside is outside. Look, I have that perspective, but we are not affected [in the classroom] by the background, where we are. We are looking at the education as it is, just like at another school.

The educators at The School of Opportunity do not lower their expectations of learner achievement and make excuses for them based on the external environment, because the school goes to great lengths to ensure that the learners feel safe in the environment in which they are learning.

This is Faith's reflection of her time at The School of Opportunity and the progress that the school has made over the last 13 years:

> You know, when I look at this place, when I arrived here, it was so difficult. It was difficult to even approach these learners. As I look at it now, there is a big improvement, now they understand us that we are here for one thing only, to just give a change to the community, and now most of the parents, they are now giving us support. The biggest challenge is that our kids don't have enough space to play. We don't have grounds, and the school is growing, growing in such a way that if you look at our Grade 4 and 5 classes, they are having 4 classes in each grade. In Grade 6 and 7, they are having three classes each. And next year, it is growing. Where are those classes [classrooms] going to come from? Which means they are going to be split into those three classes. That is a big challenge for our school and counted as contextual factors because of the spacing.

## 4.4 Constance – School Principal and Team Leader

As I sat in the library, interviewing a selection of people, I noticed how jovial the staff who came in and out over the course of the mornings were. Perhaps it is because it was the end of another busy year; perhaps it was an indication of what this room represents to them: a place of coming together, a symbol of the unity that this school lives by. Whatever the reason might have been, there was a relaxed atmosphere, which allowed a natural and unpretentious buzz amongst these colleagues to be revealed. I had the sense that these staff members are a team.

I had first heard about Constance[11] from a colleague of mine, who had met her through her previous school's relations with The School of Opportunity. She described Constance as "unbelievable" and "…a wonderful example of good leadership…", "…a true inspiration". I had not formulated an image of what I had expected her to look like, and on that first, blisteringly hot, summer morning, when she came into the reception to greet me, I saw an African woman whose small frame is inexplicably magnified by her reputation. Although she appeared to be quite a bit shorter than me, she, somehow, seemed to be the largest person in the room. With a broad smile, she walked up to me and, literally, embraced me, formally welcoming me to her community.

Her black, shoulder length hair has a wave in it and frames her light brown face. She has high, slightly pronounced cheekbones, which accentuate her smile. Her dark brown eyes are thoughtful and expressive, and when she talks, they seem to penetrate the listener and captivate their attention. She speaks clearly, with purpose and careful consideration of what she wants to say.

Constance is described by her staff as someone who likes to see everyone taking part in the running of the school and not someone who "keeps things for herself". She shares any information and feedback that she gets with her staff because she wants them to be a part of the decision making process. She has faith in her team of educators and her SMT, and, when she is not there, she expects the institution to run in the same way that it would if she were. She respects her staff and gives them the support that they need, be it in a professional manner when she is dealing with

[11] Name changed for the purpose of anonymity.

people from the Department of Education, or whether it is a personal matter, where she takes a more pastoral role.

In the eyes of her staff, she displays passion in every aspect of her management of the school; she is not a person who “just pushes” and does not follow. She is there for her team of educators, the administration staff, the children and the parents of The School of Opportunity in any way that she can be, and Faith explained this by saying, “she gives advice that builds you and makes you feel ‘wow’, I didn’t know that I could feel that way.” The educators see their colleagues as their family and one where everyone is equal. Within their family, she is a mother to all of them, and “even a father to those who don’t have fathers”. Yet, this family knows that when they get to work, they need to be dedicated and committed to their jobs, and they need to be professional.

> I am one leader who believes in other people. I affirm them, I continuously encourage them, I believe there is no person that cannot make it, so as a leader, I make sure that I am transparent in everything that we do. So what we normally do, everyday, when we start a day, we come together as a staff, we all pray together, we are not forcing a certain religion to individuals, but we all pray together be it a Muslim, be it a Christian, be it another religion. We pray together, as a staff and we start the day with a word of encouragement...

The principal prefers to be transparent in what she does and in what the school needs. Every morning, the staff members congregate in the library for a “consultation meeting” for 15 to 20 minutes before school starts:

> …every day we align our duties and our responsibilities, to say: today, these are the things that we need to achieve; it’s your objectives, it’s your aims for a day, or for a week. And every day we are able to look back and reflect on “Have we achieved that?”, and when people have done well, they will again be affirmed to say that “we have achieved that, and it is because of you.

Sydney stated that he values the way in which Constance shares information openly with the staff, as it gives him a clear understanding of what his role is and what the expectations of him are:

> The fact that every morning, especially during the week, from Tuesday to Friday, we meet before we go to the classrooms, just for a short consultation, you know what is happening with the school, you know what is happening with the district and the educational system and you go into the classroom with, at least, the scope of what is happening.

Constance went on further to describe how she has been mentoring her SMT while in her role as principal. For the last four months of the year, she was at the school as the "principal"; however, she did not manage the school, physically, herself. Instead, she gave each of her deputy principals the opportunity to run the school, deal with the day to day issues, and make decisions. She was there to assist them and support them if they had any queries or felt that they were unsure of how to deal with a particular situation. She also gave the various members of her SMT the opportunity to take turns in chairing staff meetings. She expressed that this also contributed to them being better prepared for meetings and being at school on time, as they were requested to be at school 15 minutes prior to the meetings that they were chairing. They needed to have their agenda ready, and they needed to be prepared for any questions that might arise, so that everybody could work to their potential and know what they are doing in terms of the expectations of the school:

> But over and above, the other style that I prefer, I prefer mentoring. I have a situation like for the past four months, where I was there as the principal, but I was not managing the school physically, I would be there as an advisory body, as a CEO, my deputies were given an opportunity to manage the school, to deal with the day-to-day issues, and be able to make decisions. And where they did not understand how to rectify a decision, then they would be able to come back and say, Ma'am, we are stuck here, and I will help them. I also give other SMT members, we are seven altogether, the opportunity to chair the staff meetings, they are not just chaired by the principal, but then it is also ensuring that there is no late-

> coming from members of the SMT, because then the people they know that it is their week and they need to be there 15 minutes before and have their agenda ready, and be prepared for any questions that may come and so everybody is an asset, everybody knows what they are doing in terms of the expectations of the school.

While there does seem to be an intrinsic motivation for the staff to push themselves, I asked Constance how she affirms them and shows them the level of the progress that they are making. Her simple answer was, “We recognise them.”

Constance has secured a partnership with Hollard, where, every year, they identify the best teacher in each grade. The recipients of this award receive a certificate and a cash reward to thank them for their achievements, on behalf of the school. However, with the phenomenal progress that the school made in 2012, which I shall discuss later, Constance approached Hollard and asked them if there was any way that every teacher on her staff could receive a prize, as she felt that, as a team, the staff had collaborated and worked harder than ever, and that is what happened for that year. “Words work,” she said, “but I think, over and above, people need monetary recognition. It can be a little, but it should be just to say ‘Thank you’.”

On top of this sponsored amount, she, personally, thanked her staff for their commitment and hard work in 2012 with a shopping centre gift voucher, for them to spend on whatever they needed for Christmas. She added, “I could have given them biscuits, but now they can choose what they want to buy.”

I did not have the pleasure of sitting down with David[12], one of the deputy principals of the school. Instead, I acquired a transcript that he had written for the South African

[12]Name changed for the purpose of anonymity.

National Teacher Awards, for which Constance had been nominated. In the reams of pages of Constance's accolades and achievements during her period as principal of The School of Opportunity, her contribution to the education system, the difference that she has made to this primary school and in the informal settlements, was identified.

While Constance's résumé might not include formal "leadership in education" training, it does include the following, according to David: she has been the chairperson of the local Principals' Forum, and she has been elected by the Institutional and Development Support Officials to mentor other principals. In principals' meetings, she has been requested to share her code of practice for policy implementation. In the area of curriculum management at The School of Opportunity, she works very closely with the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy coaches to ensure that the overall performances of the learners improve. Constance mentors the Extra School Support Programme employees, and while she has been working with them, she was able to identify their skill strengths, and six of them were later employed. He stated that, "She identified their abilities, helped them to enhance their abilities and provided them with the opportunities that they needed to excel."

David also reflected that every member of the SMT has had the opportunity to manage a department within the school and she has provided them with clear job descriptions, so that they can perform their duties to the best of their abilities. This is presented to them at the beginning of each school year. An example from this, taken from the document, describes David's duties and responsibilities:

- He is to assist the principal in managing the school.
- He guides and supervises the Head of Department's work for the Intermediate-Senior Phase.
- He liaises with the Heads of Department and the principal.
- He is to support the Heads of Department with their work.
- He is to supervise the general assistants' work
- He manages the school administration in terms of monitoring the assets, furniture, equipment and stock.
- He oversees parent interviews, school discipline and the attendance of the learners.
- He monitors the staff's leave.
- He manages the staff development PMDS.
- He conducts the book and file control for various departments in the school.

In line with Constance's mentoring role and in her development of the staff, she confessed that she encourages each member to be a chairperson or secretary of the various committees within the running of the school in order to develop their responsibility as well as ensure fairness and equity. Through this, their leadership skills and confidence are also developed. She extends this encouragement to the SGB where each representative parent maintains and runs particular portfolios in the areas of safety, maintenance and utilisation of the school. David described that, "she has developed a capacity within the staff members, and this is demonstrated by educators who chair/facilitate on reporting to their committees and taking minutes".

David provided a list of Constance's leadership skills and achievements prior to her headship of the school. These provide a testament to her strength of character and the path that brought her to The School of Opportunity:

As a student teacher she was the chairperson of the Cultural Committee. As a first-year teacher, she helped her school to win a National Drama Award, through district and national competitions. The following year, she was elected "site steward" of the union representing her colleagues. She was elected "Branch Cultural Governor", and was elected as the branch secretary of a prominent teachers' union. She was elected as a regional Sports, Arts and Culture Governor. It was towards the end of that decade that she was appointed the principal of this school, which had a different name then, and three years later, the principal of the newly named The School of Opportunity. However, her list of achievements did not end there: She was subsequently elected the chairperson of the local community structure called the Local[13] Community Management Committee. She was delegated to represent this body in Paris, France, which was sponsored by Hollard. In this capacity, Constance helps with the development of the youth, women and the unemployed. In 2003, she was also appointed as the pastor of one of the prominent churches.

## 4.5 The Staff of The School of Opportunity

From the moment that I entered through the black gates of The School of Opportunity and was greeted, as a friend, by the security guard, administration staff, educators and Constance, herself, I could see that this is a community that has a strong bond. I sensed, through their casual interactions with one another that there is

[13] Detail omitted to preserve anonymity.

a united team, with well-established values of care and respect for one another. I had silently observed how they spoke to one another, how they laughed, and how they worked as a team.

I had been waiting, on one occasion, in the foyer, while Constance was concluding a meeting with someone else. It happened to be a morning where the educators were resubmitting their final results of the Annual National Assessments, and the results were, apparently, due before a specific time that morning. While educator after educator came through with their paperwork and mark books, and even though they seemed to be under a bit of pressure, their interaction with each other and the secretary who was filling in all of the information online was jolly and respectful. They did not allow the situation to interfere with their manner of how they perform their duties.

It was Faith who first described the relationship that they share with one another. She explained that religion is very important to this school community (and the wider community, it seems, with over 20 churches running every Sunday on the school grounds). In a way, religion helps them to build relationships with each other and the children at the school. It is a predominantly Christian school, which serves the denominations of most of the members of this community. “Each Monday, the whole school gathers together at assembly. Before we start our days in class, even whenever we are closing our day … we pray”, Faith explained. It is at these times where learners have the opportunity to share anything that might be bothering them with their teacher. They do not have to share their problem with the whole class, but they do encourage the learners to share anything that they might be concerned about, with their teacher. She said, “That’s when we start seeing them being vocal

enough, because we know most of them." This includes the learners being able to tell their teachers that they have not eaten or they do not have food at home. The educators are, sometimes, able to help the learners in situations like that.

This unified staff team comprises 33 class teachers, an extra two teachers who are part of the SMT but not also class teachers, and the principal. There are also 3 administration staff, 3 cleaners, 4 general workers, 6 rotating security guards, and 5 feeding scheme workers. Sydney describes them as "hard working, and friendly, yet firm and fair with the learners."

Each staff member has a portfolio of duties and responsibilities. Sydney coaches the one of the sports teams and has recently been trained to start a scout group at The School of Opportunity. His face lit up as he described his new venture with the scouts, explaining that, even though they have just started this programme, children of all ages are encouraged to join, as it is used to promote leadership and problem solving in the school. As I watched him talking, during the interview process, I could see a range of emotions sweep the expression on his face as a breeze might transform a dusty path. He was animated in his responses and I sensed sincerity in the pride that he emotes and feels for his role at the school.

Sydney described his personal vision for the learners that he teaches:

> To have a learner who can implement what has been taught in the classroom so as to have survival skills in life. The way I try to make that happen is when I am teaching, I try to be as helpful as possible and give them critical examples of life so that they see from the perspective of real life. For instance, this morning I was talking to them about being positive about themselves, because it helps them to grow an attitude which will lead them to become someone in

life and to avoid being negative, despite the problems that they are having in life and the environment that they are in.

## 4.6 The Vision and Mission Statements of The School of Opportunity

Vision : To give every learner the opportunity to develop his/her talent and leave our institution with knowledge, skills and self-esteem that will give them the best chance of success in adult life.

Mission : We are dedicated in creating an effective and efficient working school by providing quality teaching in every classroom every day.

Having established *who* these learners are and their background, I wanted to establish what the opportunities are that the school has been able to provide for their learners, given their context. I started by studying the daily functioning of the school, to get an understanding of how, through creating an effective and efficient working school, they can fulfil the aims expressed in their vision.

**Table 4.1 : The Grade R and early Foundation Phase Timetable:**

| Learners | Teachers |
|---|---|
| 1. Arrive and pack away their bags. Gather together on the carpet or chairs in a circle. | |
| 2. Learners answer questions about any health problems, scrapes and bruises etc. | Quick head-to-toe check of each child. Keep a health record of illness and medication given. Refer cases that require attention. |
| 3. Learners participate. | Introduce new materials, ideas, songs, rhymes, announcements, concepts & skills. |
| 4. Learners choose what they would like to do: interacting with the materials of their choice in the Learning Area of their choice. | Provide stimulating materials and challenging activities. Observe, interact, join in, support and assist learners. |
| 5. While the class is engaged in their work-time activities, the teacher meets with each group of 6-8 learners at a time to engage with them (at a table or on the carpet). | Present a special activity to each group (working with numbers, experimenting with materials or using objects & materials to solve problems). |
| 6. Pack away all materials and equipment. | Help learners pack away |
| 7. Wash Hands. | Provide clean water, soap and towels. |
| 8. Eat. | Talk to the learners about what they did in work-time & prepare the classroom for the next activity. |
| 9. Participate in music & movement activities. | Present music & movement lesson. |
| 10. Play. | Observe and supervise. |
| 11. Toilet & wash hands. | Supervise the routine. |
| 12. Listen to and participate in story-telling. Share own stories or talk about the work they completed during work-time. | Engage learners with a story. Ask questions which encourage the learners to respond, and allow them to be actively involved in the story. |

There is a lot of emphasis placed on communication in this area of the school, and this is done at the same time as introducing the children to the “formal” school environment and routines. With learners coming from many different areas of South Africa and Africa, it is a priority to develop the vocabulary and communication skills of the children so that they can be better prepared for learning more advanced concepts in the older grades.

The learners get an idea of the structure of the school day, and that certain activities happen at certain times of the day, as well as the fact that some activities are paired

with others, like: washing your hands before you eat, and washing your hands after you have been to the toilet. These are not, necessarily, skills that the children are learning at home.

The children are allotted specific time frames in which they are to complete their organisational tasks, such as packing away their bags or activity items, and become aware of time and the importance of completing tasks within a certain time.

From Grade 1 upwards, the school has a more formal timetable with set lessons that fall within the curriculum requirements. With the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement being fully implemented in 2013, the school is prepared and their timetables adjusted accordingly. There is still a great emphasis on the building of vocabulary as the learners are encouraged to stand in front of the class and say speeches. However, it was explained to me that there is still a need for development in this area. The learners are currently having to communicate in a second, third, or even fourth language, and their confidence levels are not high. For example, in order for the learners to talk in front of the class, Faith explained that she has to put them into groups so that they can just “do it” as if they are talking, and she says to her learners, “just talk to her, say anything and let it be…” and even though they have the problem of the language barrier, with a peer next to her, the child can more easily cope with the work.

Faith explained to me that she teaches four classes of up to 45 learners each (the average being around 44 learners per class). The teachers have full timetables, which allow for little administration and marking time. In 2013, she will be teaching 48 periods per week of her subject (12 periods per class, per week), and her only

administration time will be when the children are at break. Her personal reflection of this timetable load was, surprisingly, positive. She confidently said, “But, as individuals, we are used to pushing ourselves. Whenever there is administration to be done, and the school is dismissed, I don’t go home, I do it here because I know that it won’t get done at home, I have a lot to do.”

The school also provides homework support for their learners. Together, with the Department of Education, there is a team of individuals who come in the afternoons to do homework with the learners in a formal and structured way. This has resulted in the learners being unable to make excuses as to why they have not done the set work, which used to be a problem for the school. The children would explain that they could not do the homework because there was no one at home who could assist them with it, or their parents came home too late.

> They just forget [the work]. And now the school and the department [of education] has developed a team which deals with their homework with them, so now whenever the school is out, there is another session for especially those kids who need the structure, and who needs that support, and who don’t have the background that has the skills to assist them. Sometimes they end up saying, “we didn’t do it because of ABC…” or “my mum comes late and she can’t even understand what you are teaching”, but now we are having a system that can say, “Talk to me and let us work together” and you’ll find out that now, most of them now, they are doing their work.

This system, which runs for two hours each afternoon, allows the children to reflect on their understanding of the work and has had a positive impact on their results as well. These homework sessions usually run on a Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, because on Wednesday, they focus on Sports Skills. Sports offered at The School of Opportunity include: netball, soccer, cross country, athletics and volleyball. While they do not have the proper resources for all of these sports, their coaches are still

teaching the learners the skills needed to play them. The sports field is another form of opportunity that the school provides to its learners, where learners who may struggle in the classroom can develop their skills, physically, while learning the discipline and self motivation required when developing a future in sport. The teachers have a vast range of learner abilities in their classes, too, and with high numbers, one would imagine that it becomes harder for the educators to keep *every single* learner motivated. When I asked about this, Faith explained that there is a lot of comparison amongst the children, themselves. The learners who are not performing as well as the others cannot understand why they are not getting the same results and they become despondent.

The way that Faith tries to motivate her learners is through a personal story. She explains to them the hard conditions that she grew up in, being one of 11 children in her family. She had to walk, barefooted, very long distances to school, and in order to pass her Matric, she had to commit herself to her learning and push herself through her own hard times, so that she could achieve. She added that all of her siblings passed Matric, because they knew how important it was for them. She pushed herself, she had a goal, and she aimed high. She described to me how the learners in her class become particularly interested when she shares personal stories with them. To them, she is the evidence of what you can achieve when you work hard, and they respect her for that. As they grow up, through the grades of the primary school, she often reminds them of their goals by asking, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” When they answer her, she adds, “How are you going to push yourself as high as you can so that you can become that?”

> [I tell them] … if ever you are going to take it as if you are going to church every Sunday, you will see a difference at the end of the day. I made it. Usually at home, my father had 11 kids and only 9 survived, 2 passed away. All of us

> passed Matric, even if some of us did not go further than that. But today I am a teacher, I value that. So you need to push yourself. Don't say my parents don't have money and I can't do ABC, and you just leave everything behind. Just push yourself and have a goal… aim high. As you grow up, we usually say, "What do you want to be in life", and you say, "I want to be a police". How can you push yourself as high to that level for you to get that? And so you find out, if ever you are talking to them they become interested.

I asked her if the children enjoy the personal stories:

> Yes, and sometimes, others are becoming emotional, and you will hear one of the children come after and say, but ma'am I am staying with my aunt, how can I do that? I don't have parents, and you see, they come with different stories, and you try to say to them, no matter you don't have parents, you have more than a handful of parents who can take care of you.

Faith explained to me that, even though these children come from a harsh and difficult environment, they are not as tough as one might assume. The learners are sensitive and emotional. They approach her after her lessons and tell her about their problems at home, and then they ask her how she thinks they can reach their dreams, because they do not have parents. She tells them that if they look around at the people of the school, the child will find that he/she does have "parents" who will help him/her. She gave me an example of one girl, who lives with her unemployed mother. The child is dedicated to her schoolwork and committed to her learning. Because Constance is very aware of the reality that faces these learners when they leave The School of Opportunity, she went out to everyone that she could (her sponsorship partners), looking for a bursary for this child. She secured a sponsorship for this particular learner from Grade 8 right through to University, and she was able to do this because the learner worked hard and created this opportunity for herself, as well. Faith added that they, as a school, try, by any means, to provide for the learners who are willing and who have the enthusiasm to go further.

Sydney also spoke of a girl last year:

> You would look at her uniform and her hair and so forth and you would feel sorry for her, but she was the best learner in Grade 7. And she got a bursary, and now she is at High School. So it means that she is going to have a good future, if she remains educated.

## 4.7 Beyond Academics – Skills Training

Beyond the academics of the curriculum, the school offers skills-based activities like needlework and knitting, beading and other forms of handwork. Constance expressed how the learners really excel in these areas, as well as the area of arts and culture, specifically, the performing arts. If the learners are seen to be particularly good in a specific skill, they are encouraged to continue with it, as this builds their confidence and their self-esteem. The school has collaborated with a performing arts company, called Search. The school recommends to as many learners as possible that they should join this group, as they can develop their skills in drumming, music or dance. Search also assists the school in the afternoons with sports, the training of their athletes and soccer and netball teams. Previous learners of The School of Opportunity, who have passed Matric, have joined this organisation and have come back to the school to give back, as volunteers.

At the same time, Constance stressed that this programme does not replace the academic one, and that the school still expects each learner to perform to the best of their ability, academically:

> What we do, we don't discourage the academics, we still expect them to perform, but we make sure that they are within that talent and when we see them excelling, we encourage them and motivate them to attend this school, and it will help you.

> Already, some of them, they are performing at State Theatre with the same group, so that is an opportunity for them. Some of them will be given a bursary. There is this one boy who is doing a marvellous physical training with them, and you can see the talent, the discipline, it is like they are in an army... and you can see that when they are given an opportunity, even if they do not make it academically, they can still get something else.

In order to provide the best opportunities that they can for the learners, and to develop their skills as much as possible, when a child is identified as excelling in a particular art, they are motivated to join the Search programme, as some of them may be given a bursary for their abilities in that area.

## 4.8 Leadership Camp

The learners in Grade 7 have been given the opportunity to attend a leadership camp where they are given the chance to “take the stage” and become a leader. This allows them to take some responsibility in the daily life of their school environment so that they can be better role-models to the rest of the learners. They help the smaller children tie their shoe laces, or prevent them from running so that an accident can be avoided, and, in this way they learn some of the skills required to be a good leader. Sydney interprets these skills as the children being loyal, respectful and exemplary.

## 4.9 Daily Functioning : Purposeful Teaching and Learning

The school’s mission statement states that they are dedicated towards providing quality teaching in every classroom, every day. I had discovered that, each morning, at the consultation meeting, the SMT and team of educators discuss their objectives for the day. I had asked Constance how she ensures that her staff members are

ready on time for their lessons, and prepared for their activities. She explained that this is a delegated responsibility, where her HoDs are expected to monitor the functioning of their departments. That includes work schedules being handed to Constance on time, timetables being followed, and the pace of work being monitored, ensuring that the syllabus is covered.

Before the teachers were dismissed for their December holiday, their lesson plans, work schedules and timetables for Term One 2013 were already on Constance's table, so that the team is ready on the very first school day in January to be in their classrooms and teaching. The duty rosters and timetables were already drawn up and the staff members had been instructed to prepare for the first day. The academic staff were at school for 5 days after the children had been dismissed for the December holidays and it was in this allotted time that Constance ensured that the following term was prepared for.

During the term, her HoDs and deputy principals conduct classroom visits and, as a result, they are able to report back to her that the different educators are on track with the required syllabi. The school is expected to submit their records of the first quarter to the Department of Education, outlining their progress of curriculum content coverage. When the class visits have been evaluated and the book controls completed, the educators receive feedback of the school's findings. These feedback reports also contain recommendations for improvement, should they be warranted, and, if necessary, a mentorship programme is also put into place. She added that, because this is done at peer-level, the SMT is not regarded as being enforcing or imposing. Instead, the sharing of skills is maximised and this is, what they have found to be, the most effective strategy.

There was a special mention in the SGB report of 2012 of how the school is encouraged by the “significant achievements and progress that has been made by the school towards realizing the outcome of quality teaching during the period under review”, and that they (the SGB) were pleased with the staff’s efforts in ensuring that external, quality assurance evaluators were welcomed. The recommendations that the Quality Assurance Evaluators made to the school (these included queries such as balancing the educators’ teaching loads fairly with those of the SMT) have already been implemented and adjustments were made, immediately.

One of the concerns of the evaluators was that of the language choices available at The School of Opportunity and the language barriers experienced by the learners, as the media of instruction is English or Afrikaans. Constance responded that it is difficult to choose just one of the “approximate” eleven indigenous languages to instruct in (these do not even include English and Afrikaans and are not restricted to only the eleven official languages; there are many other languages spoken by the children of immigrants, too). She added, that when this dilemma was discussed with the parents at the school, there were many objections to the adoption of one African language because the other language speaking parents thought that it was ‘unfair’ and that their children should be allowed to learn in their home language and not have to learn a fourth language. As a compromise, the school and parent body came to an agreement that English and Afrikaans be the two languages of instruction at The School of Opportunity so that no group was favoured above another.
The Quality Assurance Evaluators have still expressed, though, that one indigenous language needs to be ‘chosen’, and this is a challenge that the school will be addressing in the immediate future. However, for now, Constance is standing by the

wishes of her school's parent body, who would prefer that the media of instruction be English and Afrikaans, as there is still no consensus as to which indigenous language should be chosen.

## 4.10 Resources

The public school sector is known to be under-resourced in many departments. Constance had mentioned to me, in one of my interviews with her, how the principals from other schools in the area, schools which fall under the "Former Model-C" category, had previously visited the school; Constance explained,

> Principals from (the area[14]) visited our school, and when they left, some of them were crying, saying, "our teachers have all these benefits and people will still be complaining of this and that, and can you see under which circumstances are these people working.

Constance took me on a guided tour of some of the classrooms. When one considers that each of those classrooms has to cater to 44 learners, they appeared very small, indeed, as there was only just enough room to lay out 22 desks and 44 chairs in each of them, leaving very little room to navigate between them. The clean, wooden desks were arranged in neat, orderly rows, with two desks, facing each other, joined to the next set of two desks, and so on. The rows were very close together, as there was not a lot of space after the required number of tables had been laid out. Each desk had two small chairs pushed in underneath it, and two names, printed, in black, on white, rectangular pieces of paper. The chairs were not the same, some were plastic, some were wooden, on a metal frame, and there was

[14] Details omitted to preserve anonymity.

a selection of sizes. It seemed as though the school has used what furniture it has, where it can. The large, battered, metal cupboards and mismatched bookshelves looked to be as old as some of the original prefabricated buildings, with dents and scratches, dying to tell their story.

This was a Foundation Phase classroom. Plain, white alphabet cards created a border which framed the walls. On one of the walls, there was a selection of laminated picture posters, which labelled the Months of the Year, the Days of the Week, simple Verbs, simple Nouns, and ‘Am, Is, Are’. It was evident that these posters had been put to good use for many years, as their ‘wrinkles’ and turned up corners revealed their age. Nevertheless, they had been proudly displayed in a smart, straight line above the Alphabet cards, ready to be utilised again. On another wall, neatly displayed, was a counting poster, a selection of counting flashcards, and a set of number flashcards, neatly written on coloured cardboard indicating the number in digits and its name next to it.

The teacher’s desk, situated in the front of the classroom, next to a window with interior burglar bars mounted on it, was completely bare. It had a larger chair tucked in behind it, but there was very little space between the teacher’s desk and the wall, bringing to mind, again, how limited the space is in these classrooms. Behind the desk, on the two-toned, brown and cream wall, was a Seasons poster, a birthday chart, the months of the year typed and printed in plain, black-on-white flash cards, and a large fire hydrant.

While the classrooms were spotless, the lack of resources and emptiness of the shelves was apparent. In some of the classrooms, the taps and basins that had once

been a part of the former clinic were still protruding from the walls. The blackboards were worn and hardly had paint left on them. They were shiny, and it was visible that they cannot be easy to write on. There were no luxuries, like fans or heaters, anywhere to be seen. As Mr Ngubane had mentioned to me, when it is hot outside, these classrooms are very hot, and when it is cold, these classrooms are freezing cold. Their need for proper brick buildings is their priority, and Constance's greatest wish for the school.

However, despite the blemished condition of the classrooms in which these educators are teaching, what stood out most was the pride that the educators and learners have in their classrooms. The resources that they do have are utilised and smartly displayed. Their bookshelves, while half-empty are organised and neatly arranged. Boxes of papers and manipulatives are stacked tidily, in their places, ready for use, and the space (or lack of it) is utilised in the most effective ways. At that moment, I identified with what those visiting principals from the local schools must have felt, when they remarked on how this school was able to do so much with so little, and I, too, felt the emotion that they had felt. It may have been a feeling of guilt, even. I work at a school that does not "want" for anything, in terms of the resources and education that it is able to provide for its learners; and yet, many of the opportunities given at my school are taken for granted, by the staff, the parents and the learners. Classrooms are spacious and overflowing with resources, but not well looked after by the girls. Their property (books and uniform items) and litter is left, strewn all over the grounds at the end of the day, and they rely on the cleaning staff to pick it up for them. How sobering it was for me, personally, to walk around the School of Opportunity with Constance and appreciate how the stakeholders here appreciate what they have.

The school does have a computer laboratory. With computers being the hub of the modern world, I was interested in whether the learners were being taught how to use a computer, and developing their computer skills. The school is linked to the Gauteng Online system, a project that has connected 1 562 schools (as of May 2012) to the Gauteng Department of Education, delivering an e-learning environment in schools to which it has been connected (Rasool, 2012). Unfortunately, there seems to be a service delivery problem with Gauteng Online, according to the teachers at this school. Often Gauteng Online is “offline” and they cannot gain access when they require it.

Unfortunately, the computer room is not big enough for a full class of 44 to 48 learners to be accommodated, and, even “sharing” computers only accommodates 24 learners at a time. Each child requires attention while they are working on the computer programmes and there are still 20 children who are not in that venue with them. The educators feel that this is a great challenge for them, because they would like every child to benefit, and because there is a challenge when it comes to supervising all of the learners in their lessons if the class has to be split up.

## 4.11 Challenges Faced by the School

In the SGB Annual Report, the challenges that the school faces and “threats” to the school have clearly been identified. These are what the school deems to be its priorities for the next phase of its development:

- Low morale and discipline of some learners
- Late coming and absenteeism
- Lack of sports facilities

- Poor parent attendance at parent meetings (only 50%)
- Lack of a high school that the learners can feed into
- Minimal payments of agreed voluntary school fees
- Grade R not paying the monthly fees for the learners
- Over-use of the school by churches and organisations
- Increase of orphans due to HIV and AIDS
- Stolen telephone cables and electricity by the community which resulted in the school being unable to hand out reports in the second term.

In the same report, however, the school has listed a number of recommendations that would make a start on resolving some of the challenges that the School of Opportunity faces, and these include: including the parents more to be 'fully' active in school activities; for them to be more engaged in fundraising for the school, and for parents to volunteer their services to the school without expecting payments. I wanted to investigate these issues further with Constance, so that I could understand how she, together with her school team could address these challenges.

Low Morale and discipline of Some Learners:

Constance explained that the family units of many of the learners from the informal settlement are ones where there is an absence of a mother or father, and in their impoverished community, they do not have activities to pass the time like books, television and games, and there is no one at home to read stories to them or spend a lot of time with them. As a result, these learners spend most of their time in the streets, and she gave the example of being able to drive through the informal settlement at night time and seeing these

children burning tyres and sitting with their friends instead of being at home and in bed.

Late Coming and Absenteeism:

The school is just starting to implement a system, from the first of February 2013, where children and their parents are going to be held more accountable for truancy and late-coming. Where before, they had never detained children for being late for school, there will now be a system where the children's arrival times will be monitored by the teachers, and recorded if they are late. If a child is consistently absent from, or late for school, the parents will be notified and asked to come in for a meeting, and then, should the infraction continue, the learners will be detained for community service to the school. In some cases, the parents report that the children leave their homes on time for school but then arrive late. This will be investigated on a case-by-case basis.

Lack of Sports Facilities:

While the school is making every effort to provide a balanced extra-curricular sporting programme, the coaching in these sports are limited due to the lack of space for sporting facilities. While Constance confirmed that she would, most likely, be able to procure sponsorship of some sort in this area, there is no space for much needed classrooms and the learners' playground is the staff and visitors' parking lot. The issue around the lack of space in this school is a priority for them.

Poor Parental Attendance at Parent Meetings:

The School of Opportunity is in the process of trying to maximise the relationships between the school and the parents of its learners, and this is documented in the SGB report of 2012, through encouraging the parents to become more involved in fund-raising activities and school improvement projects. However, it has been noted that, primarily, it is only the parents of the learners who are progressing and performing well at the school that show interest in attending the meetings, be it a PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) meeting or termly progress meetings between the teachers and the parents. However, Constance stressed that this is particularly difficult for the school, as they can see that the parents from this community are not sure of what their roles are, with regard to an active role in supporting the learners after school hours, or investing their time into the development of their children. She added that this is an avenue that she would like to see developed, and one in which the parents and guardians of the learners can be advised of how they can help their children, by the school.

Lack of a High School:

As previously mentioned, there are a lot of children who “drop out” from the schooling system after they have passed Grade 7, as there are few high schools in the area. Although there are high schools which are willing to accept learners from The School of Opportunity, they are not no-fees schools, and they are situated further away, so the families of this informal settlement find it difficult to afford to send their children to high school. The Primary School has gone to great lengths to secure sponsorships for some of their learners, but this is impossible for them to do for 130 learners each year.

Minimal Payments of Agreed Voluntary School Fees:

Constance explained,

> What you will see happening is there are those families that are paying an amount in Grade 1 because they think that they are buying space, then they will pay, and then when they are already in the system, you will find them relaxing, no longer paying.

In an effort to try to recover the school fees that were outstanding from last year, however, the school retained the learners' end of year reports. In two days, they had recovered over R40 000.00 of the school fees that were owing to them. Constance added that the parents had agreed on paying R250.00, and argued that even if they do not have the full amount, she has asked them to pay what they can towards the school fees that they owe, as this has a direct effect on whether the school is able to retain the services of some of their teachers. According to Constance, the parents in this community are, however, becoming more aware of the consequences of their actions and are committing themselves more in this regard.

Grade R Not Paying Monthly Fees for Learners:

As Grade R has not been acknowledged as a "formal" year of schooling (this will happen in 2014, when the grade is compulsory for learners), and because The School of Opportunity is known to be a no-fee school, the monthly school fees are not being paid by the parents for Grade R learners. The parents think that the R120 payment at the beginning of the year is the total payment, and that they are not required to pay anything further. The school, however, relies on these payments, as the Grade R classes are not funded by the government in their allocated amount to the school, while this grade is deemed non-compulsory.

Overuse of the School by Churches and Organisations:

Even though the school rents out the hall as a facility to various organisations, Constance stated that if this is not managed effectively, the school will find that it has more than 20 and, sometimes, up to 30 various churches utilising the property each Sunday with only 26 classrooms available. The classrooms and hall are rented out, but the increasing numbers of visitors to the school is growing to the point where it is difficult to manage. Constance explained that the organisations that are using the facilities did not always leave the venues in the conditions that they were found in and furniture had to be reset on Monday mornings. However, in an effort to inform the communities, she has invited the representatives of these foundations to the Parent Meetings that the school hosts, and then there is a slot in the meeting where this is addressed and conditions discussed, and this happens regularly in the quarterly meetings. In this way, Constance is able to share with the community the challenges that the school is facing and they can involve the various stakeholders and get them more involved in finding a solution.

Increase of Orphans due to HIV and AIDS:

The School of Opportunity has learners who are both affected by and infected with HIV and AIDS. There are only a few parents who have disclosed the HIV/AIDS status of their children, and so it does not affect the school in such a way that children have been identified to other learners. However, it does become more clear when the children are sick and coughing and do not recover from illnesses. The school is also aware of the high number of orphans and are able to deduce the status of some of the children because of their family history and the illness patterns. The learners are all informed

around the safety of communicable diseases through their Life Skills lessons in the Foundation Phase and the Life Orientation lessons in the Intermediate and Senior Phases.

Stolen Telephone Cables and Electricity by Members of the Community: While the theft of electricity is not a regular occurrence, at times, a cable, or many, can be found to be “hooked up” to the electricity box and servicing the surrounding homes. Once the cables have been found and removed, a new set of cables will have been attached within four months or so. As a result of this, not only does the electricity bill for the school escalate, but the system can be overloaded and then everyone is affected. Constance reported that in winter, the problem is particularly bad, and that “it was in June when we could not even issue our reports”.

## 4.12 Recommendations Made at the SGB Meeting to Address these Challenges

It is clear that The School of Opportunity has a range of difficult circumstances in which it functions, and when one reads about the challenges that it faces, there is evidence in the structures provided at the school that time and effort is spent in trying to adapt to this environment. However, the SGB and its representatives had listed a number of recommendations that could be followed in an attempt to curb the impact of this harsh environment, and it rests on building the relationship with the environment itself (the community) that seems to be the foundation of this notion. This relationship comprises involving the parents more in the school activities, the school fundraising projects and in community service back to the school, without the expectation of remuneration:

Parents Becoming Fully Active in School Activities:

It has been quite difficult in the past for the school to get the parents to take a greater interest in the school and fully participate in school activities. However, in an effort to build the relationship and have greater input from the families of the learners, the school is going to facilitate the development of a communal vegetable garden at the school which will be managed and tended to by the parents. She is going to encourage this by explaining to them that the vegetable garden will nourish those who are tending to it, and so there is an incentive for the families to get more involved. Constance explained that, due to the lack of space, this vegetable garden will be limited to five different vegetables, for now, until the school can acquire more space to develop this project, as well.

Getting Parents More Actively Engaged in School Fundraising:

The school has handed out to the parents the document which specifies all of the fundraising activities for the school year, and at the next Parent Meeting, they will discuss how the projects will be run and will invite parents to volunteer to work on the fundraising projects with the assigned teachers.

Parents Volunteering Their Services to the School Without Expecting Payment:

The school would like to be able to utilise the skills of the parents in “handy-man” type jobs, where they can, in order to cut their expenses. However, this is very difficult for them when calling on the community members of this informal settlement. Because these parents and family members have been unemployed, and because such a large proportion of these parents are in the

same situation, when the school contacts them to assist with the painting of the buildings, for example, and the parents interpret this as a commission and expect to be paid for their services.

## 4.13 A Team Vision

When I asked Constance about her personal vision for The School of Opportunity, I was interested in trying to identify her idea of what would be her greatest accomplishment for this school. With a soft voice, she looked up and responded that her ultimate goal would be to see the school functioning in “proper brick buildings”. She then told me that it “pains” her that she is not going to be at the school to see this goal realised. She had announced to her staff, the previous week, that she will, in the next year or so, be leaving the educational system to serve the church, full time. With sad eyes she explained to me how selfish she felt for making this decision, because when she told her staff, they began to cry. She feels that she is torn between the people who still need her and knowing that she has a calling, where she wants to serve God, full time, through the church. She spoke with disappointment, and, for the first time during the interview, her eyes glanced at the table instead of looking at me directly, as she admitted that it is particularly hard for her, knowing that she has not achieved her goal:

> Honestly speaking, Julie, I might be selfish, but I have made a commitment that I would love to see this school having a proper building... as an ultimate goal, a proper brick and mortar building. But at the point where I am sitting today, I have a calling of pastoring a church which then, when then I am fully [prayed] up, I might even exit the system and go and serve at the church full-time, but it also pains my heart, because as and when I announce, as I announced last week, and most of my educators began to cry, and I felt like I am being selfish, when people still need you but you also know that you want to serve God, and you haven’t achieved your goal, because my goal was to see this school having a proper building…

While the 'ultimate goal' has not been achieved *yet*, the foundations that Constance has established towards achieving this goal are significant: She has dedicated much of her time to trying to build the school: in numbers, by instilling a value for education in the community, and in buildings, by approaching governmental departments and accumulating the previously abandoned municipal clinic. She has worked, extensively, with companies and outreach teams to develop the quality of the education and opportunities that the school can provide for the children of the community, and she is currently in the process of consultations with the local municipality to relocate some of the informal housing closest to the school, in order to provide land space for the brick buildings that she envisages. She has also managed to secure corporate sponsorship, on standby, to start the building project, when the municipality does manage to successfully relocate the aforementioned families.

With regards to the school's vision statement and mission statement, Constance communicated that, while everyone who works there works *within* the scope of the vision, the school has a system whereby proposals are presented to the whole staff, as a team. If anybody would like to do something new, or something that has not been done before, it is proposed to the team as a suggestion, and then, democratically, the individual staff members have the opportunity to voice their opinions, and, in this way, queries are resolved and the staff can move forward, in unity.

> Here at school, we have developed committees, which, these committees, all of them are having their duties. So we have the cultural committee and the entertainment committees which are steering everything. They come with ideas to us, and we are sharing these ideas. And we are having plans where we are initiating some of the things which we can do and fundraise for the school and do all those stuff. And it is a team which doesn't work alone, always when they are having

ideas they are coming into this meeting because we are usually holding our meetings and we share these ideas and the implementation goes forward.

When I asked Sydney what the school vision meant to him, personally, he revealed that the school vision statement helps him to keep focus of the goal. He said, “So whenever I am teaching, I make sure that I meet that requirement of the school.”

I enquired as to how Constance handles situations where staff members either act in a manner contradictory to the vision or those who might continually hinder the process, in the form of the nay-sayers or those who did not fulfil their duties etc. She answered that, fortunately, the school has come very far since her arrival in 1999:

> When I joined the school, most of the people were negative, most. I think it was acceptance of the new principal, and there was resistance, and so on. But you know, it didn’t only work with one aspect. So many things had to be changed, so that we are all aligned. I will give an example. When I started in 1999, the school was an Afrikaans school, that’s one. Two, the school’s name was ABC[15] Primêre, and there was that little bit of confusion when districts were changing, and so on, and the school became DEF[16] Primary. But still there were those people who were negative, who were not accepting of the new principal, and then in 2002, we then changed the school to become The School Of Opportunity[17]. That changing of the name (the name itself, when translated)[18] means ‘the place of peace’, and that change of name, it changed everybody’s attitude. People began to work together: there has been peace from the year 2002 to the year 2012. Now we don’t experience that much of negative people, but where there is the one or two that I will be dealing with, I still find the place and opportunity to call that person and say, “Mrs So-and-So or Mr So-and-So, we are together, but I do it more openly, so that a person should feel that I am not working together. I also teach a lot, moreover, on submission, I teach a lot about authority, to say what is authority? What is disobedience? When you disobey, it is as good as witchcraft, and people understand more time I give them information that they would use to their benefit.

[15] Name omitted to preserve anonymity of the school.
[16] Name omitted to preserve anonymity of the school.
[17] Name altered to preserve anonymity of the school.
[18] Omitted to preserve anonymity.

Looking at the environment in which this school functions, they are a faithful and religious community, led by a woman who is also studying to be a pastor. She has an open line of communication with her staff and, when she does have to reprimand a member of staff, she says that she talks to them in such a way that they realise that they are working against the flow of the group. As the leader, she seems to balance the scale of sharing ideas, values and leadership by also teaching them about authority, being part of the group, and about submission. When she said this, I immediately started to question, in my mind, what she meant by “submission”. This is a word that came up again in the school motto for 2012/2013, and which I will discuss, at length, later. She develops their understanding of authority and obedience, and she tries to lead them in such a way that she gives them information that they can use to their own benefit and self-growth.

It seems that, as a team, this group of individuals is committed to creating the efficient working school that is strived for in their mission statement. Faith spoke to me about how the team works towards achieving the goals that are identified towards the achievement of the mission statement. She explained that the school has developed committees which each have their own duties. The cultural committee and the entertainment committee steer most of the fundraising activities and share their ideas with the rest of the staff, for example. The academic staff engage in development meetings and attend the external staff development programmes that are on offer to schools. She described a recent meeting that she, herself, had attended covering the implementation of the new CAPS system in teaching and learning. She also explained how, as not all of the staff can be accommodated at these meetings, it is up to her to come back to the school and instruct the rest of the staff on what she learned at that meeting.

The morning consultation meetings are structured for this purpose. As soon as members of staff have been to any form of development training, they are given the platform in the next morning meeting to reflect on the workshop or meeting and present to the rest of the staff they key points and information that was shared at the staff training. While these consultation meetings are very important in the management of the school day, the team is precise in ensuring that the meeting ends by quarter to eight so that the educators are in their classrooms punctually for the start of the school day at eight o'clock. Faith emphasised how strict they are at being on time for lessons:

> Everything stops, we go to our classes, and everybody, *everybody* is supposed to be in class. What can I say, it's up to the individual… are you here for the employment, or are you here for the commitment of a child?

The educators do their planning as teams, in their Learning Area departments. Faith told me about her team, the Intermediate Phase teachers for her particular subject: "We share because we want everything according to their stages and their ages". She explained how this helped her when she came to the school: "I was teaching Grade 7 before I came to this school, and when I came here they gave me (my current grade). As a (subject) teacher, I had to adapt to the situation and come down to their level, even though I was used to another level".

I asked Faith what she deemed as "effective" and "efficient" teaching, and when she answered me, she was smiling. I sensed that this was a topic that she found particular meaning in, and when she responded, I could feel the pride that she was feeling, and I realised that her response is a shared one, a result that any teacher, no matter what circumstance or situation they are teaching in, strives for: The outcome that "they have made a difference".

> I think if ever we are so effective, it is when I see the child who is coming from this school progressing on the outside, and they come back now and say, 'Ma'am, I have passed my Matric and I am going to University.', and I start seeing that whatever we are doing is effective, and it means that that child continued with what we are doing in the school and our flag is now just flying high. Whenever we take our kids to the High School in (our area)[19], [sometimes] they don't take them after Grade 7 and we need to look for the other schools, and when we see them go to universities, we still see that we are taking them to the right direction while they can reach such a level. And now I understand, we are so effective and we are so surprised when we get a child coming back and saying, 'Now I am a manager in one of the companies'. Wow. It is nice, we are proud of that.

While reflecting on the stories that I had heard about the impact that Constance has made to this school, I began to wonder what might happen when she retires from her post as principal of The School of Opportunity to become a full-time pastor in the church. My thoughts skated from the management and implementation side to the incredible support that she has been for this team of staff members, who had been disconnected before her arrival in 1999. I wondered about how the staff would run the school on a daily basis when she is not on the property. Would the educators continue to behave in a way that they would if she was overseeing them, that is, being punctual for lessons and fulfilling their daily objectives as expected?

I asked Faith to tell me more about the "Satellite School" that Constance had established, as this was a concrete example of when she, previously, had to be parted from each of those schools for month-long periods at a time. The satellite school was created to serve the needs of the many families who were sending their children to The School of Opportunity from a neighbouring informal settlement, which was situated much further away. The children had to travel quite a distance (between 10 and 15 kilometres) to be at school in the mornings, and Constance had felt that it would be more beneficial to them if they had a school that was nearer to home and

[19] Name omitted to preserve anonymity.

more accessible to them. At the time, there was an abandoned old social workers' building in the area that was not in use, and Constance persuaded the "department" to give it to her as a location to start up a school in the area that would be linked to The School of Opportunity. She then requested that all of the learners who had come from that informal settlement were to attend the satellite school, instead of travelling all the way to The School of Opportunity. She took one of her deputy principals with her, whose task it was to manage that school when she was not there, and then she went through on a monthly basis to check what was happening, to link in with her team of staff there, to enquire as to what their problems were, and to help them resolve any problems that had arisen while she was gone. Faith was one of the team who was sent to the satellite school.

> I remember one time when we were having a satellite at Primrose, she took me out of here [The School of Opportunity] and sent me over to Primrose, where I was just there, teaching (my subject in the Intermediate-Senior Phase)[20]. And we were few, only 9 teachers there. Whenever she came, she found that nothing was wrong. She was managing at [from] a distance. But she managed to see that these two schools were going concurrently.

The development of this satellite school was a great success, as eventually the numbers at that school grew too large for The School of Opportunity to fund from their own rations. The Department of Education then allocated the newly developed school to its own area's Primary School, and the satellite school was absorbed by them.

The team of people who work at The School of Opportunity are proud of their school. Even though most of my observations were done at the end of a particularly busy year for them with the Annual National Assessments having to be processed and

[20] Details blurred to preserve anonymity

reported back on, and all of the functions that were held at the school, I saw positive attitudes, smiles, and professionalism at all times. They seem to emulate the mission of creating a working environment that strives for quality and efficiency in all that they do. The summer months at the tail end of 2012 were hot, and with the heat and high expectations that the end of a school year brings, I might have quietly understood if the staff had been less enthusiastic, or more lethargic in their manner. I, myself, felt "hot and bothered" at times, not having been used to these prefab style buildings that seemed to capture and retain the heat in the way that they do.

## 4.14 More Than Just a Vision – Making it Work

I was most interested in *seeing* how the Vision of the school was being followed through with, in everyday activities. *How* does this school ensure that they are continually striving towards the accomplishment of the Vision Statement? While I was reading through the school's Annual Report for 2012, I came across the following:

**Our School Motto for 2012/2013 : Moving Forward Without Fear – (FAST)**

**F – Faithful**

**A – Available**

**S – Submissive**

**T - Teachable**

This was exactly what I had been hoping to find, and was revealed to me through my analysis of the SGB report of 2012. It is a motto pertaining to the underlying values of what this team considers to push them further in the coming year. This simple

motto provides for them a undemanding, structured plan of how they, as any staff member in their role at the school, can work towards achieving their goals. When Sydney was talking about what he appreciated most about this school, compared to other schools that he had taught at previously, he mentioned that the structures within the school play an important role in the smooth running of The School of Opportunity.

While the school bases their vision and mission statements on that of the Education Department, it is this working motto for the two years that would be able to ensure that the individuals of the school are continually striving to attain those goals. The thought and consideration that had been put into creating this acronym was revealed to me when I spoke to Constance about it, on one occasion.

I had gone back to the school in the first few weeks of the new school year so that I could refer back to questions that had emerged through the reflections of my observations. Again, Constance had opened her schedule for me, and made time to, personally, answer my questions. On my way back to the school, I drove through what had now become ‘familiar territory’ and, having acquired a more in depth understanding of this environment, which, in truth, is so far removed from *my* everyday experiences, I could not help but think back to the mise en scéne, so to speak, that I had described in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. It was another scorching day, and the heat was amplified by the humidity created by the heavy clouds that were rolling in. It was midday, and as I rounded the bend and entered the informal settlement, I noticed that the braziers were still burning on the pavements, producing the distinct smell and smoky haze that I now anticipated. The dull, grey-washed colours of the informal shelters blending into a sea of metal sheets, were

reflecting the light, glaringly, while absorbing the heat of the beating sun, and as I arrived at the “Place of Peace”, I saw that the learners were playing in the parking lot, as it was their break time.

Constance was wearing a lovely, floral dress and I noticed that her hair had been braided beautifully away from her face. She appeared renewed and refreshed since I had seen her last, before the December holiday, and she looked, somewhat, even *more* authoritative than I seem to have remembered her. It was as though she was wholly ready to take on the brand new year with all of the challenges that it holds. Sitting across the table from me, I asked her about the 2012/2013 motto that I had discovered at the end of the SGB report. I specifically wanted to know what her interpretation of the four words that formed the FAST acronym was:

F – *Faithful* She explained that this refers to the learners, primarily. The school and its teachers want to be faithful to the children who they serve, and treat them in a manner which reflects that of the vision, and it incorporates the duties of being in class on time and ensuring that quality teaching and learning is taking place in every classroom, every day.

A – *Available* Constance’s interpretation of this refers to parents and teachers, alike. The school, as a body, wants to make certain that the teachers and parents make themselves available to the learners to support them and provide them with the tools that they need to flourish. Parents are being encouraged to make themselves more available for parent – teacher meetings and school affairs, as well

as being more involved in their children's learning where they can be.

S – *Submissive* She explained that this does not only reflect the authority of the principal and the respect that individuals need to show their superiors. Constance expressed the importance of being submissive to God and the role that each level of the "chain of command" has to play. She sees herself as a role model to her SMT, who, in turn, need to be role models to the HODs, who, in turn, are role models to the teachers and then the learners, etc. She added that, while disobedience is a form of rebellion, it is far more important to demonstrate and lead by example. She said that it basically comes down to the simple phrase of, "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you".

T – *Teachable* This simple word refers to every person at every level of the school and the development of every person at every level of the school. Constance explained that it is not only the learners who need to be teachable and open to learning. The school is creating a platform for all of its members to have the opportunity to develop themselves, be it educationally or professionally.

This acronym expresses the values that are going to be focussed on in 2013: Faithful, Available, Submissive and Teachable. Having spoken to Sydney about this motto, he seemed to have had the same interpretation of the words that Constance had explained to me. This indicates that his understanding is a shared one to that of

the principal and that they *share in the vision*. He confirmed this when he said that the motto provides a renewed focus for success in his teaching career and for the school.

While this 2012/2013 motto guides the school through the context of its day-to-day functioning towards the attainment of the school's vision and the shared vision that this staff has for The School of Opportunity, it should be noted that it underscores the great crest mounted in the front of the reception area; the vibrantly coloured green and bright yellow emblem of The School of Opportunity which appears visibly throughout the campus on the Vision and Mission Statements and other formal documentation, and patched onto the school uniforms on jerseys and yellow school shirts.

*"Working Together, Bringing Light, through Education."*

Constance shared with me her intention to have this motto become a more relevant aspect of the children's learning. She said that all children are taught the motto and understand what it means, but she would like the phrase to become more than that, and to have more influence on the learning that happens in the school. She would like the learners to intrinsically understand the relevance of those words as they work in the classroom together, bringing light to their learning and education. Constance teaches the Grade 7s as part of her time in the classroom and added that she does revisit the crest and meaning of the motto, but that she would like to see this happening in all grades, especially since the crest is on their uniforms and can be used as a tool to constantly remind them of this important lesson.

## 4.15 Staff Development and Training – Enabling the Vision to be Realised

Constance spoke extensively on utilizing the strengths of her staff members through mentorship programmes and sharing some aspects of her leadership with them. In order to promote progress and continuously build on their abilities, the staff at The School of Opportunity regularly attend staff development programmes offered to them. However, she added that, due to costs, the Department of Education has reduced the number of workshops offered to educators, and instead, offers training to members of SMTs with the intention of empowering the heads of department and asking them to go back to their schools and provide feedback from staff development workshops. When the education department does offer in-service training to the educators, the teachers are encouraged by the school to attend.

Apart from the in-service training offered by the Department of Education, Constance has developed a relationship between The School of Opportunity and an independent school in the Eastern suburbs of Johannesburg. While there is already an arrangement that has been made with the senior school's principal regarding some of the School of Opportunity's girls attending the independent school with a scholarship in Grade 8, Constance is anticipating a new arrangement with the head of the Junior School to take effect. When the newly appointed principal of the primary school is ready, she is hoping that a teacher-exchange and mentorship programme can be developed. She said that this is the ultimate goal for her to achieve from this collaboration.

## 4.16 Creating Partnerships with Local Businesses to Boost Resources and Facilities

The School of Opportunity is working in collaboration with businesses in and around the area as a result of a number of factors which highlighted the needs for a meaningful and holistic approach to improve learner performance within the school (Annual Report, 2012, p. 1).

Constance described the school that she joined in 1999 as being “Platonic”: they had the Foundation Phase learners attending classes in the mornings from 07:00 until 12:00, and the Intermediate Phase learners then having lessons from 12:00 until 17:00. The school was too small to host all of the learners at one time. In 2000, she approached the local Municipality and asked them for access to the buildings that had previously been the municipal offices and clinic for the area, but which was, at that time, no more than a ‘white elephant’ adjacent to the existing school. The school was granted access, and the empty clinic was converted to five new classrooms, while the school offices then moved to the old municipal offices.

The school was also granted buildings in Primrose, a neighbouring informal settlement that was home to a large number of the children who attended, at that stage, ABC Primêre Skool. Constance established, what is termed, a “Satellite School”, consisting of 8 classes in Primrose, and, for eight years, she managed both institutions, moving between the two continuously. The remarkable thing about this endeavour is that she managed both of these schools, with the assistance of her deputy principals, on the limited budget that was allocated to The School of Opportunity alone. She moved her staff from The School of Opportunity to teach

there and to get that school up and running. While she was at the one venue, her one deputy principal would manage the other venue, and vice verse.

As both of the schools grew in number, however, it later became impossible to fund both of them with the budget that she had been granted, and so, eight years into the project, the satellite school was handed over to a closer existing Primary School as a Foundation Phase feeder school. In the 13 years that Constance has been principal of The School of Opportunity, the number of learners that attend the school have grown from 700 to over 1 300 learners.

Constance and the SGB have, over the last 13 years recognised the value of effectively marketing The School of Opportunity to local businesses so that they can provide a greater quality of learning and opportunity for their learners and the community. Over the past 13 years, the school team has created a personal and beautiful scrapbook of what their school stands for, to them, and of all of their initiatives. They have recorded all of the positive changes and the progress of the school, and how hard it is working to strive for better. To a researcher, this book symbolises and embodies the faith and commitment that the principal, SMT, educators, learners and parents have in the school; that it is an institution that is growing from strength to strength. When Constance approaches the various businesses and companies that she is hoping to strike up partnerships with, she takes a vital document with her… a scrapbook, created by a number of teachers at The School of Opportunity…

*When I met Constance for the first time, she escorted me to her office through the doorway of achievement, where the school's top performers smiled down at me from their elevated positions. Her office was another gallery of pictures and awards. She invited me to join her at a round table and she proudly placed, ceremoniously, in my lap, a large, heavy, black album of history and memories. As I opened her offering, I was greeted by the school's vision and mission statements – a smaller copy of the mounted version that I had seen, displayed in the office. Just like the introduction or foreword in a novel, I knew that the vision and mission statements, displayed on the first page, encapsulated and had moulded everything else that I was going to see in that book. What an impact it made.*

*Behind the protective sheets of plastic and mounted on an array of differently decorated and coloured, school-themed sheets of paper, I was taken back to Constance's starting blocks of The School of Opportunity. Behind the "ABC Primêre Skool" sign, I noticed that there were no paved grounds, and no shielding palisade fencing. The familiar sight of the informal settlement could be seen through the supporting poles, although, in this photograph, there seemed to be a lot more space between the dwellings, and they were not yet up to the border of the school grounds. In photographs of the classrooms at that time, there are images of many children to a class, of which very few were wearing school uniforms. However, they looked as though they were working hard. Other pictures in*

*this section included some of the children playing in the dust in front of broken fencing in a different part of the school. In that particular photograph the ground was littered with papers that may have blown in from the settlement, or may have been carelessly dropped by the children.*

*Special, fundraising occasions have been documented in the scrapbook, including Spring Day, Fun Day, Heritage Day and awards ceremonies. In these photographs, the organisation of the events and children are shared with their audience, and an idea of how far this school has come, compared to the earlier photographs previously described begins to develop. The paving has been laid, by the time these photographs were taken, there seems to be a greater pride in what the school presents, and almost all of the children are dressed in school uniforms of yellow and green.*

*Included in the scrapbook is information about the school facilities… and the lack thereof. It is described how few toilets there are for the large number of learners at the school, and how, when these are broken, they have to walk to the taxi rank to use the facilities there. The school has to teach the learners how to use the toilets, as most of them do not have these facilities at home and struggle to use them "wisely".*

*There is also evidence of how the school is developing the staff and the general community. With the aid of sponsors, the school has run in-service training programmes for educators, leadership programmes for the School Governing Body and they have sourced a number of Non-*

*Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to come and address the parents on better parenting skills and registrations for identity documents and social grants etc.*

*The book celebrates the achievement of their choir, who entered a choral music competition and progressed to district and then provincial level to participate in the Tirisano Music Competition. In these photographs, the choir is donning beautifully made shiny yellow sashes with a thin, green ribbon sewn down the centre. In one of the pictures, they are wearing a green shirt with it, and in another picture, they are wearing a yellow shirt, in the same material as the sash.*

*The development and importance of the school library is also acknowledged, with the school having a full-time librarian to encourage the learners to read books, to help them with their projects and assignments, and to read to the learners and tell them stories. The school have recently extended their library and converted it to a media centre.*

*There is a wonderful selection, over many pages in the scrapbook, of how the school is developing the cultural and practical skills of the learners, through teaching them handcrafts and performing arts. There are numerous photographs of different learners, dressed up in various ways and performing different dances for many different occasions. The vibrant colours and action shots draw the viewer into the event, and a sense of the closeness of this community can almost be felt.*

*In the midst of these celebrations, the partnerships with various companies and special guest visits are revealed, with the donation of sports equipment from Hollard, and their other wonderful commitments, building projects. What was expressed through all of these photographs, in particular, was the sense of community and the value in the development of this primary school that the companies and people in the photographs shared. On one page, there is a description of how the State Secretary of Great Britain was invited to the school on a recent visit to South Africa. He has vouched his support for the school. A Gauteng parliamentarian has 'adopted' The School of Opportunity, and he pledged his support in trying to access the land in "block 5" where the informal settlement has encroached on school property, affecting their building plans.*

*I sensed that, while I was paging through the imagery of pride, hope, faith and commitment, I must have been feeling what any managing director of any local business or grand company might be feeling, if they were looking at this scrapbook. There is a vast difference between looking at pages of statistics, business-style interviews, and regular day-to-day meetings, and being presented with something like this school scrapbook - The portrait of the vision and mission of this school so vividly described through pictures and events that draw one into the moment. The expressions of all of the children, educators, visitors, sponsors and parents who have been represented, present to the viewer of that book so much more than a primary school in a previously disadvantaged context,*

*and I can see why Constance is so successful in obtaining the sponsorships and relationships that she has.*

Through sponsorship that the school has acquired, separate from anything that the Department of Education has partaken in, Constance and the SGB have erected the palisade fencing (in partnership with SASOL), paved the school grounds, had two mobile classrooms and the school hall donated (by Johnson Matthey), acquired a donation of sports equipment and a Grade 7 classroom, from Hollard, as well as an initiative where teachers awards are donated by Hollard, for excellent service, and learners awards, for excellent school and sports results. I believe that they are also on board to support the development project for brick buildings when the ground space is made available for development. Melco, a new partner to The School of Opportunity, awards the top 6 scholars in Grade 7 (for the last two years, and the following years to come) a full scholarship for high school and tertiary education, and they have job placements awaiting these learners when they have graduated. They pay for the school fees, the stationery and the uniforms for the learners. Through her relationship with the principal of the independent school, 50 learners from the community have been sponsored (awarded) Saturday classes from Grades 8 – 12, which gives the learners greater opportunity when they have left The School of Opportunity.

The school calls on NGOs like Child Welfare, to inform the Grade 7s about teenage pregnancy, HIV awareness and the dangers of drug abuse. The school has also been able to provide more than 500 learners with school uniforms through fundraising and sponsorship projects. 1000 of the learners at The School of

Opportunity are being fed through the Primary School Nutrition Programme (P.S.N.P).

In their annual school report, the school particularly “thanks God and all of the companies which are supporting it to achieve its Vision and Mission”. David, the deputy principal, in his profile of Constance, listed collectively, the following businesses and partnerships that she has teamed with during her time as principal at The School of Opportunity: SASOL, Hewlett Packard, Hollard, MacSteel, Johnson Matthey, Premier Park, AFROX, Melco, FNB and Nedbank.

It is Constance’s commitment and persistence in forging relationships with these surrounding companies and businesses that help her to create the greatest opportunities for the learners of The School of Opportunity. Without the continued relationship development between the principal and the community, the school would not have the support and collected funds for the resources and developments that it is accumulating now, and with this type of support, the learners at the school are encouraged to work hard for themselves.

## 4.17 School Performance

The School of Opportunity has just been moved out of the category of “non-performing” schools and into the “performing schools” group. Faith explained to me, with a sense of excitement in her voice:

> I was so surprised, even myself, as yesterday as we attended a workshop; I know our school is at the GPLS [Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy] schools, those non-performing schools. But yesterday, we were called with those schools who are performing. And we attended such a workshop. When we arrived there, we saw

> different faces, and we said, 'this is not our team'. Because we know we don't belong there. We said, 'Wow!' because this means that there is a big improvement, a big one! So with the teaching, we are improving every day. Really, we are improving every day and hoping that we are going to push that quality to the higher level.

When I spoke to Constance about this development for the school, she smiled and told me how proud she is of the educators and the children at the school. However, in the same breath, she divulged that there is still much room for improvement. At that point she acknowledged her staff again, saying how committed and dedicated they are. She added that when it is time for them to be in their classes, the staff members know where they are supposed to be.

> I must say, we have very committed staff, we have very dedicated staff. You know, when it is time to go to class, we don't have space, my deputies are sharing an office, my HODs are sharing an office, even my Junior HODs don't have office space, they are using their classes, everyone they know that it is their period in that class. So it is also a blessing in disguise which adds up to an improvement, and it is not only said by us that we are seeing it, but we are getting officials who are coming to our school and they say, "Constance you have a good teacher in that person. If I were to move from my position if I were to move from my position and this person gets my job, I would really do [accept] it. And you get, you feel, as a parent you feel proud that you have people that can make a difference out there.

Other principals look to her for advice, asking her how she handles absenteeism, or misconduct. She is a leader who is happy to share her methods with other principals. She sent her whole SMT to another school in order for them to mentor and assist the SMT there, sharing with them what Ekurhuleni is doing in the circumstances that they are in.

As far as immediate steps towards furthering the school's improvement goes, the SGB and SMT identified that one of the greatest areas of need was that of a

receptive year, or Grade R class. In 2012, the school had 34 Grade 1 learners who had to be retained because they were not “school ready” when they started Grade 1; they had not had the opportunity to attend a Nursery School or a Grade R programme of any sort, and as a result, they struggled with the content and school routines. Those children who had been “in the system already” had progressed very well. It was clear that the school had to provide this extra grade for the community, and for the benefit of the school, hence, they established, in 2012, four Grade R classes at The School of Opportunity.

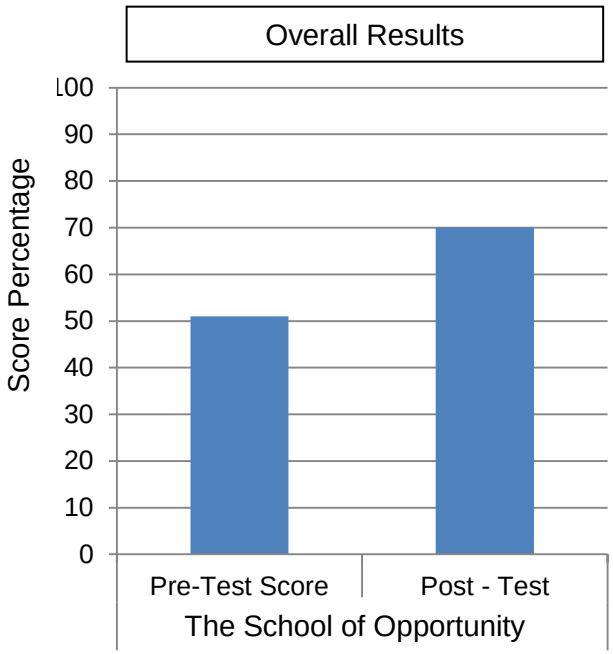
**Table 4.2: 2012 Learner Statistics at The School of Opportunity (SBG Report 2012)**

| Grade | Boys | Girls | Total | Pass | Retained | Pass Rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **R** | 73 | 54 | 127 | 127 | 0 | **100.0%** |
| **One** | 103 | 93 | 196 | 162 | 34 | **82.6%** |
| **Two** | 92 | 67 | 159 | 144 | 15 | **90.5%** |
| **Three** | 77 | 80 | 157 | 139 | 18 | **88.5%** |
| **Four** | 85 | 91 | 176 | 164 | 12 | **93.1%** |
| **Five** | 91 | 84 | 175 | 171 | 4 | **97.7%** |
| **Six** | 59 | 85 | 144 | 141 | 3 | **97.9%** |
| **Seven** | 59 | 70 | 129 | 124 | 5 | **96.1%** |
| **Total** | **639** | **624** | **1263** | **1172** | **91** | **93.0%** |

While reading the Annual School Governing Body Report for 2012, and the learner statistics, I observed that the greatest number of retentions in the school have been in the Foundation Phase. With the implementation of the Grade R programme, the school is hoping to reduce the number of retentions in the Foundation Phase as the learners will have been better prepared for formal education.

Overall School Improvement:

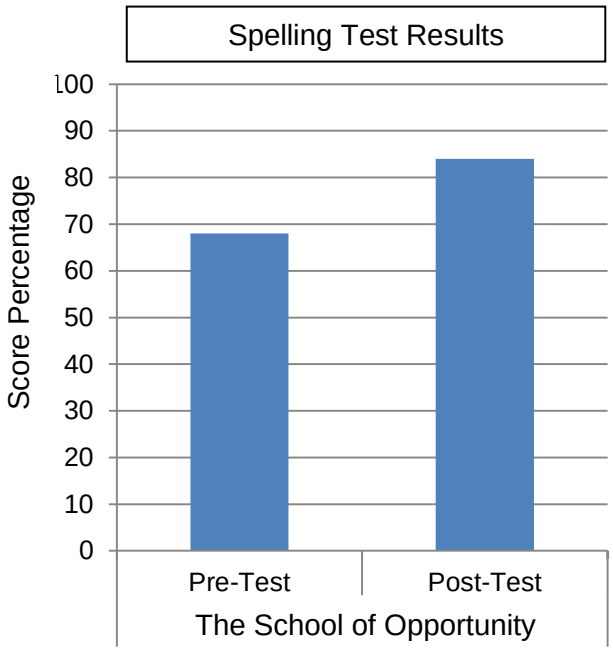
This graph indicates that average overall scores for The School of Opportunity, for the components of: Spelling, Language, Writing and Comprehension, and represents the pre-test and post-test results as part of the GPLS 2012.

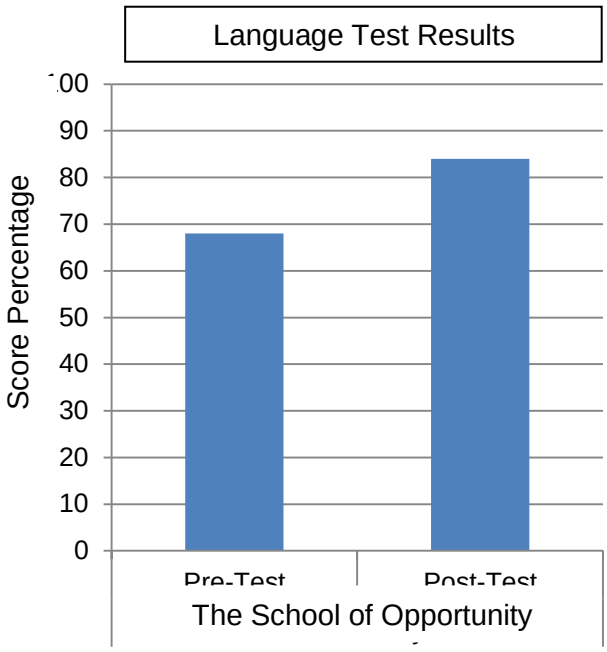


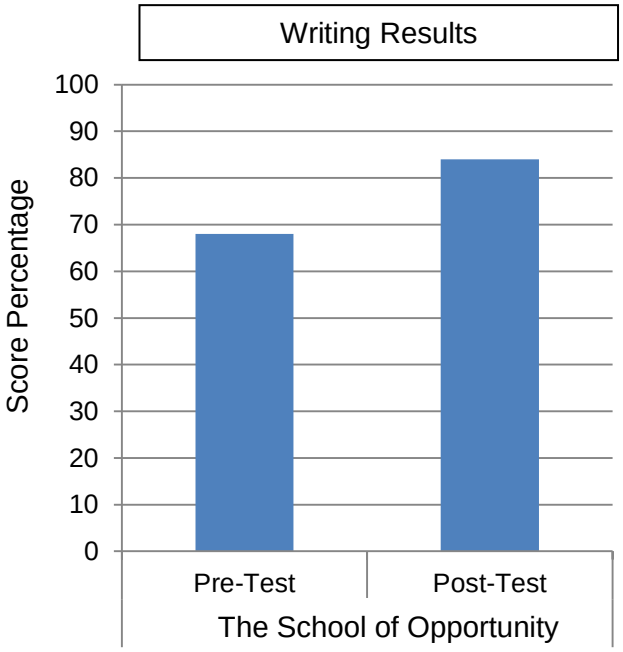

The School of Opportunity produced a 19% increase in their overall Literacy results and were in the top 2 performing schools in that area.

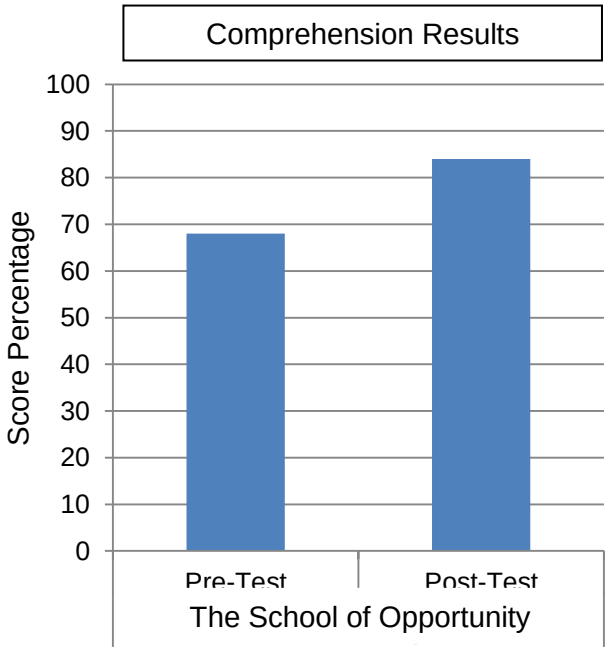
They showed a 24% increase in their Spelling results, a 17% increase in their Language Test results, a 19% increase in their Writing results, and a 16% increase in their Comprehension results.

Compared to the other schools in the area that participated, The School of Opportunity was the second highest performing of eight different schools, and achieved significant improvements in all areas of Literacy that were focused on.






Early into the New Year (2013), I revisited The School of Opportunity and sat down with Constance again. She was able to give me a copy of the Annual National Assessment District results that had been released to her that month:

**Table 4.3 : The District ANA Statistic Results 2012 for Grades 3, 6 and 9**

| GRADES | MATHEMATICS | | | HOME LANGUAGES | | | FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGES | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % | Position | | % | Position | | % | Position | |
| | | Provincial | National | | Provincial | National | | Provincial | National |
| 3 | 52 | 1 | 1 | 60.4 | 1 | 1 | | | |
| 6 | 37 | 1 | 2 | 50.8 | 5 | | 48.4 | 1 | 2 |
| 9 | 17.2 | 3 | | 49.3 | 10 | | 43.6 | 1 | 2 |

It seemed as though the district has performed relatively well, given the “positioning” in the table, with first place provincial placements and the province placing first, nationally, for Grade 3 Mathematics and Home Languages in Grade 3. The District, again, seems to have led the results for Grade 6 Mathematics in Gauteng, and the

province being placed second, nationally. It appears as though the District learners in Grade Six achieved sixth position in the provincial Home Languages arena, but the province's national ranking was not divulged. As The School of Opportunity does not teach Grade 9 learners, I shall not focus on those results. When I asked Constance whether the percentage results reflected the percentage of learners who passed the test or the overall average marks of the tests for those Learning Areas, she informed me that it was the percentage of learners who passed the papers.

While the results seem promising on a National scale, Sydney informed me that they are merely the benchmark from which The School of Opportunity, itself, can now focus on outdoing next year. He claimed,

> Language may have been a problem, as there is a barrier, but also, some of them, their reading is a problem. Because even with the assessments in the class, within my learning areas, they don't read the questions before they write.

This is just one area that the educators are going to be focussing on in their goal to improve the learners' performances in the following years, and The School of Opportunity intends to continually improve.

## End Thought

What I found to be most interesting during the conversations (interviews) that I conducted with the team at The School of Opportunity was the way in which they seemed to interpret many of their accounts of success and progress as mere stepping stones towards continual growth and development of the school. At no point was I made to feel under the impression that any interviewee was satisfied with how

far the school had come and that they were at a point where they were finished. This echoed a strong sense of personal mastery to me, which seems to be fuelled by the buy in of these staff members to the shared vision of the school, as well as the support that the staff give to Constance and the reponse by them to her open, leadership approach.

# Chapter Five : Reflection

## *5.1 The School of Opportunity*

In the introduction to this report, I relayed that the environments in which previously disadvantaged South African schools in the wake of Apartheid find themselves now, are very challenging. The School of Opportunity, a school, operating in an informal settlement in the East of Johannesburg is no different. Some of the “serious problems in historically black areas” cited by Moloi (2005) have been identified as the problems that The School of Opportunity contends with.

Referring back to the work of Bronfrenbrenner (1979): On an exo-systemic level, their space is very limited as a result of the encroaching community who will make the most of any square metre of “available” space. The school’s electricity cables are often stolen or tapped into, and this has impacted the school to the extent where they were unable to produce their reports in the middle of last year.

On a meso-systemic level, the majority of the parents of the learners who attend the school are not educated, are often unemployed, and they are not sure of what their role in the education of their children is. Therefore, when or, more realistically, if they come to parent body meetings, they are unsure of what to do with the information that they receive from the school regarding their children. The school is a no-fee school, which means that there are limited funds and the governmental allowance is supplemented only by fundraising and sponsorships that can be procured.

On a micro-systemic level, the learners are school children by day and “street kids” by night. The lack of structure in their home environments, for many of them, not only contradicts their classroom time, it undermines it as well. One could argue that the preparation for “real life” that the school aims to provide for the children shows little relevance to their immediate environment as they know it. As a result, some of the learners are late for school or absent. The lack of sports facilities impacts the community in a greater way than “not having a field to play on” or equipment to play with. Given the lack of money in the community, there is little for the children to do in the afternoons. There are few, if any, books or games at home for them to engage with, and there is nothing to keep them busy. This kind of environment does not nurture the routines that children would benefit from at a primary school age.

With limited access to high schools (be it due to low numbers and proximity or monetary shortages), the community needs extra support in motivation and incentive to commit to the education of their children. While they may know how important it is to be educated, there seems to be a feeling of “what is the point” as they see the end of Primary School education as the end of their formal schooling. Even though The School of Opportunity is a no-fee school, there is an expectation of minimal payment made by the parents per term, agreed to at the SGB and parent meetings. However, there are many parents that do not commit to their payments and this affects the daily running of the school. As a result, the school relies on renting out their facilities (classrooms) to the local churches and municipal rallies/functions. There is concern, however, that the school facilities are being overused and this, too affects the daily running of the school.

These are some examples of the physical contextual challenges with which many of the previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa are contending with. Fleisch's (2008) argument that up to 80% of children are unable to read fluently in the language of instruction at the school is another challenge. As described, The School of Opportunity instructs their lessons in English and Afrikaans, but the children who attend the school speak a range of the indigenous languages of South Africa and other African countries. Often, English and Afrikaans are not even their second or third languages, and because the parents of the learners are not fluent readers, they cannot support their children in the afternoons when they are doing their homework in these languages.

Sydney described the school as operating in the environment of the informal settlement, but not limiting its expectations based on the environment in which it operates. The school does not allow excuses for the circumstances of the environments in which its learners and parents are living. While it is empathic to the needs of this community, there is a firm belief at the school that many of the challenges that the community faces can be overcome with quality education provided by the school.

The micro-system level, (Figure 1.2, adapted from Bronfrenbrenner, 1979), of the school, on page 6 of this dissertation, provides the structure of what support the learners need to succeed in their school life. The school is working very hard at extending this structure and determination out to the meso-system, through the school vision of giving each learner the opportunity of developing their talents, and leaving the school with knowledge, skills and self-esteem. They are doing this by reaching out to the community through its churches and into its parent body, by

inviting the parents to be more involved in the fundraising, the development of the community vegetable garden and volunteering their services to the school, for example.

This environment, and the school's outreach to the communities of the Ekurhuleni informal settlements, demonstrates the impact that each has on the other. While the school seems to be the antithesis of the environment in which it operates, the impact of the environment on the daily functioning of the school is starting to be balanced by the impact that the school is having on the environment. In the thirteen years that Constance has been principal of The School of Opportunity, significant progress has been documented in all aspects of the school.

The learners are more aware of the expectations that the school has of them, with regard to their work ethic, discipline and their progress. With the sponsorships of the high school and tertiary bursaries being awarded to the top learners in Grade 7, the pupils at the school are inspired to do better, and to try to attain one of these bursaries. The learners are pushing themselves more, now that there is hope for them and they can *see* a future in education beyond Grade 7. As Mr Ngubane reflected,

> That is motivating our childrens, to be, to focus on education. They don't do that at the corners, they do that in front of other learners to show them , "Tracey, John , Thobile, Mogetle, come forward, this one we are taking them to high school to university." And others, they ask themselves, "Eish, why?"… My grandchild, she is going to Grade 7 next year. She was number 2 this year in Grade 6. She told me, "My grandfather, next year I want to be number one!"I said, "Stop playing with the "tjommies", you just play with the papers inside the yard. You will get that number one! I am here, your mother is here, she is my child, your grandmother is here, we will help you. If you want me to buy a newspaper every day and you read the newspaper, that will also upgrade your education.

The teachers are, continually, striving to engage better with their subject content and motivating the learners to do the same. With the daily consultation meetings, the educators and the SMT are able to share best practices and mentor those teachers that need extra support in engaging better with the curriculum. In this way "meaningful and productive changes in instructional practice" (City et al., 2009) is regularly assessed and strived for.

The school vision and the way that Constance has incorporated it into her leadership approach have made a significant contribution towards identifying the end goal for the learners that attend The School of Opportunity. It has given the teaching at the school a definitive purpose and guided the principal, her SMT and her staff in the progress that they have reported. Loock et al.'s (2003) explication that educational leadership encompasses the ability to manage change and create a vision for the future, whereby this vision is communicated to followers and used to motivate them to achieve the vision, comes to life when I hear from her staff about the way that Constance has lead this school. With Constance I identified a dual vision for The School of Opportunity, which, to me lays the foundation for the relationships that I have witnessed at the school.

Formally, the school had adopted the Department of Education's Vision and Mission Statements and, through various arenas, transformed them, from what I had previously commented were idealistic measures, into a tool that Constance has been able to work "at ground level" with. This vision of "giving each learner the best chance of success in adult life" is being nurtured through the practices and daily routines of the school. However, it is clear that Constance has dedicated herself towards much more than this for the school. Her personal vision goes beyond the

learners sitting in the classrooms today. It extends to the future learners that will move through The School of Opportunity and, hopefully, their children, too. As McLagan (2003) suggested, she has extended her leadership of this school far beyond basic managerial input and the usual organisational processes. What will be most interesting to observe, however, is whether Constance's mentorship and leadership practice has, indeed, rubbed off onto the rest of the staff, and whether this school will continue to move forward under a new principal.

Constance actively supports her staff, and rewards great effort. She ensures that they continually improve on their skills, whether it is through sending them to any available workshops or development programmes, or whether some teachers require mentorship from those who are excelling. She encourages day-to-day improvements and changes, and this is evident in the daily consultation meetings. As Sydney and Faith explained, it is during this time that the objectives for the day, the week, and sometimes, the term are discussed, and in this context, Constance is "open" with her team of staff. She gives them immediate feedback on any departmental requirements or school requirements that might have been looked at. The "openness, reflection, deeper conversations and shared vision" that Senge (1990) believes to be the fundamental components that energise change are very visible at The School of Opportunity. Programmes and practices are reviewed continuously and the staff members are recognised for their development and achievements.

The value of personal development is fostered in the teachers, and they are, then, able to foster this in the learners as well. Bush and Middlewood's (2005) description of both formal and informal staff learning strategies are, therefore, all (unconsciously) utilised at The School of Opportunity, where, informally, staff learn from other staff,

they analyse their own and others' work, and formally, specific provision is put in place for her staff to develop, and training is provided externally through workshops, as well (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 195).

While she has not studied theories of Educational Leadership in a formal context and chosen to adopt a particular leadership style, Constance has demonstrated leadership approaches that could be linked to those of the Learning Organisation (Senge, 1990). She is continually aware of what is happening in the micro, meso and exo-systems in which the school operates, and she does "scan the environments to contribute to broadening the scope of the information, policy and practice that would influence the school's development" (Silins, Zarins & Mulford, 2002; Moloi, 2005). She was described by her staff members as being open and, by sharing all information with her staff, she fosters a climate of collaboration and trust, and she involves each of the staff members in various areas of need in the school. They are involved in the decision making processes and given an avenue whereby they can voice their concerns or approval around the long term and short term planning for the school.

What I have observed of Constance is a leader who not only, continually reassess where the school is at and where the next goal will take them, she is also very concerned with the past of the school, and how far it has come. While Senge (1990) describes Personal Mastery as the ability to maintain a balance between a clear personal vision and awareness of current reality, Constance adds another dimension to this, and she utilises it to secure support in her endeavours to reach her goals. Because Constance is honest and direct with her staff, they seem to trust her. The staff members that I interviewed referred to the staff body as a family and to

Constance as their mother. This stressed the loyalty that they have towards her and reciprocates the loyalty that she has for the school and her staff team. With this kind of familial relationship at the school, it is clear that the staff share in her vision for the school, the vision that reflects that of the Educational Department and her secondary, personal vision to see the school functioning in brick buildings, with enough classrooms for all of the learners, and for sports and recreational facilities so that the learners can develop their sporting skills as well as their academic and cultural skills.

The Maryland Schooling System through MDK12 (1997) spoke about “describing the school you seek to become”. With the history of the school and the present contextual factors taken into account, Constance has, with her team, identified the areas that need improvement. Unfortunately, some of the improvements that need to be made have to wait for steps to be taken by external bodies, such as the relocation of the people who have constructed their homes on land that she had already secured for the school. However, this does not mean that the school has made no preparations of their own in preparation for when the relocations have been arranged. She has created partnerships with a range of leading industrial and commercial companies to facilitate that immediate action is taken when the time arises.

The school’s vision statement seems to be the structural component of the shared vision that this team has, under the leadership and guidance of Constance. It stabilises the changes that are most likely to come from the macro-system – that is, the continually changing requirements of the Department of Education. As the Department of Education alters its requirements of the public schools towards the

fulfilment of their vision, and these changes will, in the end, facilitate the attainment of The School of Opportunity's Vision Statement. Constance advocates a unified school culture which bases its instructional programme, both in the staffroom and the classroom which is conducive to student learning and staff growth, and this links to the argument that this type of nurturing promotes a safe and effective learning environment. It also links directly to the school's mission statement, providing an environment in which quality teaching and learning can take place every day.

*The School of Opportunity's Vision is…*

*"To give every learner the opportunity to develop his/her talent..."*

In the community in which the school operates and the contextual environment that comprises challenges from all systems in which it works, the school does not focus on academics alone. The talents and capabilities of each learner are considered. The empathic staff take into account the circumstances of their learners and acknowledge that, for now, it would be unrealistic to expect every learner to achieve the kinds of academic results that will result in bursaries to high schools.

The learners' home backgrounds, the fact that many of their parents are not educated and cannot support their learning programme at home, and the lack of structure in their out-of-school life all contribute to this. While Sydney explained that this does not bear any allowance for a lowering of the school's expectations of the learners, the school does provide the opportunity for each learner to identify other talents, beyond their academic programme, and the school has made efforts to forge partnerships with organisations that will develop the learners in these areas if they demonstrate their commitment to it.

*"...and leave our institution with knowledge, skills and self-esteem that will give them the best chance of success in adult life..."*

The current reality is that many of the learners who attend The School of Opportunity are not going to be educated further than Grade 7, and that is because of the shortage of high schools in the area, and the fact that the high schools in the area are fee-paying schools. The learners at this school, therefore, have to take the greatest amount of knowledge from, and learn as many skills as they can at The School of Opportunity. However, one could argue that two of the greatest skills that they will have to take with them are the abilities to read and to think. If they are able to, at least, do these two things, they may have developed enough self-esteem to carry them into the next stage of their lives. Faith expressed that she sees the success of these learners as them having completed the National Senior Certificate.

This amounts to the learners continuing in their paths of learning; that they have developed an intrinsic attitude for learning and for self-development, and this requires self-esteem and personal motivation, on the part of the child, in an environment that is, for the majority, largely not educated and unemployed.

Gates (2011) mentioned the word "aspiration" in her presentation, and that "people want their children to be successful, to be healthy, and to have a successful life". But does the Culture of Poverty (Christie, 2008) negate Gates' (2011) idealistic notion? There has been a marked increase in the number of parents getting involved in the school community than before. According to Constance, the school is able to boast that an average of 50% of the parent population is taking greater interest in the education of their children, as indicated by the marked increase in attendance at the parent body meetings held at the school.

There seems to be a growing connection between the community and the school – a developing unified vision; a shared vision. From the interviews that I conducted with the teaching staff, the representative of the SGB and Constance, it seems as though the community is developing an appreciation for the role of education in helping their children to be more successful and the school's goal, itself, is to give the learners the best chance of success in adult life. MDK12 (1997) stresses the importance of a shared vision between the school and the community so that parents are able to commit to the goals which The School of Opportunity is striving to develop in a way that the parents of this community can become more of a support to the learners and to the accomplishment of the vision itself.

Gabriel and Farmer (2009) and Hammonds (2005) identified the common criteria of a school vision. It should be concise, a single, encapsulating statement which is a projected goal of what the school is striving for or to become, and that a common understanding of the vision amongst stakeholders is crucial. I believe that The School of Opportunity's vision statement meets these criteria, and that, in the process of working towards achieving this vision, they are fostering the common understanding of the vision amongst the stakeholders. This is particularly prevalent in their motto for 2012/2013: Moving forward, without fear, FAST.

The fact that they refresh the "working vocabulary" of how the school continues to strive towards the achievement of its vision, indicates that this particular school vision means more to the stakeholders than just a plaque on the wall, filled with empty words. It should be noted that this motto is clearly short-termed. This indicates that it is a "working vision" for the next steps towards the end goal, and that at the

end of 2013, the environment will be scanned and assessed again and a new, appropriate motto for the following period will be identified.

The Mission Statement, as described by Gabriel and Farmer (2009) and Hammonds (2005) explicates the school vision with the processes of how the vision is going to be achieved, and describes the values that support the school vision. Together with the school motto, The School of Opportunity's Mission Statement does just that. The values are expressed as being dedicated to quality teaching and learning practice. The acronym "FAST" in the school motto expresses the values that are going to be focussed on in 2013: Faithful (faith), Available (availability), Submissive (submission) and Teachable, and this provides a platform for the educators to work towards achieving the shared school vision.

The school vision statement and mission statement also fulfils Hammond's (2005) requirements of a powerful vision, that is, one that is positive and inspiring, is comprehensive, yet detailed, and is shared by the community. The School of Opportunity is strengthening their relationship with the community and the parent body of the school as they, through the vision and the leadership of the school, are beginning to recognise their role in the system of the school.

### *5.2 Schools That Work And The Learning Organisation*

Christie et al.'s (2007) characteristics of "Schools That Work" incorporated values that I have linked to the five disciplines of Senge's (1990) Learning Organisation. The discipline of "personal mastery" was linked to the high expectations and the consistent monitoring of progress in the schools described. At The School of

Opportunity, the principal has high expectations of her staff team and this follows through to the expectations of the learners. Sydney expressed this clearly when he explained that the outside environment (meaning the informal settlement) does not affect the level of expectation that the school has of its learners. Progress is monitored in a number of ways, from personal performance reviews carried out by Constance and the SMT, to scrutinised monitoring of the progress of the curriculum in each grade and subject. There is a clear chain of delegated responsibilities in the school and all of the staff members are aware of their duties. Because there is regular monitoring of progress, the principal is able to identify which, if any, educators require support in any specific way, and provide the mentorship that they need.

Christie et al.'s (2007) "Schools That Work" characteristics of "concentrating on teaching and learning, and purposeful teaching" was linked to Senge's (1990) "mental models". There is great emphasis at The School of Opportunity on being in the classroom and being prepared for the lesson, as far as the educators are concerned. The educator accountability is high and well monitored, but from my observations, I sensed that there was less emphasis on accountability being the reason for the responsibility that these educators demonstrated. Their purpose and dedication to quality teaching came from within them, indicating true mental models - their way of thinking, and their attitude to their purpose at the school. I sensed that part of this may have reflected personal mastery, while another part suggested that it stemmed from loyalty to Constance and a buy-in to her vision for the school. Having walked around the school and moved from classroom to classroom, the pride that The School of Opportunity has, even in the little that it has and despite its contextual

challenges, is reflected in the organisation of the classrooms and the sense of agency and purpose in them.

I linked “Team Learning” (Senge, 1990) to the characteristic feature of “Schools That Work” (Christie, 2007) : the creation of a learning environment. From the conversations that I had with all of the staff members at The School of Opportunity, it is evident that they are greatly encouraged to develop their skills at every opportunity. The mindset at this school is one of continued learning, amongst the staff and amongst the children, and they maximise the opportunity to learn whenever they can and from each opportunity presented to them. They are, therefore, sent to all of the workshops and staff development programmes that are available. The daily consultation meetings create a platform where teachers are able to share their knowledge of what they learn at the workshops with the rest of the staff, and, because mentorship is an important tool at this school, teachers build on the strengths of other teachers, as well.

The “Systems Thinking” that Senge (1990) describes is the ability of all members of the organisation to think bigger than just themselves. Rather than seeing oneself as an individual, one sees oneself as a member of the greater team and recognises one’s value and responsibility towards the running of the “whole machine”. While I had linked this to Christie et al.’s (2007) consideration of pupils’ and teachers’ rights, at The School of Opportunity, the “systems thinking” approach stems, not just from the vision statement and the motto for 2012/2013. Every member of staff at this school sees themselves as a part of a family there. While this may sound “relaxed” and a little without purpose, it was also made clear to me by all interviewees that while they all feel like they are part of a family, there are strict guidelines to the roles

and expectations of each member of staff. They are aware of where they “fit in” to the system and everything that they need to do to grow and develop their part of that system. The motto, itself, indicates an acute awareness of how each member of staff needs to be included in this team and that the possibility to move forward towards the end goal, the shared vision, is through every person’s ability to move forward without fear, and being faithful, available, submissive and teachable.

The Shared Vision, described by Senge (1990) and Christie et al. (2007) is the key to how The School of Opportunity has been guided over the past 13 years. When Constance arrived at the school in 1999, interviews documented evidence that there was a school with little direction as well as, what seemed to be, a divided staff. They did not trust her and there were feelings of resentment amongst some of the staff because they had not been promoted to principal and that, instead, it had been awarded to an external candidate. Looking through the photographs of that time, the school was in a state of disrepair, and as Constance described, it seemed as though they had lost the sense of who they were. With Constance, however, and her clear vision of some of the steps that were needed to give The School of Opportunity its identity back, the school staff and the community have grown to share in this vision. Without a purpose, and a directional path, it would take an organisation of over a thousand a very long time to reach its destination.

A systematic and organised approach is required if one is to lead so many, and Constance has also identified that she cannot do this without the support of each member of staff, doing their bit. She achieves this through living out the words of the school vision, which are displayed as a reminder to members of staff and each parent of the community when they walk into the offices. It is presented to each

company that she approaches for sponsorship, and expresses to these people a vision of what she is looking for and requisitioning for the school. To the learners, her vision comes through in the form of an easy saying, one which they are reminded of every time they see the crest on their school uniforms: “working together and bringing light through education”. The teachers are exposed, daily, to this vision in the consultation meetings, through the crest of the school on the children’s uniforms, and through the school motto for 2012/2013: “Moving forward without fear, FAST”.

As a result, The School of Opportunity is a “School That Works” (Christie et al., 2007) as it displays similar features and characteristics that were described and isolated as effective. However, while Sydney reported that the first set of ANA results achieved in 2012 are not as high as expected, it should be noted that it is the “class picture” mindset that blurs the achievement of how far this individual school has come. Statistically, and without any personal understanding of the context in which The School of Opportunity has operated and engaged with over the past fourteen years, one might consider the ANA results of the school to be unremarkable. In a cluster of schools that have achieved similar results, and if these results had been released to the public as the Senior Certificate results are each year, one might expect to see a similar reaction to the underwhelming average performance to those reflected upon earlier in this report. That is the class-picture representation. To really see the remarkableness in The School of Opportunities accomplishments, one needs to acknowledge that these learners who wrote the ANAs come from difficult circumstances and have overcome great obstacles such as language barriers and limited resources, and yet, have demonstrated a willingness to learn and improve.

Sydney acknowledged that the ANA results were not as high as the school would have liked to have obtained. He confessed that the teachers had worked very hard in trying to prepare the learners for the first set of national assessments. However, when one looks at the individual portrait, one would see that this is a school which, as a previously disadvantaged school in the midst of an informal settlement, is continually confronted with serious challenges and obstacles, for both the school and its teachers. Yet, it has just been elevated out of the “non-performing schools” category and placed into the “performing schools” group.

Personal Mastery (Senge, 1990), by definition, describes the process of continually reassessing the relationship between current reality and the end goal, the vision. For those who practice personal mastery, the vision is never completely reached, as it evolves to continually provide a path of self-improvement and progress. The next step towards the fulfilment of the vision at The School of Opportunity will, according to Sydney, include better preparation for the Annual National Assessments. With a starting block (a current reality), the school now has statistics that they will aim to improve on, a sense of purpose, and greater knowledge of what these assessments incorporate and how they are laid out. With a balance of all of the disciplines of the Learning Organisation, the school will continue to build on these results and move from strength to strength. As Sydney described, the first set of ANAs results gave them a starting block upon which the school intends to improve.

As City and Elmore (2007) discussed, in low performing schools, progress is gradual and intermittent spurts of significant performance will be registered at points along the path to progress, as learning has to take place amongst the educators and then assimilated, before results can be seen in the learner. However, it is the school’s

response to circumstances like the ANAs results, and the way that they address a challenge that sets them apart from the norm. Instead of blame, they look for opportunity, and instead of excuses, they strategise about how they intend to improve these results next year.

### *5.3 A Relationship Based Leadership Approach*

Constance confessed to me that she has not had formal training in leadership practice, and that she has not studied leadership theory. However, through her growth towards being a fully prayed-up pastor in her church, and through her experiences at the school, she has discovered her leadership approach to be one of mentorship, where the relationships between herself and her staff is strengthened. Khoza's (2011) argument that "effective leaders of today collaborate with their followers rather than dictate to them" (p. 128), is relevant to Constance's leadership style. She works in partnership with her SMT and her educators to ensure that the best possible work can be done for and at The School of Opportunity.

Through the consultation meetings every morning, a platform is created whereby members of staff are free to make suggestions or share their ideas about various tasks that are being focussed upon. The daily schedules are reviewed and the responsibilities of each staff member are aligned. The latest feedback or requirements from the Department of Education are discussed, and the team confronts any other challenges or matters that may arise unexpectedly. This open and supportive environment results in, what Khoza (2011) describes as, "the elevation of every staff member's consciousness to higher levels of psychological and ethical maturity" (p. 128).

Loock et al.'s (2003) holistic approach is also inadvertently supported at The School of Opportunity, the staffroom boasts a culture of excellence, where teachers are treated as professionals. There is effective communication at all levels of the teaching and support staff, which is focused on the school's goal of providing quality teaching and learning in the classroom every day. Constance empowers her staff through ensuring that they develop themselves, professionally, at every opportunity. She has created a system where her deputy principals and other members of the SMT are given the opportunity to run the school for set periods at a time, so that she can mentor their development as school leaders.

The staff of The School of Opportunity see the principal as a maternal figure, who guides them and leads them to creating a better school. Constance builds relationships outside of the immediate school environment as well, with businesses that have donated sports equipment, buildings, bursaries and funding for other projects, like the palisade fence and the paving of the parking lot / playground.

Through her relationships, and mentorship, Constance also fulfils the six tasks that Brighouse (2001) identifies as modern management tasks: creating energy, building capacity, meeting and minimising crisis, extending the vision, securing the environment and seeking and charting improvement (Brighouse, 2001, p. 2).

It is through this style of leadership that Constance practices consistently in her daily running of the school that the Vision Statement is acted out and followed through with in such a way that the staff share the vision of the school, and they share in Constance's personal vision of excellence.

## 5.4 A Team Buy-in To The School Vision

While I did not get the opportunity to interface with all of the staff members at The School of Opportunity, I felt, through the many hours of observation and interviews with the selected members, that the staff share an embedded set of principles and values that guide them there. Bush and Middlewood (2005) provided an arrangement of the link between staff learning and the learning organisation, which I had not intended to highlight when I was drafting my Literature Review (Chapter 2). However, through my observations at The School of Opportunity, the growth and development of the staff team is reflected in this table. The commitment of the educators and support staff at The School of Opportunity for the school vision and accomplishments needed towards achieving those goals, show evidence of a "learning behaviour" that demonstrates this path, and I felt that this needed acknowledgment:

Bush and Middlewood (2005) posit that,

> "Ultimately, the link exists between staff learning and the learning organisation, and the organisation's capacity to make continuous improvement whilst adapting to change in an external environment, and as such, employees will be able to set, plan and meet targets because of the culture of learning that has developed" (Bush &Middlewood, 2005, p 197).

**Table 5.1 – Learning Behaviour versus Non-Learning Behaviour (Bush & Middlewood, 2005)**

| Learning Behaviour | Non-Learning Behaviour |
|---|---|
| Suggesting ideas | Discounting ideas |
| Learning from mistakes | Repeating mistakes |
| Admitting inadequacies | Blaming others / events |
| Being open about the truth | Telling people what they want to hear |
| Looking at alternatives | Going for quick fixes |
| Taking responsibility | Expecting others to take responsibility |

Through their own descriptions and reflections of their environment and the way that the school functions, each of the interviewees, at some point, illustrated that their school is a functioning learning organisation which demonstrates these learning behaviours. The School of Opportunity may not have researched the principles of a learning organisation and followed them according to a textbook analysis. However, through the leadership practice of its principal, Constance, the strengths of learning organisation are evident in the day-to-day activities at the school.

Staff members are encouraged to suggest ideas for improvement, and a platform for this is created in the daily morning consultation periods. It is evident in the minutes of the meetings that the school is honest in their continual assessments of where its current reality lies. Instead of telling people what they want to hear, the staff analyse a situation or event, admit the shortfalls in certain areas and create a plan to look at how things could have been done differently and what the alternatives are. They do not blame others for a situation or result, they look towards a solution to the problem. Think of the way in which the school is inviting the community to participate in the development of a vegetable garden. The school has not resigned itself to the fact that it has no resources and the external community is exploiting their facilities (overuse by organisations, stealing electricity etc.). Instead, by getting outside community members to stake an invested interest in an aspect of the school, one by which they can benefit, the team is now extending a greater interest through the community in the people who are going to look after the school better or influence others' actions in the community, because they have a newly developed, invested interest.

In all of the interviews that I conducted, the respondents were honest and candid in their narrations, both about the situation of the school and the learners, and about the interpersonal relationships between the members of this school community. There seemed to be no effort made to conceal anything from me or hide the fact that they, as a team, are working towards a better system. They did not pretend that The School of Opportunity is a perfect example of a government school in Gauteng; neither did they assign any *blame* nor were they resigned to why the school has its areas that require extensive growth, still. What they did do, however, is relate an open account of the true circumstances of the school and the context in which it functions, together with a *vision* and a plan of action of how the school and its members, as a team, are striving to overcome these challenges.

Through their school vision that lays the path of their end goal for their learners and the biennial mottos that not only guide their actions and focus for the next period of time ahead, it also provides evidence that the team is continually assessing and evaluating what their current reality is in relation to their vision – a crucial aspect of personal mastery.

# Chapter Six: Conclusion

This research set out to understand a series of questions related to the leadership style employed by a principal in of a previously disadvantaged South African school and how they use the vision and mission statements, in combination with this to ensure progress in the face of continually changing and challenging circumstances.

The previous two chapters presented a portrait of, and a reflection upon, how a principal in a previously disadvantaged, government school, situated amidst an industrial township uses clear, compelling vision and mission statements, in combination with a purposeful leadership strategy, to help the school to create a rich learning environment for staff and students. The particular focus of this research was explicated in the series of sub-questions that were isolated to investigate this question further, including:

- How the school vision and mission statement is interpreted by the principal and the staff;
- How a shared vision contributes to the sense of purpose in a school;
- How the purpose of the school vision is explained and disclosed to new members of staff and learners, and how buy-in is achieved.
- How the school vision becomes visible through the work of the teachers, learners and administrative staff of the school?

Through my observations at the School of Opportunity I found that the success that the school has experienced and the progress that it has made stems directly from the way that the principal has led her teams of teachers and administrators, and

through the leadership style that she has employed. The school vision and mission statements are integrated into the general activities of the school in many areas: The working biennial motto is structured around how the school analyses and interprets the needs of the school at that time to achieve the school vision: “To give every learner the opportunity to develop his/her talent and leave our institution with knowledge, skills and self esteem that will give them the best chance of success in adult life.”

The way that the school works towards achieving this is through the series of activities and skills training opportunities that it offers its learners in addition to the academic curriculum. The partnerships that the school has with nearby independent schools for additional academic lessons on Saturdays, bringing in dance academies and partnering with school support organisations for homework classes.

The values shared by the staff I spoke to indicated that there were shared goals and visions of the school. Each staff member strives to provide the greatest opportunities for the learners that attend the School of Opportunity, and there are no excuses made about why the children cannot succeed at school. The values and goals of the school vision are reinforced and aligned each morning during the consultation meetings. There is a clear understanding of the expectations that the principal has of her staff, and also a clear understanding of the opportunities of growth that are available to her staff.

When new teachers arrive at the school, the interviewees indicated that they are mentored and supervised in such a way that they adjust easily into the routines of

the organisation and through this mentorship, they are informed of and encouraged to share in the vision of the school.

The staff participants at the School of Opportunity translate the vision and mission statements into personal goals for what they wish to achieve with the pupils. This indicates that they have embraced a shared vision, and the principal's leadership practice reinforces the principles of the school vision and mission statements in her expectations of her staff and in the way the administration of daily practices are performed.

The Mission Statement, that The School of Opportunity is "dedicated in creating an effective and efficient working school by providing quality teaching in every classroom everyday", guides the daily activities and values of the teachers, and of the principal's requirements of them.

Through the record of the scrapbook, documentation and accounts of the staff members that I interviewed, aspects of how the school carries out the vision and mission statements of the school in daily practice was evident. It was visible in the detailed duty lists, in the values of the interviewees and the principal, and in the extent of the sponsorships and bursaries that she has managed to procure for the school and for the learners. The staff and SGB have a coherent knowledge of what they are working towards and display energy and commitment towards the school and its students.

## Afterword

To answer my question: “what has made my experience of education in South Africa such a positive one, while so many others have such a negative outlook?” I realised that, through my own experiences, I have been looking at the “individual portrait photographs” of the schools that I have been involved in and taught at, whereas many others have just been looking at the “class photograph”. I have seen examples of the good leadership skills and commitment required to persevere towards these systems of excellence. I have had teaching experience at a range of schools, from public schools in Soweto and Brixton to ex-Model C schools in the Northern suburbs, and now an independent school in Parktown. In each of these schools, I have seen the rich textures and qualities that paint portraits of excellence and a hope that can be fostered in our educational system.

I came to understand that excellence in schools did not necessarily stem from the national curriculum statement or assessment protocol that is provided to the schools, as this links to the “class photograph”, and focuses more on providing equality and fairness of opportunity in education, which desperately needs to be established. Excellence will not automatically be achieved by a school that implements CAPS or government protocol. Instead, excellence comes on the ground level at each individual school, brought to life by a *vision* of excellence that has been adopted and strived for on a daily basis by each of the stakeholders, through commitment towards the attainment of this vision, and through the development of a working system that can sustain this excellence.

While the “class photograph” is a necessary tool required to present equality and uniformity in the South African educational system, it is vital to study the portrait photographs of each of the schools as well, in order to identify and document how the leader of a school, serving a previously under-represented population of South African students can overcome the challenges of its environment by using its vision and mission statements to create a sustainable environment, focussed on excellence.

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# Appendices

Diary Entry

It is Thursday, the 3rd of January, 2013.

I am in the middle of writing my research report, and have, much like the rest of the country, been eagerly awaiting the announcement of the Matric results for 2012, which were just released. This year recorded a 3.7% increase in the overall pass-rate in South Africa, with the province of Gauteng boasting the greatest improvement of all of the provinces. There was also an increase in the percentage of learners who passed Maths and Science.

The African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) commented in a statement:

"The improved results demonstrate that our young people are serious about their development and achieving economic freedom in our lifetime,"

-IOL News (accessed 3 January 2013)

However, the responses below the news report, written by "random" (in the non-specified sense) South Africans, had a much darker reflection on this year's results. I expected to read the negative "lower standards" and "a pass does not guarantee that they will perform adequately at university" comments; but, on top of this, what I read this morning was more negative and disheartening than I could have imagined.

I have been so impressed about what I have seen at The School of Opportunity, and, even more so, excited about sharing my observations, that the reactions that I read about have thrown me a little. It seems that the public's disappointment in the education system is becoming more volatile, and the people of South Africa are becoming more vocal and more candid in their opinions. There were a large number of racist comments and ethnic finger-pointing. The respondents were very aggressive in their attacks towards each other, to the point where I am hoping that this was just an example of "a few" and not a reflection of where this country is headed.

It has now fuelled my determination to share my observations and positive experiences at The School of Opportunity, because it is an institution that is truly making progress, despite operating within what seems to be a troubled educational system.

http://www.iol.co.za/news/special-features/matric-results-welcomed-1.1447016 - Accessed 2013-01-03

APPENDIX B Letter To The Principal Requesting Permission To Observe

14 JULY 2012

Dear Madam

As part of my dissertation towards the completion of my Masters in Education (Leadership and Management) Degree, I will be composing a detailed account of a school, chosen with specific criteria in mind. The title of my dissertation is:

*"How does an effective vision and mission statement create a system which propels one Gauteng primary school from challenging circumstances towards success?"*

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate how a principal's vision of excellence has motivated and moved their school towards providing a higher quality of education to its learners, despite the disadvantaged history of the school or the turbulent environments in which the school exists. This study aims to illustrate the importance of a vision that is followed through with; one that plays a part in the decision making processes and serves as a baseline standard which guides all aspects of the running of the school towards achieving sustainable quality of service.

The study aims to investigate the typical activities and processes of the people who work at the school, and the extent of their involvement in the planning and implementation of the shared vision. These members of staff will be chosen for interview based on their experience of the context in which their school operates, and the journey that the school has gone through to enact the school's vision.

I would like to ask your permission to use your school as the subject of this study. The expected length of observation is two weeks of continual observation at your school. I would also require a few prior visits to the school so that I may prepare for the observation. I would collect the data I need through observation and through

one-on-one interviews with you and selected members of staff, as well as team interviews with educators or community members. I would also request to read through documentation such as minutes of meetings and the school vision and mission statements in order to prepare for the observation process.

Please note that for this case-study:

- Participation is voluntary. Your school, or any participants from the school, may withdraw from this investigation at any time, without penalty.
- The participants are not expected to disclose any information, or act, in any way, that would infringe upon their principles.
- The responses and the name of the school will remain anonymous.
- I will inform the school of the findings of this research once the study has been completed.

Your consideration of and cooperation towards this study would be most appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Jane Penrose

Student Number : 0115404 A

Tel : 082 535 3978

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*"Intrinsic motivation ~ importance of personal vision and aspiration" – Senge (1990: p 1)*

APPENDIX C Letter To The Principal Requesting Their Own Participation

21 JULY 2012

Dear Madam

As part of my dissertation towards the completion of my Masters in Education (Leadership and Management) Degree, at the University of the Witwatersrand, I will be conducting a study based on how an effective vision and mission statement of a school can propel one Gauteng primary school from challenging circumstances towards success.

The aim of this study is to investigate how a principal's vision of excellence has motivated and moved their school towards providing a higher quality of education to its learners, despite the disadvantaged history of the school or the turbulent environments in which the school exists. This study aims to illustrate the importance of a vision that is followed through with; one that plays a part in the decision making processes and serves as a baseline standard which guides all aspects of the running of the school towards achieving sustainable quality of service. I would like to ask your permission to interview you so that I might ascertain the processes and activities that you undergo towards enforcing and creating a learning and teaching environment that fosters the values and principles of your vision for the school, through your vision and mission statements.

Please note that for this case-study:

- Participation is voluntary. You, as a respondent, may withdraw from this investigation at any time, without penalty.
- You are not expected to disclose any information, or act, in any way, that would infringe upon your principles.
- Your response, and the name of the school, will remain anonymous, although, you will be referred to as "the principal".

- I will inform you of the findings of this research once the study has been completed, and present you with a full copy of the completed study, for your (and the school's) reference.

Your cooperation towards this study is most appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Jane Penrose

Student Number : 0115404 A

Tel : 082 535 3978

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*"Intrinsic motivation ~ the importance of personal vision and aspiration" – Senge (1990: p 1)*

21 JULY 2012

Dear Sir/Madam

As part of my dissertation towards the completion of my Masters in Education (Leadership and Management) Degree, at the University of the Witwatersrand, I will be conducting a study based on how an effective vision and mission statement of a school can propel one Gauteng primary school from challenging circumstances towards success.

The aim of this study is to investigate how a principal's vision of excellence has motivated and moved their school towards providing a higher quality of education to its learners, despite the disadvantaged history of the school or the turbulent environments in which the school exists. This study aims to illustrate the importance of a vision that is followed through with; one that plays a part in the decision making processes and serves as a baseline standard which guides all aspects of the running of the school towards achieving sustainable quality of service. I would like to ask your permission to interview you so that I might ascertain the processes and activities that you undergo towards achieving and incorporating the values and ideals of your school's vision and mission statements through your teaching and/or management practice. I would like to observe how you use the vision and mission statements of your school as motivation, and action, towards an improved quality of education and the success of your school.

Please note that for this case-study:

- Participation is voluntary. You, as a respondent, may withdraw from this investigation at any time, without penalty.
- You are not expected to disclose any information, or act, in any way, that would infringe upon your principles.

- Your response, and the name of the school, will remain anonymous, although, you will be referred to as "Educator #".
- I will inform you of the findings of this research once the study has been completed, and the school will be presented with a full copy of the completed study, for your reference.

Your cooperation towards this study is most appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Jane Penrose

Student Number : 0115404 A

Tel : 082 535 3978

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*"Intrinsic motivation ~ the importance of personal vision and aspiration" – Senge (1990: p 1)*

21 JULY 2012

Dear Participant

This letter is to ask you if you would like to participate in a study that I am doing at your school.

I will be talking to you and your colleagues and recording our talk on a voice recorder.

If you would like to talk to me about your school and your goals for your own teaching, please fill in the slip below.

Yours sincerely,

Julie Jane Penrose

Student Number : 0115404 A




Consent of Participation:

I, _____, would like to talk to Julie Penrose about my teaching and The School of Opportunity.

I allow her to record our conversation using a voice recorder.



Signed : _____ Date : _____

*"Intrinsic motivation ~the importance of personal vision and aspiration" – Senge (1990: p 1)*




In the top left corner is a picture of the school is it was in days before and soon after the palisade fence was constructed. This would have been around 1999 to 2001. The surrounding pictures are of classrooms as they are now. The two on the top right are pictures of classrooms that have been converted from the old clinic… can you see they taps that are still sticking out of the wall? While these classrooms look a little worse for wear, they are clean and the teachers take pride in them. There are no fabulous resources – the blackboards lack enough paint on them to even write on properly.



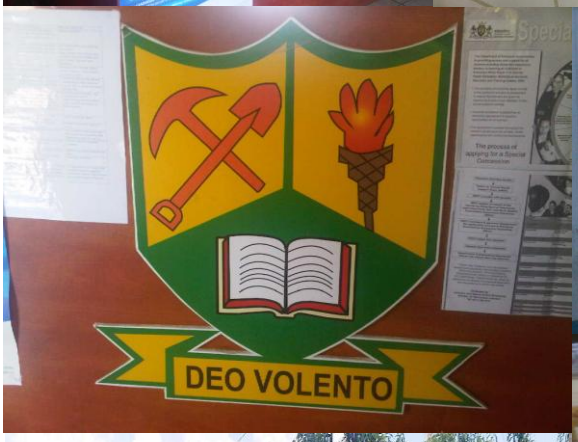





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