

# Candid tour

## of Eastern Cape rural schools

We often hear of neglectful Eastern Cape government bureaucracy. **Monica Hendricks** gives this neglect a sharp and detailed face and speculates on its impact.

As part of my duties as a lecturer, I visit teachers registered for the Advanced Certificate in Education in English Language teaching in the Eastern Cape. The purpose of the classroom visits is to support teachers' classroom practices and, in the process, to learn about the challenges facing rural teachers.

Between August 2004 and May 2006, I visited three districts in the Eastern Cape: Mount Fletcher, Bizana, and Lusikisiki and observed 34 teachers. The lessons that I attended and observed focused on various language skills in a range of grades, from Grade 7 through to Grade 12. I would like to describe what I saw in each district by looking at the local differences and commonalities in education practices and the challenges and difficulties confronting rural teachers.

### DISTRESSING VISIT TO LUSIKISIKI

The first district I visited, in August

2004, was Lusikisiki in the Transkei and my experience at the 12 schools was eye-opening. Bungeni Junior Secondary School (JSS) was a graphic example of the shortage of classrooms in the Eastern Cape. It has 17 teachers, but the main school building is a block of four brick classrooms, and along side it is one big corrugated iron structure that accommodates two classes. There is no office for the principal or staffroom for teachers. The rest of the classrooms are scattered in rondawels in the village.

At Nkqubela JSS, 880 learners and 21 teachers all had one toilet, which, not surprisingly, was blocked. Most learners used the bushes around the school as toilets, while teachers asked neighbours to use nearby toilets. Though these sanitary conditions had prevailed at the school for several years, the lack of toilets was judged to be below standard only when the Education Department's Phakama Project invited a Global teacher to teach at Nkqubela JSS. So, in preparation for the Global teacher's arrival in July 2006, the local municipality built three extra toilets and fenced the school perimeter.

Reading materials are cognitive resources particularly significant for children's literacy and writing development. A shortage of textbooks and the absence of school libraries in rural areas, therefore, make it difficult for learners to develop grade-appropriate literacy levels.

At Mgezwa JSS the Grade 9 class

was very over-crowded. I saw 90 learners on a rainy day, but typically there are more than 100 of them. There was such a severe shortage of books that the teacher copied readings for the learners and wrote exercises on a small chalkboard. At Kwa-Nomathemba JSS, seven learners per group shared one textbook, which effectively means that about four learners are too far from the page to be able to read and follow the text. At most schools (Gwebinkumbi, Bungeni, Nonkonyana, Sigcau, Khotso, Xura View, Jikindaba and Nkqubela) three learners shared a textbook, so that all could read and follow the text. However, there are too few textbooks for each learner to be able to take a book home to read or do homework.

### UNEVEN CONDITIONS IN MOUNT FLETCHER

In February 2005 I visited Mount Fletcher. The Mount Fletcher Education District Office is accommodated in three separate physical locations: a small building behind Mount Fletcher village JSS, shared accommodation with a funeral parlour in Mount Fletcher, and a third office in Maclear, some 80 kilometres from Mount Fletcher. None of the offices has rooms big enough to hold meetings or workshops with groups of teachers.

In Mount Fletcher I visited eleven schools, four of them senior secondary schools (SSSs). The SSSs generally had more textbooks for the learners than JSSs. At most SSSs,

learners had their own copies of books, or there was one book between two learners.

One school, Sidinane SSS, was particularly well-resourced. It had a fully-equipped science laboratory and solar power that electrified the entire school and ran a computer laboratory with about 35 computers. However, even in this school, which was the flagship of the area according to the curriculum specialist in the district office, there was no library. Also, science and mathematics are taught only on the standard grade in matric, which limits children's chances of qualifying for exemption, and university entrance.

Thakabana SSS, by comparison, had no electricity and the school building consisted of classrooms without ceilings and with bare cement floors. There seems to be a significant difference between junior and senior secondary schools with regard to the number of textbooks available for learners.

#### NEGLECT AND IMPROVEMENT IN BIZANA

In May and August 2005, I visited eleven schools in the Bizana district. As is the case in Mount Fletcher, the Bizana Education District Office is located in three separate buildings, none of which has rooms big enough to hold meetings or workshops with groups of teachers.

As in the other districts, most schools were over-crowded. With regard to textbooks, there wasn't the discrepancy between junior and senior secondary schools that I observed in the Mount Fletcher district. At most schools in Bizana learners had their own copies of books, or there was one book between two learners.

The exception was Mdatya SSS, where 65 Grade 10 learners shared



*Mothers making sandwiches for school feeding scheme, with teacher and author in foreground at Bungeni JSS, Lusikisiki.*



*Nongeke SS in Bizana in a well resourced school.*

20 English textbooks. Mdatya SSS was also the only senior secondary school with a serious shortage of furniture. The learners we observed sat mainly on low benches without a back-rest, had no desks on which to write (they wrote on their laps) and the teacher had neither table nor chair in his classroom. There was no surface – bookcase, cupboard or table – on which Mr Zameko could store or display the books donated by Biblionef and Kearnsey College. The books lay on the dusty cement floor of an improvised library – a block of toilets, unused and unusable, because they were designed for water-borne sanitation.

By contrast, Nongeke SSS was upgraded in 2001 in a Nelson Mandela Foundation and Nokia joint project. Ten new electrified classrooms, a library and offices for the principal and heads of department were built. The 12 existing classrooms are being

renovated – ceilings and electricity installed, floors tiled and walls painted. In common with all the schools visited in Bizana, Nongeke had VIP toilets – Ventilation Improved Pit toilets – a new generation of odourless long-drops.

Two other schools further demonstrate the stark differences in school conditions in the Bizana district. At Eluthulini JSS, a long stone structure built in 1923 is subdivided into three classrooms for foundation phase learners. Their first experience of school is of gloomy classrooms with small windows and no electricity. While the walls are solid, the rusty roof leaks badly whenever it rains and the children have to huddle in small dry patches as the raw earth of the clay floor turns into muddy puddles. The unplastered stone walls are too rough to keep clean and too uneven to have pictures or a board hung on them. The chalkboards that rest on the floor

against the walls are broken and it must be difficult for learners at the back of the class to see what is written on them. Compounding these dismal conditions is a desperate shortage of furniture. The foundation phase learners' desks all seem to be rusty from the damp or broken, and their teachers had no tables and chairs.

On the other hand, Mzamba JSS has a well-tended garden and the principal, in a year and a half, had turned an incomplete shell of a classroom into a library. She had a door, windows, ceiling and burglar bars installed, the floor tiled, the walls painted and put in wooden bookshelves and a built-in cupboard. As far as possible the labour and materials came from parents, school governing body (SGB) members and local luminaries. Money for the paint and ceiling came from the ward councillor (the principal capitalised on the upcoming local government elections), the bookshelves were financed from the school's budget and, through a former SGB chairperson, she linked up with an Australian non-governmental organisation which donated several crates of books, reading cards, puzzles and word games to stock the library. To develop the library into a media centre, she also has plans to build a work station housed in a lockable sliding steel cupboard for the photocopier (at present in a nearby SGB member's home as there is no secure place for it at school) and she hopes to purchase computers.

#### WHAT HOPE IN SUCH CONDITIONS?

This litany of uneven and limited material resources in schools

described above is a matter of serious concern because of the impact on teachers, and especially learners.

In a study of youths in run-down



*Eluthilini JSS, Bizana: learners standing next to the unplastered stone walls of the foundation phase classrooms*

schools in the US with poorly-qualified teachers and a shortage of up-to-date textbooks very similar to most of these rural South African schools, Fine, Burns, Payne and Torres in a book entitled *Civic lessons: The color and class of betrayal* ask whether schools like these reproduce broad social inequalities, worsen them or reduce them. With regard to the likely effect of these poor facilities on learners, they argue that, "Schools, like other contexts of childhood and adolescence, are ... intimate places where youths construct identities, build a sense of self, read how society views them, develop

the capacity to sustain relations and forge the skills to initiate change. These are the contexts where youth grow or shrink. ...". Buildings in disrepair are not, therefore, merely a distraction; they are identity producing and self-defining.

I am humbled at the commitment of these teachers and subject advisers to improving their teaching and professional work in the often difficult circumstances observed during these school visits. My fear is that the ongoing Eastern Cape Education Department malaise, bureaucratic inefficiency and officials' complaints about 'department bashing', exacerbates infrastructural problems with regard to educational buildings, furniture and textbooks.

Failure to address these problems will discourage teachers and subject advisers who try, despite the odds, to work effectively. Although substantial numbers of black students have enrolled in previously whites-only schools, "racial integration will never play more than a minor role in determining the quality of the educational opportunities available to black students. ... The main determinant of educational opportunities and outcomes for black students will be the quality of the schools formerly designed to serve African and coloured students."

In a country as profoundly unequal as South Africa, the possibility that schools could worsen the prevailing social divide for the majority of learners is worrying, especially since rural schooling serves half of South Africa's learners.

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