

CHAPTER 5

THE RECONNAISSANCE PHASE - GETTING TO KNOW STREET CHILDREN AND SETTING UP MASUPATSELA SCHOOL

5.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the reconnaissance phase of this study. The period represented the first phase in the four phase research design of this study and consisted of two stages. The first of these was concerned with getting to know street children who had been taken off the street and placed in a shelter. This stage lasted from May to the end of September 2001. The second part dealt with the establishing of a special needs school for street children. This took place between September 2001 and January 2002. It was this school, Masupatsela, that provided the context in which the later three action research cycles took place.

5.2. Reconnaissance

5.2.1 Introductory remarks:

In embarking on this research it was necessary to investigate the context of the research problem and collect relevant information surrounding and informing it. This was necessary to become familiar with those individuals and groups involved, gain their consent and willingness to participate and then either to create a site for the study or assess whether an available one was suitable. It was also important to determine the chances of the site being available for enough time to complete the research. During this time many questions had to be answered. Would I be able to work with street children? Would they accept me and agree to participate? Where would I be able to teach them? Would I have enough time to complete the study? These were just some of the many considerations and issues which needed clarification before I could continue with the study and begin with the planning and implementation of the research cycles.

I decided to gather the necessary background knowledge and establish a suitable context for the study by using the following reconnaissance model (Figure 5.1). This model forms part of the general action research model. As shown in the model the reconnaissance phase involved exploration, observation, discussion, negotiation, explanation and then an assessment for possibilities, opportunities and constraints.

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Figure 5.1 Reconnaissance: Stage one of the Action Research Model

5.3 Getting to know street children

5.3.1 Making contact with street children organizations

After making the decision with Magdel to make service to street children the basis for our further studies we set about trying to make contact with a group of them. This proved more difficult than expected because other than driving to the centre of Pretoria and looking for street children on the streets we had no idea of how we could get close to them. After trying for two weeks using various leads such as *Learn to Live* in Cape Town and the *Street Children's Alliance* in Gauteng we ended up frustrated and unsuccessful. It was however through a chance conversation with a personal friend that we heard of the involvement of the Doxa Deo Church's work with street children from Pretoria. We contacted Mr Johannes Earle and were invited to meet him and some of the executive members from POPUP (Pretoria Upliftment Project). Johannes explained that he was the "house father" to 30 street children who formed part of the POPUP project.

On 11 May 2001 we met with Johannes at the POPUP site near Salvokop in Pretoria. I explained to him who we were, what our background was, what knowledge and skills we had and the reason why we were investigating places to get involved. We asked him if he saw a role for us in his project with the street children. We mentioned very clearly that we wanted to parallel our involvement with our studies. He was extremely excited - so much so that his first words were

that we were an answer to a prayer. It became apparent from the beginning, as he explained the role that he played and the situation of the street children in his care, that much assistance, especially from an educational and psychological perspective, was needed. The other executive members of POPUP we subsequently met were just as enthusiastic to have us become involved but stressed that they would expect a genuine commitment from us.

We then went on a guided tour of the main POPUP site which was established to rehabilitate homeless adults. Johannes then took us to see the shelter where the 30 street children were housed. This shelter is situated about a kilometre from the main POPUP buildings. The children were all at school. The shelter consists of a long building with small rooms. Each room caters for two boys. Johannes lives full time in the shelter and has one of the rooms for himself. Apart from the living quarters there was one very dark communal room with a TV set. There were also toilet and showering facilities.

My diary of 3 May 2001 records my reactions to this first visit.

“After experiencing the depth of commitment of Johannes and the conditions under which he works I experienced the first signs of excitement that what we had seen could form a basis for our research. The location was suitable, Johannes seemed enthusiastic and dedicated, the group of children stable and from what Johannes told us they were all exceptionally keen. Walking around the whole site I experienced a feeling that ostensibly there was a deep sense of caring and practical purpose ” (Diary, p.3).

We set a date to meet the children.

5.3.2 The history of the Doxa Juniors

The original 19 children were encouraged to leave the streets of Pretoria by welfare and voluntary workers and enter the Rataneng street child centre. While the children were in this shelter the church council of Doxa Deo approached the Sunnyside police station and requested that they show them what the real social needs of Pretoria were. From what they observed late into one Saturday night the church council realised that the plight of the homeless people and the street children needed to be addressed. Out of this experience grew the POPUP project.

Because of the problems being experienced by the Rataneng shelter the Department of Welfare approached POPUP and asked if they could not take over the shelter and administer it. They agreed to do so bringing the children and the staff to Salvokop and finding accommodation for them in a house. After experiencing a number of difficult problems with those looking after the children the executive of POPUP asked Johannes if he would take over the running of the shelter and become the “house father.” As an adult Johannes had lost everything and had found his way to POPUP and had been through their readjustment programme. Because of the problems at the street child centre the executive of POPUP asked him to help out with at the shelter for two weeks. It is important to mention that Johannes had no formal training or experience in working with street children. He decided to accept the challenge. Soon he realised that this was his calling and so he accepted the position of “house father” permanently.

While at the shelter the children received strong spiritual guidance and an impressive programme of social exposure to outside places, events and people. It was interesting to hear from the children that it was not the danger to themselves or eviction from the Centre that the smoking of dagga and sniffing of glue might bring, that maintained their abstinence but the ongoing Christian teaching of its evil that stopped them.

Most attended Greenwood College while some of the academically weaker children were at the Pretoria College’s Community Project school for street children where the focus was on basic literacy and numeracy.

5.3.3 Meeting and getting to know the Doxa Juniors

We then made arrangements with Johannes to meet the children. Before visiting them we worked out some questions to put to them These we hoped would help us to get to know the children and find out what their needs were. The questions were concerned with some biographical details, what they saw as their needs to be successful at school, what worried them, what they thought prevented them from doing well at school and whether they wanted us to work with them in any way. In terms of the biographical questions their ethnic identity received the most animated response. They were extremely keen that I helped them with school subjects especially Mathematics, English - mainly reading and writing - and Science. My reactions to this first contact with the children as captured in my diary are interesting.

“I find the enthusiasm and positive reaction to me and what I did with them overwhelming. They contributed with confidence and with a desperate longing for anything I could offer. I felt that I was being sucked into something by a force outside myself so great was the lust to improve themselves and for me and Magdel to begin. The feeling was palpable in the room.” (Combined diary, p. 4)

In Richter’s study (1989) of ninety seven street children over seventy percent had left home by the age of thirteen. The amount of time they had spent on the streets before going to a shelter could be divided into three groups: 36% spent up to six months on the street, 44% 9 to 18 months and 20% up to two years. Nearly half had been in and out of shelters for a year. In terms of Doxa House the number of children who had entered the shelter and then left on their own accord or had been ejected or transferred was very limited - perhaps 5% at most. It seems therefore that the conditions at Doxa House were such that they were doing something right to meet the needs and aspirations of the children in their care. In fact one of the greatest fears of the children at the shelter and a reason for them to conform to its rules and ethos was that they would be asked to leave.

5.3.4 Working with the Doxa Juniors

After this first meeting with the children we negotiated and agreed with Johannes and them that we would work with the children at the shelter on two afternoons a week - Tuesdays and Thursdays - from 16h00 to 18h00. This meant that we would spend four hours a week each with the children. The focus of our programme would combine an educational and psychological approach and would be aimed at:

- establishing a sense of trust between us
- making the children feel special
- developing them as individuals
- beginning to put broken identities together again.
- dealing with issues raised by them and which affected them.
- working on literacy, numeracy skills and helping them with problems they were experiencing with their school work.

Our first lesson with the children took place on 31 May 2001 in the dark windowless TV room

at the shelter and was constantly interrupted by an interfering dog and requests for keys and other items from the room. However it is interesting to note the reflections made in my and Magdel's combined diary. Some of my initial and personal reactions are captured in the following quotes from the diary. They show at this early stage my enthusiasm for the children, how I perceive the private emotional dangers to myself to be and the combined educational and psychological problems to be addressed.

“ First it was wonderful to get in front of students again and be able to make close contact with them. However, I sense a high level of expectation both from Johannes and the children on us to achieve rapid and startling success. My nature has always been to accept this kind of displaced responsibility from others onto my shoulders and then suffer the stress that this accountability brings with it. I must not let this happen this time. I need rather to see the problem in clinical terms rather than emotional ones - if this is at all possible for me to do. We need to set ourselves some personal objectives. Perhaps the first should be to win a level of trust, then some sort of increased psychological support to overcome blocks to their adjustment and/or trauma and finally a level of scholastic improvement to overcome some of their academic deprivation” (Combined Diary, p 13).

Some of these sentiments are echoed in Magdel's comments.

“It was wonderful to interact with children again. I felt alive again. But I am overwhelmed by the enormity of their deprivation. So much needs to be done if an effective programme is to be established. By effective I mean a programme that will assist in their educational and psychological development so that they can go back into the community, acquire and hold stable jobs and be able to have fulfilling relationships. On the surface they appear to be nice, ordinary, open adolescents. As you ask them to explain something the first signs of their deprivation appears. These kids are strong but they crave attention and affection. I could see their eyes light up when Mickey gave them high fives and warm fuzzies ” (Combined Diary p. 13).

Later on in the combined diary of 19 June 2001 these early interactions with the children also confirmed the initial sentiments of shock at the severity of the deprivation. They also brought

out the first private feelings of inadequacy in dealing with the problem.

“ I come away quite shaken again by the amount and scope of the depravation that all children displayed. I get quite desperate when I see their level of ability to read, write, speak English and especially when I think of what is missing in their basic concepts of number, space, time and a trillion other things such as values, ethics, morals and even the ability to cooperate - things that normal children have in place and accumulate from being in a normal environment. I also come away feeling that I have not been able to adapt well to their displayed needs and level of ability.”

As mentioned the children had been placed in a private school situated in the centre of Pretoria and had attended regularly from the beginning of the year. However their presence in the school had created problems for them, the teachers and the other pupils. This was apparent from the interview we had with the headmistress and the teachers who taught them. Their real educational depravation and psychological issues resulting from their past home life and experiences on the street resulted in serious negative behavioural concerns and interpersonal altercations with both teachers, themselves and other students. When asked about the children's strengths and weaknesses the following were mentioned by the headmistress and teachers in interviews on 6 and 8 June 2001.

Strengths:

- Some were artistic
- They were eager to learn
- The children were very verbal
- They knew how to socialise eg. at sports meetings

Weaknesses:

- There was fighting and jealousy between themselves and between old and new Doxa boys
- Some were short tempered
- Concentration spans were short
- Basic Mathematic and numeracy concepts and skills were not in place

- Their ability to express themselves in writing was very weak.
- They have hidden frustrations. They seem to be aware of the fact that they are abnormal. Teachers try to ignore the fact that they are different but when they fight amongst themselves it emphasizes this difference in front of the other children and staff.
- They do not have social and learning skills which normally are taken for granted i.e. following routine, discipline, asking permission to do things or go places, listening for extended periods.
- Some still displayed evidence of substance dependence.

On the basis of what the children had requested and on the information the teachers had given us we decided to use literacy, numeracy and school subjects as a basis for our workshops. From the end of May 2001 to early November we held 25 of these two hour sessions with the children. In order to make the large group more manageable in terms of numbers, for a narrower spread of ability and for coherence in terms of our material Magdel and I decided to divide the children into four groups.

Group 1: Grades 3 & 4

Group 2: Grades 5 & 6

Group 3: Grades 7 & 8

Group 4: Grades 9 & 10

It was agreed that Magdel would work generally with groups 1 & 2 and I with groups 3 & 4. By mutual agreement we would swap groups if we felt it necessary for the children to have time with the other person. On average my two groups consisted of 14 boys varying in age from 14 to 18.

Within the first few sessions I was able to establish a rapport with the children through Rogers' (1983) approach of being congruent, empathetic and showing positive regard for them. By being myself I began to win their trust and confidence and with this came an increasing ability to penetrate their worlds. Also their great need for physical affection soon became apparent. This is reflected in the combined diary on 5 and 12 June 2001.

“Already I am beginning to “read” the children and learning some ways to penetrate their

outer layer of self-imposed protection. One can see that the younger children have not yet been “hardened” by the streets as the older ones. All have a strong need for physical affection and crave the security of touch.”

“They held onto my arm right until it was time to leave and drive away.”

However it soon became evident that working with the children in a formal or controlled kind of way in an unsuitable venue was problematic and exhausting. Our inexperience with these children in terms of their behaviour patterns and academic abilities soon became obvious and began to take its toll. The first hint of the amount of personal energy of all kinds needed to work with these children, the honest commitment required and the emerging personal dilemmas and realizations also became evident. The vital element of fun and humour in the interactive process as well as the critical role of language was also realised. These observations are captured in our combined diary of 12 and 14 June 2001.

“I found these two sessions extremely difficult, tough and emotionally draining. The venue, dust, noise level, language problems, interruptions, lack of basic abilities of the kids, lack of working space and feeling of confinement made the two hours an exhausting experience. The amount of energy, concentration, psychological and behavioural monitoring, material adaption, flexibility of content, process and pace needed is staggering to say the least. Perhaps the fun element needs to be raised, the pace and content expectations relaxed and much simpler exercises used. I realised that any task - no matter how simple needs to be explained very carefully - nothing can be taken for granted - especially the language of explanation.”

“ It is humbling and guilt producing to know that you have the knowledge, skills and empathy to make a huge and significant difference in these children’s lives but also to feel that to plunge yourself into this crevasse will be all consuming, never ending and possibly could be self-destructive. Being with these children just brings home the overwhelming feeling and realization of just how privileged one has been to live the life one has, to have experienced so much of the world and had the love and undivided closeness to love and be loved in turn. However being experienced is not always an

advantage. With it comes deeper insights, wider choices and responsibilities. To a sensitive person these can be extremely uncomfortable.”

To overcome the negative aspects of the venue we moved our workshops to the diningroom of the POPUP adult facility. This was a huge room with tables and chairs for over 100 people. I used the front right hand corner and Magdel the rear left one. This venue although not ideal by any means was a huge improvement on the TV dungeon.

It soon became apparent as time passed that I as the teacher had to be very flexible in my approach and methods of presentation. Although they were able to concentrate, extended periods of attention could only be achieved by varying the methods and content regularly and as soon as their concentration began to flag. The formal explanation of mathematics was therefore linked closely to their life experiences, punctuated with games, stories and alternated with discussions on topics that arose out of the lesson and in which they were particularly interested. The success of this approach is documented in my combined diary of 14 August 2001. I had prepared a Mathematics lesson for grade 9 and 10 group on Exponents but on arriving for the workshop I noticed that the children were in a different mood. For some reason they just wanted to talk and they wanted to talk about how their bodies worked. I began asking some explorative questions and was astounded by their ignorance even about very basic issues such as why we breathe and eat and the function of the heart and blood. I then began explaining to them using sketches of how the body is made up of different systems and how they were linked. I started with the digestive system, then the circulatory system and then on to the heart, blood and finally the topic of death arose. This evoked many questions about when a human being is dead. Most of what I told them about their bodies and especially their reproductive systems and particularly those of females was new and fascinating to them. Soon they were asking penetrating questions about germs, sickness and finally the topic of AIDS. For nearly two hours they sat rivetted, on the edge of their chairs asking many very sensitive questions with an honesty, candidness and keenness that was disarmingly straight, incisive and insightful. My positive reaction to this lesson is especially interesting.

“I have felt close to these children before when they begin to understand things through my way of teaching. However this time it was different. It was not only the material that

held us together but somehow we joined together as human beings. I think I may have broken through in a way I could never have expected.”

“I realised when I had finished why I believe this workshop was successful. I addressed their needs and did not come with a pre-arranged agenda. Perhaps I should share the time between the ‘real stuff’ such as Mathematics and the stuff they want to deal with spontaneously. Yes I will try this” (Combined diary, p. 51).

During the last two months or so of the workshops I used this approach of mixing games, stories, discussions, debates, songs and fun with the formal teaching of Mathematics and other school subjects with success. They enjoyed this approach immensely but always at the back of their worries and concerns were the struggles they were having with formal school - the difficulty of the subjects, their relationships with teachers, other students and the confining nature of the environment. They seemed to know they were not really part of the establishment and were seen as different. They often expressed these issues to me with gravity, anxiety, a sense of resigned inevitability and a certain sadness.

Because Magdel was dealing with their painful life stories during her sessions with them I did not specifically make a point of introducing these issues and only dealt with them if they were raised in the natural course of the lessons. As time passed they began to surface more and more and so I would spend individual time with them after the lessons. From my perspective the stories of neglect, abuse, violence, abandonment and brutality were horrendous, almost unbelievable and evoked within me emotions of deep sorrow, heartache and a smouldering anger. When working this closely with the children it was not possible for me to remain detached and neutral. They sucked one relentlessly into their worlds.

During this time the children’s weakness in basic reading and written literacy and numeracy was continually confirmed. I found that much of the fundamentals of Mathematics such as number concept, basic operations and fractions were absent.

To obtain a more objective understanding with regard to my gut feelings regarding their English, numerical literacy competency, general non-verbal reasoning abilities and learning potential

other than just from working with the boys, we decided to have these areas assessed by the Industrial Psychology Department of UNISA. On 3 October 2001 and using the three psychometric tests described in chapter 5, the children were assessed in these four areas. With regard to their English and numerical literacy abilities my subjective assessments proved to be correct as shown by the summaries in table 5. 1 In each case fourteen boys were assessed.

Stanine	Description	English ability as second language	Numerical literacy
1	Very poor	4	7
2	Poor	3	5
3	Below average	6	0
4	Low average	1	1
5	Average	0	1
6	High average	0	0
7	Above average	0	0
8	Good	0	0
9	Excellent	0	0
Total		14	14
Mean:		2,2	1,8
Range		1 to 4	1 to 5
		Very poor to low average	Very poor to average

Table 5.1 English as second language and Numerical Literacy ability

These results show that the majority of the boys' second language English ability displayed below average proficiency compared to normal grades 7 to 9. Half of the group were in the poor to very poor categories. Not one boy displayed even average second language English ability. The Numerical literacy situation was even worse. Twelve of the fourteen boys displayed abilities in the poor to very poor categories in comparison to typical grade 8 to 10 learners. Only one boy showed average ability in this area.

However the assessment of the general non-verbal reasoning performance and learning potential as tested by the LPCAT brought forward interesting results. If age is discounted table 5.2 shows

that 9 out of the 14 boys were operating above the grade they were in at school in this area. This was in sharp contrast to the language and numeracy situation.

Child	Grade in school	Age	Non-verbal reasoning performance		
			Below grade potential	At grade potential	Above grade potential
1	7	17			Grade 9
2	7	15			Grade 9
3	7	18	Grade 4 - 5		
4	7	14			Grade 9
5	7	17		Grade 7	
6	7	15	Grade 2		
7	8	17			Grade 10
8	8	18			Grade 9
9	9	17			Grade 10
10	9	18			Grade 10
11	9	17			Grade 12+
12	9	18		Grade 9	
13	9	16	Grade 7		
14	9	16			Grade 12
		Total:	3	2	9

Table 5.2 LPCAT non-verbal reasoning performance.

Even though the weekly afternoon sessions were voluntary the boys were keen and attended regularly. They showed a lively interest in all I did with them especially when talking informally about adolescence, the physiology of their bodies, AIDS and their life experiences in general. They responded very well to me as a person and the way I interacted with them. On numerous occasions they stated how much they enjoyed the methods I had used to teach them and how these differed substantially from those they experienced at school.

At the end of the workshops I felt I had, through a genuine interest in them, gained their trust, I had succeeded in making them feel special and had come some way in helping them by

improving their basic numeracy skills. I had achieved, to a limited degree, some of the objectives I had set for myself. Although there were obviously large gaps in their academic knowledge I discovered that underneath their verbal confidence they were just children wanting desperately to improve themselves and be part of the normal world they had revisited through being at the Doxa Deo shelter and having received care from concerned and empathetic adults.

With the removal of the street children from the street and their placement in the shelter at Doxa House most of their basic needs had been taken care of. They were well fed, clothed, they had shelter and most importantly they experienced a seemingly positive adult role model in the form of Johannes. Outwardly it appeared as if he was constantly there to help them as best he could with their emotional and psychological needs and to champion their cause.

During all the eight months that I worked with them and spent time at the shelter I experienced very little aggression and fighting between them. They were at all times respectful and extremely keen to cooperate. One sensed however all along that the effects of the trauma that had driven them to the streets and the terrible things they had experienced on them were just below the surface and ready to make their presence felt again. Through their short and at times unhappy exposure to schooling again, the spiritual teachings received from the church and through their participation in many outside church and private experiences they had been given again a glimpse of what might be possible in their lives. In many cases it was this, they said, which motivated them to work hard at their schoolwork even if some of their ambitions for themselves were rather far fetched. To have provided them with this glimmer of hope, to have given them a peep into what was possible and then for them to be disappointed because their academic deprivation prevented them from achieving the means to a better future would, I felt, be sad indeed.

They were children of great courage and fortitude. They had possessed the guts to leave their intolerable pasts, go it alone in the harsh reality of the unforgiving street and now they had dared to hope and place their fragile trust for something better in the hands of others again. A special programme, school environment, method of teaching and learning and a more empathetic way of working with all of them now from similar shelters in a school specially catering for their needs I believed was a possible way of helping them to achieve their new dreams.

In summary then the six months spent with the children at the shelter highlighted the following issues:

- They were aware of their precarious position and were keen to improve themselves and create a better life.
- They understood the value of education as a means to self-improvement. They wanted to attend and be accepted into what they called a “proper” school.
- They all, to different degrees, had serious and extreme levels of academic deprivation.
- They had difficulty in adapting to formal situations and routine.
- They possessed strong psychological issues from past trauma just below the thin veneer of shelter and school imposed conformity. This often made their behaviour unpredictable and volatile.
- Standard disciplinary methods were ineffective. Alternate and creative methods were required to deal with problem behaviour.
- The lure of the freedom of the streets and the relapse back to them was ever present.
- They craved genuine physical affection.
- My student centred approach combined with firmness, impartiality, fairness and clear behavioural parameters appealed to them and won their trust.
- A variety of teaching methods were needed to maintain interest, motivation and concentration levels.
- They displayed a strong requirement for their perceived needs to be met in any teaching situation. This required flexibility in both content and process from the teacher.
- Working for extended periods with them was extremely draining physically, psychologically and emotionally.
- The strong Christian basis for living received at the shelter played a significant role in maintaining their abstinence from substance abuse and other unacceptable behaviour.
- There existed a paradox between fierce individualism and a pack instinct.
- They were very materialistic - probably as a result of past poverty and deprivation. This often made theft endemic and irresistible.
- Most missed their families - especially their mothers - a great deal.
- They held little or no respect for adulthood, age or position. They only respected adults who had won their trust through their actions and showed a congruence between who they were, what they said and what they did.

- Beneath their air of bravado and confidence lay a painful vulnerability and a child waiting to come out.

5.3.5 The schooling of the Doxa Juniors

The experience of the Doxa Junior children at a general academic school during 2000 was not good. In an interview (December 2001) with Johannes Earle, “house father” of the Doxa Juniors, he mentioned that they were seen by the teachers of the school as being rowdy and having the tendency to operate as a pack to defend each other when in difficulties. As mentioned, the teachers themselves in an interview I had with them in June 2001, commented that they fought a lot, there was much jealousy between themselves, some were short tempered, concentration spans were short and basic numeracy, reading and the ability to express themselves in writing was very weak. Only two of the fifteen teachers could think of any strengths.

Johannes believed that street children attending school had distinct personal needs, required teachers with special qualities and a teaching approach which differed substantially from what main stream schooling offered. Some of these needs included a clear education emphasis on their basic rights with regard to their personhood, education, labour rights and medical services. The school programme should therefore have space for dealing with areas such as exploitation, AIDS, sodomy, homosexuality and the teaching that children have the right to say no. When asked about the qualities he felt the teachers who teach them should have he mentioned intrinsic motivation to teach them, experience, commitment from the heart, empathy, honesty, and the ability to set boundaries for the children. A strong correlation therefore existed between his perception of what the children needed in a teacher and the approach I proposed. He believed that there should also be a strong emphasis on basic literacy and numeracy and for those children who were not academically orientated an economically practical and useful skills development avenue should be available. Johannes was of the opinion that the school which they attended did not meet these needs or have the teachers empathetic enough and with enough insight to deal with the children’s special requirements. Williams (1992) also argues strongly for a curriculum which goes beyond reading, writing and numeracy and includes four other underlying objectives that should be strived for when educating street children. These are increased adult contact, overcoming boredom, reducing “restricted social understandings” and the need to redress the live-for-the-minute attitude through developing a “predictive rationale”, which relates to the

three points previously mentioned. To achieve these teachers will need to teach in a special way and develop an approach which incorporates these objectives.

All the street children in Pretoria who have been removed from the street and placed in shelters attended one of two schools. One was a registered private school and the street children in it were subsidised by the state. The other was not registered and was funded by the private sector. When asked why the street children did not attend government schools Johannes mentioned that principals of these schools were reluctant to admit them mainly because of the “bad image” and stigma they would create for the school. Even at this early stage Johannes realised that perhaps the answer lay in creating a special school not only for them but for many of the other street children who had been taken off the streets and were in shelters and struggling in the private schools around Pretoria. The school would also cater for children still living on the streets and who wanted to attend the school by their own volition. In August 2001 Johannes officially informed us that he was going ahead with the establishment of a school catering for the special needs of street children and other children at risk. He asked us if we would like to be involved. This opportunity seemed too good to be true because I realised that the school could provide the ideal context in which to work with the children in a more structured setting so that together we could plan and attempt to achieve a better future for them. I would also be able to research my philosophy, psychology and practical ideas on education and I felt confident that the approach that I had developed over the years would be effective and applicable in teaching street children and other children at risk in the environment of the kind of school we hoped to establish.

5.4 Establishing the Masupatsela School

5.4.1 Early negotiations and planning

On his own initiative towards the end of 2001 Johannes approached the Pretoria College with the concept of expanding the community street child project they were running in classrooms situated at their campus in the centre of Pretoria on the corners of Potgieter and Pretorius Street into a bigger school for street children. On 29 August 2001 and on an invitation from Johannes we visited this community street child project and found it catering for about thirty street children. Some of them were from shelters but others just attended from the streets. From my conversation with the woman in charge I gathered that the aim was to provide for the basic needs of the children such as food, showers, recreation and basic literacy and numeracy skills. An individual

curriculum was followed by each child and material from Project Literacy was being used.

After visiting the Centre we moved to the business of enlarging the facility into a full school. Johannes explained that he had met with the Rector of the College and she was keen for the school to go ahead. She had also formally made a large portion of the campus available to the project. This portion included 15 classrooms, a large hall with a stage, another large hall with pottery facilities, the use of a computer room with thirty networked computers, a kitchen with a stove and refrigerator, a staff room and administration offices. The only aspect missing was a playground. These facilities, as well as their location with regard to the shelters of the children, was ideal. The College also explained that the school could make use of the campus's utilities such as water and electricity as well as the telephones and photocopying facilities.

It was Johannes's vision that the school should cater for the academic needs of the children as well as provide some skills training and recreation. He envisioned the school starting with about 300 children and cater for all the grades up to grade 10. From there the children, if they were competent and so wished, could go on to the College for the further academic grades to matric or progress to vocational training there or elsewhere. Knowing the kind of children we would be dealing with I was immediately hesitant at the starting number of learners. When I suggested that perhaps we should start more modestly, begin with grades up to possibly seven and then phase in higher grades, he reacted negatively as he said they could not selectively withdraw children presently in other schools.

When I enquired about the funding of the school Johannes explained that the initial financing would be partially subsidised by the College and that he would fund raise the balance from sponsors. He was also confident that the Gauteng Department of Education on application would be keen to take over the school once it was up and running and in so doing relieve the school of much of the financial burdens. My diary of 13 September reflects my pessimism with the speedy take over of the school by the department.

“I'm not sure that the negotiations with the Department of Education will proceed as smoothly as expected. The wheels of governmental bureaucracy respond very slowly to this kind of creative, lateral thinking and initiative.”

At this early stage I realised that although both Johannes and the manager of the Centre were very enthusiastic and excited with the prospect of the school they had very little experience and insight into the practicalities, logistics, financial implications and complexity of the situation. I also was concerned that Johannes's talents and interests lay in the creation of projects and not the grind of ongoing maintenance and sustainability. I was also faced with a dilemma. Both Johannes and the manager of the Centre made it clear that they were going to rely heavily on my knowledge, expertise and skills in establishing and running the school. With having to develop and run my own research, teach five hours a day and write up my data and reflections each evening I did not see how I would have the time or energy to help to that extent with the administration and day-to-day running of the school. I explained that I would assist, consult, provide advice, plan and teach in the school but would not take responsibility for running it.

I also explained that my involvement in the school would be dependent on my being able to research what I was doing. I explained in broad terms the scope and nature of what I wanted to do and they readily agreed with enthusiasm as they said it could only be of benefit to the school. I left the meeting feeling positive but with the underlying concern that the Pretoria College, Johannes and the manager of the Centre were getting into something the extent and complexity of which they did not understand (Combined Diary, p. 70).

On 13 September 2001 Johannes, the Manager of the Centre and prospective Principal of the school, myself and Magdel met with the Public Relations Manager of the Pretoria College to finalise the details relating to the school. At this meeting it was decided to go ahead with the school but to my relief no more than 200 children would be accepted. The school would cater from grade one to ten and be called Masupatsela - the one who leads the way. Ages would be limited to between seven and eighteen with some exceptions based on merit for older students. It was decided to drop the label street children and use the term out of school youth. It was also agreed to limit the school to boys as the addition of girls would be a serious complicating factor seeing that most of the girls on the street were involved in prostitution. The OBE curriculum and phases in the school would be followed. The learners would also receive computer instruction, have pottery lessons and be involved in sport and drama. Apart from the teachers a student counsellor would be appointed and support staff with regard to administration and recreation would be supplied from the student body of the college as part of their practical assignments.

Outside organizations would also be approached to help with extra mural activities such as drama and sport.

At this meeting I negotiated my role in the school and explained my position to the College with regard to the research. They were very pleased that I was going to study an aspect of the school formally and provided their consent. It was agreed that I would act as an educational consultant to the principal and be responsible for the teaching of Mathematics and Physical Science to the grade 7, 8, 9 and 10 learners.

At this point the combined diary of 13 September 2001 reflects my relief and pleasure at having a suitable context in which to carry out my research and passion for teaching.

“I also believe that the school situation will provide me with an ideal context and opportunity not only to do the research I would like but the teaching as well.”

At this meeting Johannes, in his capacity as chairman of the Children’s Alliance, provided us with the latest census on the status of street children in the Pretoria district. Table 5.3 Captures this information. This showed that in total there were 650 street children in the Pretoria district of which 145 were in shelters. The number of children on the streets he said would increase in the summer. The need for a school was definitely there.

At a meeting held in November 2001 in the prospective school buildings to which the representatives from all the shelters in the Pretoria district were invited the concept of the school and what it wanted to achieve was explained. At this meeting those from other shelters reiterated the problems their children were experiencing at the schools they were attending and welcomed the initiative of the proposed new school. They agreed to support it.

Place	On the street	In shelters
Sunnyside	90	40
Hatfield	30	
Central	20	60

Surrounding areas and suburbs	30	
Eersterus	25	
Mamelodi	50	45
Soshanguve	40	
Bronkhorstspuit	100	
Children floating between areas	120	
Total	505	145

Table 5.3. Census of street children in the Pretoria district.

5.4.2 Opening the school

Masupatsela School opened its doors in late January 2002 for registration. On 31 January 2002 the school was officially opened by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Unfortunately I was only able to start at the school two weeks after it had opened. On arrival this was the situation I found.

5.4.2.1 The learners

Within the first week 126 children had been admitted. These covered the grades from one to ten with only grade four having no learners. When analysing the children at the school the following categories could be found:

- Children who had left the streets and were now in shelters. Three of the shelters in Pretoria had admitted their children to the school. These were the Doxa Deo Shelter, Crossroads and Intumaleng. These children formed the majority of the enrollment.
- Children who were still on the street and sleeping in derelict flats in Sunnyside along with other homeless people.
- Children who had left home but were staying with family, friends or benefactors in and around Pretoria.
- Children from home who had heard about the school and because of poverty could not attend any other school.
- Refugees who were living in parts of a garage nearby.

99% of the school consisted of boys. The only girls enrolled were in the first two grades. These had been admitted because they formed part of a refugee family who had been found locked up in a small part of a garage during the day while the parents went onto the streets to trade. It was felt that this small family could not be split up. They spoke no local language and could only converse in Swahili. The ages of the learners ranged from six to twenty one with little correlation between age and grade. Classes varied in size. The smallest had four children and the largest 16 learners. There were two white children in the school.

5.4.2.2 The buildings and facilities

As promised by the Pretoria College the buildings and other physical facilities were available and ideally suited to the school. The classrooms were large and fitted out with individual desks and chairs. There was a very well equipped administration block and the computer room. A large hall was available for assemblies and other activities such as indoor sports, music and drama. The school would be maintained and cleaned by the College.

5.4.2.3 The uniform

Because of the financial situation of the learners black T-shirts with the school's name on the front were supplied to all the students. These they could wear with whatever trousers they had. Footwear of their choice was required. They were discouraged to wear headgear such as caps, balaclavas and bandanas.

5.4.2.4 The staff

The staff on opening consisted of the principal, 10 teachers, a student counsellor and a school secretary. Of these only the principal and the teachers, kept on from the College's previous Street Child Centre, were contracted to the College and received salaries. The rest of the teachers were appointed on a voluntary basis. The selection and appointment of these staff members was, out of necessity, based on availability and willingness and not on qualifications, experience or skills in working with disadvantaged children at risk. Most were unemployed teachers who were, out of desperation, keen to gain the experience and so improve their future opportunities. Of the teachers three were male.

5.4.2.5 The curriculum

On arrival I discovered that the classes up to grade 6 were following the OBE integrated curriculum but the grades above that were spending the days, to the dissatisfaction of the children, alternating between literacy, numeracy and computer lessons. Sport in the form of soccer was held in a nearby park on Fridays from 12 o'clock onwards.

5.4.2.6 Resources

Apart from the buildings and facilities the school possessed very few teaching and learning resources. There were no text books for the children, limited exercise books and stationery and very few teaching aids and resources for the teachers. In fact all the school provided for the teachers in the beginning was chalk and chalk boards.

5.4.2.7 My responsibilities and venue

On arrival at the school and as previously agreed, I was asked by the principal to take over the teaching of Mathematics and Physical Science for the 7, 8, 9 and 10 grades. I also agreed to help with setting up a more appropriate timetable and curriculum, assist with staff training and help with creating necessary structures like a student representative council and teacher support groups. I was then shown to my teaching venue - a huge airy and light filled double classroom, carpeted and with a separate storeroom and ample furniture. It was here that I would conduct the cycles of my action research. I regarded it as very suitable. Because of its size I would be able to locate my video camera in such a way as to maximise the potential of the recording of the lessons.

5.4.2.8 My classes and learners

Before beginning any lessons I decided, through a simple questionnaire, to obtain some basic information about the learners in my four classes. This I did on 6 February 2002. On handing out the questionnaires, which contained ten very simple questions such as name, age, where they lived, where their home was and the national group to which they belonged, it soon became clear that they found the filling in of the forms difficult. They were unsure and nervous to commit themselves. To overcome this insecurity I took them through the questionnaire step by step, reassured them and answered any queries immediately. It must be mentioned that because of the floating and erratic nature of attendance and even enrollment at the school the numbers in each of the classes varied from day to day. The statistics therefore included are correct for that

particular day. Table 5.4 is a summary of the responses to some of the questions posed to the children. This summary provided me with some useful information regarding the children. With classes varying between ten and thirteen learners I felt that I would be dealing with a class size that would be just manageable considering the nature of the children.

The cultures and home languages of the children covered the whole spectrum of South Africa's people. The dominant indigenous languages were isiZulu and Setswana. This in itself, I realised, could pose problems when translations were necessary and for choosing a second language for the school. It had already been decided that from grade four English would be the medium of instruction. It was also significant that the majority of the learners came from the three shelters. This was significant because at least there would be reasonable stability and adult care provided by these institutions and the basics such as shelter, food, clothing and ablution facilities would be available to them.

Information	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Total
1. Number in class	12	13	10	10	45
2. Main language: Sesotho	0	3	2	0	5
Sepedi	1	1	1	0	3
Setswana	4	2	1	3	10
xiTsonga	0	0	1	0	1
Venda	0	0	1	0	1
isiSwati	0	0	1	2	3
isiZulu	7	5	1	0	13
isiXhosa	0	0	1	2	3
English	0	0	1	0	1
isiNdebele	0	1	0	2	3
Afrikaans	0	1	0	0	1
Namibian language	0	0	0	1	1
3. Residence					
Shelter	10	8	9	8	35
On the street	2	3	0	2	7

	With parents	0	2	1	0	3
4. Age	Average age	15,8 y	15,6 y	17,2 y	18,9	16,7
	Age range	14 to 18	14 to 19	16 to 20	17 to 21	14 to 21
5. Time spent on the street:	Average	1,1 y	0,8 y	1,7 y	2,8 y	
	Range	0 -> 3,3 y	0 -> 3 y	0 -> 4 y	0 -> 9 y	

Table 5.4. Summary of responses to the learners' first questionnaire

Table 5.5 shows the average age of children in normal schools for grade 7, 8, 9, 10. In arriving at these ages it is assumed that the starting age of children is six and that no repeats of a year occur. The table also shows the average age of the children in the four grades at Masupatsela.

Grade	Age of learners in normal schools	Mean age of learners at Matsupatsela
7	12 years	15,8 years
8	13 years	15,6 years
9	14 years	17,2 years
10	15 years	18,9 years

Table 5.5. Comparison of learners' age in different grades at Masupatsela and normal schools

It can be seen from this comparison that the boys at Masupatsela were from 2,6 to nearly four years older than their grade peers in normal schools. Even this very raw statistic hinted at how much schooling had been lost and academic deprivation suffered. The age range of about four years in each class also showed how varied the classes would be especially considering the crucial stage of adolescence they were in. It can also be seen from the table that generally speaking the older the boys were the longer they had spent on the streets. In grade 7 and 8 this was around the one year mark but in grade ten this had moved up to nearly four years. This time spent on the street was also a further factor pointing towards their academic deprivation.

Table 5.6 shows a summary of the distribution of the parental homes of the children. From this table it can be seen that the majority of these homes (62%) were to be found in the close proximity of Johannesburg and Pretoria. In seeking a new life the children therefore gravitated to their nearest large city. At this stage I also believed that this could be significant in trying to rehabilitate them with their parents and families.

Information from this questionnaire provided me with a broad stroke profile of the learners in the classes I would be teaching. Although the children had been placed in specific grades this had been done according to their previous history at other schools and for those directly off the street by placing them where they had asked to be accommodated. No assessment was done. Also the children were very specific, adamant and determined to be placed in the grade of their choice.

Location of parental homes of the children	Number
1. Townships in and close to Johannesburg and Pretoria. eg. Soweto, Tembisa, Alexandria	13
2. Townships further out from Johannesburg Pretoria eg. Soshanguve, Ga-Rankuwe, Winterveld	15
3. Bigger towns surrounding Johannesburg and Pretoria eg. Witbank, Brits, Klerksdorp, Vereeniging	6
4. Places far away eg. Durban, Namibia, Komatipoort	8
5. Unknown	3

Table 5.6. Location of the parental homes of the children

At this stage the school had no access to or funds to pay for academic or other assessments. In order to establish a baseline of language and numerical ability and of the learning potential of the children the school counsellor decided to approach the Industrial Psychology Department of UNISA again to see if they would be interested and willing to sponsor the testing and assessment of the children. After negotiating with them they agreed to the request and the whole school was assessed by a team from the university on 7 March 2002. The children in my four classes were assessed in four areas - competency in English as a second language, numerical literacy, general non-verbal reasoning ability and learning potential using the instruments described in chapter

five. The results of this assessment, to say the least were enlightening and depressing although they did confirm the gut feeling I had developed during my time with the Doxa Juniors, the limited assessment made the previous year at Doxa House and the first week or so teaching at the school. A summary of these descriptive statistics can be found in Table 5,7.

The average second language English proficiency in terms of vocabulary, spelling ability and language usage through the four grades had a stanine value of 2,2. This value translated into a descriptive ability of just over poor. 19 of the 45 learners had a stanine value of 1 which translated into a descriptive ability of very poor. I realised that when planning and deciding on a teaching methodology and strategy this weak language ability would have to be seriously considered.

The numerical literacy scenario proved to be even worse. Here the stanine value was 1.8 which translated into a descriptive ability of less than poor. 26 of the group had a stanine value of 1.

	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	
Number of learners (N)	12	16	10	7	N=45
Age: Mean Range	15,8 14->19	15,4 13->19	17,1 16->21	17,6 14->21	16,4 13->21
English Stanine: Mean Range	1,2 1->5	1,75 1->3	3 1->6	3 1->4	2,2 1->6
Mathematics Stanine: Mean Range	1,2 1->3	1,93 1->3	2,4 1->5	1,6 1->2	1,8 1->5
LPCAT Pre-test: Mean Range	41,5 31->49	40,3 27->52	45 38->48	42,7 35->47	42,1 27->52
Present grade: Mean Range	7->8 3->10	6->7 2->10	8->9 5->10	7->8 4->8	7->8 2->10
LPCAT Post-test: Mean Range	40,75 33->50	39,5 28->50	46,4 41->54	42,5 4->8	41,9 28->54

LPCAT Difference: Mean Range	-0,8 -4->3	-0,8 -4->2	1,4 -2->7	-0,14 -4->4	-0,2 -4->7
LPCAT Combined: Mean Range	41,5 31->49	40,3 27->52	45,1 38->48	42,7 35->47	42,1 27->52
Potential grade: Mean Range	7->8 3->10	6->7 2->10	8->9 5->10	7->8 4->9	7->8 2->10

Table 5.7 UNISA'S descriptive statistics of English, Numerical Literacy, non-verbal reasoning ability and learning potential of learners.

This showed that they were very poor in this area. From this I realised that there would be serious gaps and deprivation in their mathematical knowledge and skills caused by their infrequent school attendance. Because of the sequential nature of Mathematics this would have a significant impact on the curriculum I would have to use with each grade.

However when it came to the potential general non-verbal reasoning skills and learning potential of the boys the LPCAT revealed an interesting trend. In grades 7 and 9 the future grades accessible in terms of general non-verbal reasoning ability and learning potential on average would be approximately the same as the grades where they were at present i.e. 7 to 8 in the case of grade 7 and 8 to 9 in the case of grade 9. On the other hand in grades 8 and 10 the future grades accessible in terms on non-verbal reasoning ability and learning potential on average would be lower than the grades where they were at present i.e. 6 to 7 in the case of grade 8 and 7 to 8 in the case of grade 10. These statistics presented quite a pessimistic view of the boys learning potential and possible future academic performance. There was however one factor which concerned me in the assessment report. The negative change in the pre and post test of -0,2 could be evidence of a loss of concentration and an inability of the boys to remain motivated with the test. In 17 of the individual reports it was mentioned that the fall in score could be caused by these two factors. Again these results hinted that in the formal setting of a classroom the boys could very well display limited concentration and motivation spans.

5.5 Conclusion:

The establishment of the school and the beginning of lessons with the four classes in early 2002 brought to an end a year of reconnaissance. In terms of the reconnaissance design I had during this time, explored and observed the world of street children theoretically and practically in both a shelter and school situation. I had also explored the possibility of and helped establish a school for 120 street children. I had discussed them and their issues in depth with house fathers, school principals, teachers, Magdel and themselves. I had explained and negotiated my and their involvement in what I was doing, my research and what I planned in detail with the children themselves, those looking after them in the shelters, the schools they were attending, the Pretoria College and the staff of Masupatsela school. At all levels I only continued when I had explained exactly what I planned to do, what my motives were and had gained the consent and blessing of those concerned. I realised that Masupatsela and the four classes I would teach provided ideal possibilities for the research, an excellent opportunity and a very suitable context in which to carry out the action research cycles I had conceptualised. Yes there were constraints. The school had a minimal budget, the structures and organization were not ideal, the continual existence of the school not certain and the attitudes of the children to the school ambivalent. But on the positive side there was the enthusiasm of those involved, an exciting sense of adventure into the unknown by those concerned and a feeling of well being that we were doing something positive to address a growing and serious local and national problem.

Finally on assessment of all that had taken place during the reconnaissance year I decided on a general plan of action. This plan was aimed at finding out what kind of person and teacher I needed to be and what methods would be best suited to teach these children in the formal setting of a newly established school - one that I had helped to create for them and with children who had slowly but surely, in their unique way, crept into my affection. Children I wanted to help.

In Chapter 6 I will deal with the planning, implementation and evaluation of the first action research cycle.