

What a Community School should be - Charles Duna Primary, New Brighton

Principal Nombulelo Sume has led Charles Duna since 1998. It epitomises what a community school should be. She trained as a Foundation Phase teacher and started her career in 1989 at a school in the Nelson Mandela Bay community of Kwadwesi.

She is currently doing her master's degree in leadership and new knowledge where the ethos is all about being a human being first, before being a leader.

"In our classrooms, in addition to the curriculum, we address the issues our learners deal with in their daily lives. Our grade 7s (12 to 13 years) learn about peer pressure, body shaming and puberty," Sume explains. "They learn that we are all different, we are all unique, in our looks and sizes but what is important is how we use our brains and to realise that the power of dealing with our circumstances is in our hands."

She explains that many of the learners come from informal settlements where their lives are unspeakably hard: "In February 2019 we had a 9-year-old girl committing suicide. Her family and friends said she was raised by her paternal grandmother in nearby Motherwell but recently sent to live with her mother and maternal grandmother in a shack where there was a lot of drinking in the home, and she was burdened with collecting water and looking after the younger ones. She never told any of us, which is we have to be even more vigilant about the signs of silence. We now have a learner support agent who has sessions with the kids.

There are many different daily tragedies in an area where most of the parents are unemployed, gang-related shootings and stabbings are commonplace, there are six shebeens situated around the school, and the community is plagued with HIV/AIDS.

Despite this, there are also great triumphs. "What I love, and it is certainly a great triumph, is that our school is moving into becoming a true community school with much heart." This required thinking beyond the money they received, because from 1998 to 2013 Charles Duna was incorrectly classified in the quintile system and was receiving R5 per learner from the Department of Basic Education. The parents in my school cannot afford to pay and at the same time we need to make sure these kids are getting a quality education and we need to make a difference in the community.

"That is when we gravitated to becoming a community school and we started calling on our parents and community members to be part of the school. We joined the Manyano network of community schools and called for parent volunteers and today we have 27 parent volunteers on site. Our on-site coordinator, Nomawethu Swartbooi, who opens the school every day, has been with us since 2006 when she started as a parent volunteer. She had no money but she wanted to contribute to her child's education and she did so by cleaning the classrooms.

“She is now employed by the school and has since completed her matric, her Early Childhood Development (ECD) Level 2 and 4 training, she manages the slow learners, and she is very good at administration – all gained through her volunteerism – reciprocity - very successfully as she is dealing with the slow learners. All our volunteers have been incredible, from helping us to tile the classrooms to cleaning the toilets, we are doing things for ourselves.

“Engaging with the Manyano network has been invaluable for capacity building and skills development of our teachers, learners and volunteers. Our parents know that when they bring their child to Charles Duna, we take care of their child and them.”

Programmes and facilities the school has established include:

A well-managed library, reading clubs, concentrating on reading for meaning, we are busy establishing two science labs for Grade 5 to 7 with funding sought from the Motsepe Foundation, a computer lab with internet for IT skills training where the learners can research topics and where community members can learn computer skills, multimedia projectors for the Science, Maths and Foundation Phase teachers. They have started science and maths clubs. In partnership with the Mott Foundation, Nomawethu Swartbooi is doing maths clubs with the Grade 2s and we have started robotics lessons.

“My belief is you can’t just teach kids, you must give them different opportunities, academically, in sport and with life skills. Our kids have represented the province in national sporting competitions, we are doing well in netball, rugby and hockey, and one of our girls was given a full scholarship to Collegiate Girls School in Port Elizabeth 2019, based on her netball achievements. Another two girls and one boy have scholarships at Alexander Road High School, for netball and rugby, and I have applied for 12 kids to attend the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in Gauteng; and we have approached Allan Gray Orbis Foundation for scholarship support.

“We also started swimming lessons in the municipal pool in Kwazekhele and we had two kids who were excelling but the lessons were interrupted as a result of the drought when they closed the pool. Our kids want to learn to swim and we want a school swimming team. Swimming is an essential life skill.

“Our learners are also doing really well at chess, including Nomawethu’s son who went to Johannesburg to compete. He is now in grade 11 at our feeder school, Cowan High. He is doing well in mathematics, which he wasn’t as a young boy, but with extra input from that age, he has shone through. Our school also does well in the choir and music competitions.”

Former Charles Duna learners have also gone on to establish their own clubs. One is Samkelo Dumse, now a national handball player, who started playing handball when he was here for primary school. He has since established his own club in Kwadwesi and he is also studying mechanical engineering at PE College.

Principal Sume's approach is forward-focused. She sees that South Africa has a shortage in specific professionals such as engineers, and she motivates the learners that they can be the next generation of engineers or entrepreneurs or whatever they aspire to be. From Grade 1 they do craft projects which they sell to learn to make and manage money. They give some of their profits to the school and the school then lends them some money to reinvest in their next project. "I don't want any sense of entitlement here," says Principal Sume.

At the same time the school works tirelessly to help their learners advance. The Adopt a Learning Child programme they started this in 2009, where those with means could help support the learners' academic needs has been a huge success. Several of the initial beneficiaries are now in 3rd year at Nelson Mandela University. "And when they are working, they, in turn, must adopt a learner," says Principal Sume.

The school also has a meal-a-day feeding scheme and HIV/AIDS and TB programme. "We worked with the university of Pretoria as we had HIV related deaths until 2007.. We are really proud that 2017 marked our 10th year of not burying any kids with HIV/AIDS and TB.

"It is so important to partner with universities and organisations who have the skills, experience and resources to help but at the same time we only work with people who understand engagement, and don't capitalise on the opportunism around pandemics such as HIV. We have worked together with so many people over several years, we are incredibly proud of this collective achievement for our community school, but there is still so much more to achieve and so many challenges, so we keep working on."

Parent volunteer at Charles Duna to Honours graduate: Koleka Ndzuta

"In 2003 my child was at Charles Duna when the teacher called me and asked if I would help as a volunteer. I said I would and met with the principal and teachers to exchange ideas. I was unemployed at the time but I had skills as I had worked at an NGO that helped people who had been unfairly dismissed.

"The concept of the community school interested me as I had previously thought of parenting as helping the children at home, but I saw great potential in parents helping at the school. Our schools needs to work with the community and I wanted to

be part of that link and to also look at what surrounds the school to make it safe for our children. I was interested to see how many parents were responding to the call for volunteers, and the principal was keen to listen to our ideas, both in terms of how we could contribute as volunteers, particularly in maintenance issues, and also to apply for support from the extended public works programme. I got R500 a month for doing this.”

Ndzuta subsequently responded to an advert looking from the Department of Basic Education, seeking care-givers for psycho-social support and she got appointed at Charles Duna. “If a teacher was having a problem with a learner or parent then I would help.” She rose through the system and in 2011 she was appointed as a Grade R teacher at Charles Duna, and she completed her ECD Level 4 and 5.

“I enjoyed learning and teaching, and in 2015 I decided to enrol for my BEd Foundation Phase at Nelson Mandela University, for which I received a Funza Lushaka teaching bursary. It wasn’t easy going to study as my six children and I were staying with my parents and they saw it as an indulgence that wasn’t bringing in money for the family. But I persevered and I graduated in 2018. I am now doing my Honours in education psychology – hopefully followed by a Master’s – and there has been a total shift in attitude about higher education in my family. My parents can’t believe what I have achieved and the child that first led to the link with Charles Duna is now at Nelson Mandela Union studying logistics. My oldest child is a lawyer.

“The gift of the community school approach is that through this, people here were able to identify my strengths. I would be sitting with professors discussing education when I was just a parent. Principal Sume kept on exposing me to greater things, she never limited me.”

Charles Duna Grade 6 maths, science and tech teacher, Jarren Gangiah

“These kids have so much potential already, roots and all, but what we are doing is fertilising the soil,” says the maths, science and tech teacher at Charles Duna, Jareen Gangiah who graduated with his BEd at Nelson Mandela University in 2018 and joined the school through the CCSs programme.

“This is my first fulltime post and it is an amazing feeling as you are the person in which the kids put their hope,” says Gangiah who is from KwaZulu-Natal where his mother is a principal of a school and his family has a potato farm. Having done his student teaching in working class areas in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro, Gangiah felt a need to contribute here.

“I would never have been able to deal with the realities of the community without being exposed as a second year student through the CCS to Charles Duna and to

working with people at grassroots level,” he explains. “Dr Damons was a lecturer of mine at the time and we engaged about how education is so different in township or working class areas. Initially I taught at Sapphire Primary in Booyens Park where, because of Dr Damons’ participation there is now a clinic, police station and skills development programmes at the school. It was not always like this.

“Going there for the first time was actually terrifying for me, as the only thing I knew about Booyens Park was that three of my friends had got shot at there. People have very little there and you see kids with tattered uniforms and broken shoes, but the biggest smiles you’ll ever see as they greet you or line up for their meal.

“The atmosphere in the school revealed itself as an oasis of hope and happiness in the community. Those kids will be able to improve their situation and make it better for their families. The same applies to Charles Duna where I knew from the first day I visited that I would teach here. When I first walked through the gates with Dr Damons, he said: ‘I am not going to say anything, I just want you to experience, listen, hear, smell what it is like to be at township school. I loved what Principal Sume and her team are doing, and the passion of the people who are tangible creating hope here – something we don’t always see in South Africa.

“I teach multi-cultural learners in classrooms with learners who are Christians, Moslems or who follow ancestor belief systems. One of the parents permanently sits in my classroom to help me communicate better in isiXhosa, as it is my fourth language. The learners who come from the widest range of backgrounds, including violent and impoverished circumstances. I have learners in my classrooms who are the head of their household, with younger siblings to look after. I have a child with epilepsy who has to eat before taking his medication but when I went to his home there was no food; he relied on his meal at school.

“I know I can make a difference and I love teaching here. I love the idea of the community in the school – it melts inside of me – there’s a nice word in isiXhosa for this: *nyiblikha*. I have learnt there is magic in these working class communities as people are prepared to volunteer whatever they are able to do with their two hands to fix the problems at the school. We also have British and German students volunteering here. It is a living example of the community coming together because everyone has a skill, everyone can teach you something, there is experience, knowledge. Here, we don’t ask outside people to sort out our problems; we all get together, parents, learners, teachers, volunteers.

“My whole concept of the purpose of education changed with the CCS. Previously, I saw education as someone going to school and then going home and having a family, whereas at working class schools, you are the child’s mother and father and nurse, sometimes you are everything to that child and you develop a very deep bond.

“The school is literally a beacon of hope and care. It is the place where many of the children eat their only meal of the day; the place where they smile; and laugh; the time of the day when they can be a child, as many of them go home and have to be an adult, wash clothes, face harsh real life problems, be street smart. Suicide and HIV/AIDS is a very real reality, many learners are in one parent homes or they are orphans; they simply don't have the support regime children need.

“This is the real reality of South Africa, and I want to do postgraduate research on what lifts up these and other communities; hopefully to influence policy in recognising the pivotal role of the community school and how wholesale change in basic education in working class or township schools is possible.”