



feeding the self

Anecdotes from the schools

A series of stories from our projects to humanise the hard data (see other project reports for details)

Feeding the Self

Produced in conjunction with



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NPO # 1357/870

Siphosethu

Using the garden for discipline

There are a lot of reasons children misbehave at schools, especially when they're from under-resourced backgrounds; and finding ways to correct that misbehaviour is often very difficult. Through the project, Ms Buthelezi (Siphosethu) found a new and effective way of managing poor student behaviour.

A boy in her class was often poorly behaved and demotivated with school work. Instead of giving him yet another detention, Ms Buthelezi decided to put him to work in the garden, giving him a section of his own and telling him that the success of that garden reflected his own success. Initially he was unhappy with the work, but soon this changed.

As the fruits of his labour began to grow and the garden became a success, this punishment brought the student a sense of achievement and he realised that he was not destined to be 'naughty'. With this his attitude and desire try in the classroom improved where no normal disciplinary measure had worked. When Ms Buthelezi told this story the joy in her eyes was clear.

"These devils are lying to me..."

Teachers are naturally suspicious of outside forces – after all, what does someone from a different background or location really know about the conditions at their school, especially when that person is engaged in such different work to them? This is especially true when those outside forces are making very ambitious claims, as with FTS.

When we first spoke with Ms Buthelezi, talking about feeding people with gardening, she thought we were trying to fool her. Trick her into believing that more was possible than could actually be managed. So she smiled and nodded whilst thinking we were trying to pull the wool down over her eyes. But she took the learners out into the garden and got them planting anyway.

We only heard this at the end of the project run, when Ms Buthelezi admitted that we had made her into a believer. She even felt that, working together, it was possible to feed a nation with food gardens. All you need is willing and resourceful people.

Fecundity by design

One of the background ideas of the project was to create gardens that would be fruitful even if no-one was working in them because it was possible that after we left we all work in the garden would stop; so wanted the garden to keep encouraging stake-holders to come back. Of course, we couldn't know whether this would work or not until a sometime later.

Top check on this, a year after the project had started and run, we returned to Siphosethu to check up on both the garden and Mrs Buthelezi. At first, we were dispirited; the garden looked empty, aside from the odd chilli plant.

The worry was, thankfully, unnecessary. The reason the garden was empty is that, after the long summer break, Ms Buthelezi had come back (expecting the garden to have died out) and found instead a profusion of butternut, chilli, and tomato – which she subsequently harvested. As a result of this, she was looking forward to getting a new set of learners out into the garden, entirely without our intervention.

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MLS Blackburn

Moving on blue

If children are truly enjoying something then there is one group of people who would be sure to know about it – their parents. So to really know what impact the project has on children, we need to know how their parents reacted to it. It actually turned out to be easy to get their reaction.

At the end of the year the parents contacted the school with sadness. This sadness was for one simple reason; MLS Blackburn only went up to Grade 6. Over the course of the year, however, with project the learners' results and attitude changed so dramatically that parents were sad because, on leaving the school, the children would no longer be involved in the garden.

We, therefore, knew the project was successful because parents noticed real change in their children. At home they were more motivated and every child in the Grade Six classroom started a food garden and worked to make their home life better. The problem for the parents was that their children had to go to another school for Grade Seven and this would mean a return to the old way of doing things – or perhaps not, if we were successful enough in showing them a new way of learning and acting.

Food for the holiday

A constantly heart-breaking fact, especially for caring teachers; is that many of these children can't concentrate because they don't have enough to eat. Also, being on the nutrition programme often means children can only rely on eating what you eat at school.

For many of the children at MLS only secure meal they have is at school. This creates a problem for learner and teacher alike, during the holiday the learner's food security is low – and a caring teacher worries about what the learner will eat during the holidays, as does the learner.

One morning FTS arrived at MLS when Ms Ntsikanye happily asked if we noticed a boy harvesting spinach, cabbage and other staples into two shopping packets. This child did not know how much food he would find to eat during the school holidays and, concerned, spoke to his teacher about it. The solution available to Ms Ntsikanye, other than simply worrying about the wellbeing of the child, was to have him harvest food to take home for the holiday.

One a'them good problems to have

Ownership is one of the main factors affecting project success; if learners and teachers feel that the garden is truly their own, and take pride in it, they will care more about it. We knew this, but didn't expect to find problems arising as a result.

At MLS, the project has been so successful that the grade six teacher Ms Ntsikanye wanted to keep the project to herself, which created tension because the other teachers and students all wanted to get into the garden and learn; she was so proud of the garden that she didn't want anyone else to take it from her.

Granny power (Siphosethu and MLS Blackburn)

One of the foundations of the project was to have the learners move out from the school and take the practice of growing food in productive gardens with them. So we designed the course such that the learners would speak to community elders; but we had resigned ourselves to the fact that we would probably not hear too much about how things were going in the community. Especially as many households in the area are headed by children or grandmothers – for a range of tragic reasons.

We expected this to provide a chance for creating some interactions between the children and their community. We were pleasantly surprised to hear from the schools that the older members (Gogos) of the community had contacted them and promised that, if the learners were willing to help in the garden then they would provide land and seeds for the children to work with, and help them maintain the gardens.

Real sustainability is a matter of embedding practices in the community; and what more proof could one ask for than the young and old coming together, completely outside of school pressure?



Ottawa

Pride and motivation

A central plank of the projects is pride; if the learners and teachers take ownership of the garden, and take a personal pride in it, we can be sure of strong and lasting engagement. Generating pride is one of the areas in which we worry most, however; after all, how does one make someone else take pride in their work when you're the one instructing them in it?

As with all of the schools, we initially started with just one class, with the intention of convincing other teachers that they should roll it out for their classes, too. Before we could, however, the teachers and students took it on and started expanding it themselves. Very early on, and without any prompting from us, all of the grade six teachers created a teaching group to properly integrate the project across the curriculum.

A few weeks later, the teachers in charge of the project proudly told us that parents were calling them surprised at how much of a change their children were showing. They were more motivated and better behaved. Also without any prompting other than the materials we provided, over half of the Grade Sixes, across both classes, had started gardens at home. Embedding the project into the children, rather than the school, has always been a core focus of FTS activity, and this proved we were getting the results we hoped for much earlier than we'd expected. As the students became more successful and the results of their labour more obvious they took more pride in their work and their general attitude changed.

An unexpected invitation

Part of the project is encouraging children to grow gardens at home. It is, however, difficult to know how many of them are doing this successfully – after all, we cannot invite ourselves around to pass judgement on their home gardens it feels too invasive, and so we only really know what we can find out in the surveys.

One bright Tuesday, however, we arrived at the school to see, the always encouraging, happy faces working in the garden. On one visit we were greeted with more than the usual questions about what could be done to improve the quality of the garden.

As one of the learners outlined with some pride how his garden at home was doing very well, better in fact than the school garden, he invited FTS to come and see his home garden. This was quickly followed by all the children in the garden that morning inviting us to come and see how well their home gardens were doing.

Old dog, new tricks

One of the things about being a principal is that, after a while, you've seen everything. Or so the principal at Ottawa thought, until one day she was surprised by a request from her students that she had NEVER, in all her years of teaching, encountered.

The learners actually wanted to come into the school over the weekend, separate from class time, and work. They didn't want teachers or supervision or any reward; they had taken so much pride in the garden that they wanted to make sure it was constantly being maintained, without any prompting or guidance from the teachers. Self-directed learning through lifelong learning practices is the core objective of OBE; it may have failed across the system, but here, because of the garden, it had set in so much the students were asking for the chance to do it outside of the school curriculum.

Real sustainability

Many otherwise successful community garden projects eventually end because the garden is kept up by only one or two interested stake-holders. This means, sadly, if these motivated individuals move on the projects will close because the community cannot decide who will take it over, we wanted to avoid this problem.

To make sure the project sticks, we need it to be spread across the school, not just within one grade; the children need to be talking to each other about it, outside class, and across grade boundaries. While we were thinking about this, we decided to try and encourage a buddy system.

The only problem was, the schools had arrived came to the conclusion first; due to the success of the project the teachers at Ottawa discussed, without any additional prompting from FTS, rolling out the project to the lower grades, and when we spoke to them about it, we found they already had plans in place. Their idea was to use the motivation of the current set of students working in the garden to introduce it to the younger ones, especially those within the foundation phase – that way, they could make sure that the knowledge stayed in the school as long as possible, even if teachers changed or left.



Ogunjini

Things don't always go as planned

When you go into a school and get introduced to the person in charge of grade six it is natural to assume that they are a teacher by training. This view remains true even though the media often talks about the critical shortage of teachers within certain areas and communities. Hearing stories like this doesn't prepare you for the on the ground reality experienced in some under-resourced schools.

At Ogunjini our contact teacher was enthusiastic but was, as it turned out, not a qualified teacher. This was not his fault or the school's, there were not enough staff to cover all the classes so the school was forced to recruit willing members of the community. We only discovered this late into the project.

Seemingly out of the blue we found ourselves restarting the project, virtually from scratch, with Mr Patel who had been placed at the school. How long he would be there, however, is uncertain because the government did not take into consideration his logistical needs when placing him at the school and so he has already asked to be moved.

It just goes to show that the best plans really do change the moment they move off the planning board and into the field.

A new teacher a new ally

Often when you have to restart something from scratch, especially after you have invested some time in getting it going the first time is quite disheartening. As a person you worry about all the reasons you have to go back to the beginning – did I make a mistake looms over restarting. But restarting in this instance offered new potential energy.

You always like to think you have good ideas, with us at FTS it is no different. The new teacher at Ogunjini, Mr Patel, offered some confirmation that we were walking the right path. As a new teacher in a new environment he did not have to be welcoming of three guys thinking they knew something about helping children learn.

It did not take him long to see the eagerness with which the learners got out into the garden and worked. Within no time he was asking us for ways to help him take learners into the garden and bring the garden into the classroom. With Mr Patel any worries about how things would run with a new teacher, not obligated to help us, turned out to be unnecessary.

Less flowers?

When you think of a garden you think of flowers, right? With lawns, the garden is a place of peace and beauty to relax in. So coming from middle-class backgrounds we at FTS did not expect to have to defend planting flowers in a garden.

This was a lesson in not making assumptions about where you are based on where you are from. We suggested letting the learners plant flowers in the garden and around the school. The school, however, exists within a completely different space to us: both rural and economically under-resourced.

This is the place that two of the older teachers, gardeners themselves, came from when they commented that 'you cannot eat flowers'. This caught us off guard, but for their needs the garden's primary function is different. They are primarily concerned with growing food as opposed to making the environment more pleasant. Fortunately the flowers we suggested they plant will help the garden grow and so serve to improve yield as well.

Why we do this

In all of the above, it must be remembered that we take as much of a hands off approach as we possibly can. We provide seeds, tools, and material for the children and teachers, but apply no pressure ourselves, trying to keep our interactions with the school minimal, and allowing the teachers to roll the project out however they see fit.

This would be cause for concern in many similar projects, where far more is spent on providing gardening material and equipment that go unused; for it has proven a cause of pride and joy, as we see teachers and children taking up the project with drive and determination. A good example is the planting of gardens at home; we went to a couple of schools where, despite the provision at significant cost of mulch, compost, seedlings, and tyres (for planting in), the children and teachers had simply left these things to slowly degrade. For us, we gave them only seeds, and a little instruction, and in all locations the majority of children planted gardens at home.

