

Race and Education Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
With
Gloria Gcotyelwa Piliso
By Nyree Addison, John Morrow, Lucy Richman
Funiwe Senior Secondary School, King William's Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa
August 24, 2015

Interview with Gloria Gcotyelwa Piliso (N)

Interviewed on August 24, 2015

Location: Funiwe Senior Secondary School, King William's Town, SA

Interviewers: Nyree Addison, John Morrow, Lucy Richman (I)

Language: English

I: First can you state your name for the camera please?

N: My name is Gloria Gcotyelwa Piliso. I stay in 10 Harmer Close, King Williams Town, South Africa.

I: And what's the name of your school?

N: The name of the school is Funiwe Senior Secondary School. It is situated in the area called Qhuru. Yes.

I: Okay. And how do you think your students are doing in school right now?

N: In terms of academic performance?

I: Yeah.

N: Yes, they are doing very well. And as we know most of the area... the people from this area are from a poor background but we do our best because they know that education is the way out of poverty.

I: And do you think that where they come from affects their education?

N: Yes it does because you'll find out that most of their parents – those who stay with their parents – they are illiterate so they cannot help with the homework. And some even

they do not have water, electricity; they only come to see those things once they come to school. So it does affect them a bit.

I: Okay, and what do you think makes your school successful?

N: It is the attitude of the teachers, teamwork of the teachers, support from the parents, having the same vision with the parents, and also the kids. The kids themselves are willing to do their best because they know that education is their ticket out of poverty.

I: And what problems does your school have?

N: We do have problems because there are some kids who are heading their families – their parents died – so there are sort of child headed families. There's no one to give guidance, so we as teachers with one help from the parents we also intervene in such cases where if they do not get food we make food parcels for them because the government does give us an allowance to buy food for the learners so we make it so that we can look after them in that way and also academically.

I: Also, do you find that your students have a tough time going to school? Would they walk to school, or take a bus?

N: Fortunately, the government came on board. They've got a school transport. So there are buses and taxis and they take them from various stops and they come to school.

I: How new is the bus system?

N: It has been operating for the last three to four years. I'm not sure, but three to four years, yes.

I: And how would students get to school before the buses?

N: They used to walk long distances. And if its winter we had to allow them to go home earlier because it gets dark earlier and anything could happen and it has been happening for so many years, yes.

I: Okay. And what do you think are the most important factors for improving student achievement at your school?

N: Its all about attitude, being willing to learn, and just doing your best. Its all about those. Your background doesn't feature. You just have to make a choice to say that I'm going to do this and I'm going to do it well. That's it.

I: And do you know the pass rate in your school?

N: The last three years... can we pause a bit?

[Narrator leaves to retrieve pass rate information, returns with numbers]

N: Okay, you can ask me the question again.

I: Alright, so what is the pass rate at your school?

N: 2011 we had our lowest in the matrices, it was 56%. 2012, 86%. 2013, 96%. 2014 it was 90%. I'm happy to tell you the strategies that we used to move from the 56% to the nineties. We decided that our matric are going to stay in and sleep here – this is not a boarding school – sleep here at school. We organized mattresses. We said the kids do not have enough time to study at home. They are being disturbed. Either they are being disturbed because there is no quiet place because the huts are small or there is no food. So we decided as the [UNSURE] school management with the teachers, our kids are going to sleep here. They will sleep here at school. We organized mattresses and we cooked for them. The aunties cooked for them and we said there is only one thing that we have to do in this premises. This place is for studying and nothing else. Your worries

that are happening here in your family they are none of your business. Whatever is happening out of these premises is none of your business. Your business is to study and they did that and it has been working wonders for us.

I: Also, I noticed that you said that you got the bus system three or four years ago. So I noticed that 2011 your pass rate was 56% - do you think that enacting the bus system also improved achievement to the 86%?

N: Yes because sometimes if it's raining and the rivers are full, they cannot come. But now there are some improvements even from their communities where small bridges have been built so they can cross over. Yes it has an impact for them to have the bus system. They are not coming to school very tired having walked so much and then also not having enough food to eat.

I: Okay, and also how did your school get the bus system by the government? Because I know a lot of the schools we've been to are fairly rural schools as well, and they don't have a bus system, so what made your school different in order to get a bus system, do you think?

N: There is a formula they work with. They will say that if we have children living such and such kilometers away from school, they qualify. And the fact that we're in the rural areas we qualify automatically because the roads around this area are not so good and also there is no transport. So by virtue of being a rural area type of school, we qualified.

I: Yeah, also one thing that I found interesting that you said is that you guys... how your students live here sort of, that they sleep here. Does the government know about it, or did you guys just decide to do it on your own? Do you know other schools that have done that, or is it just your school?

N: We did not get permission from the government. We did not even ask them. It was our own initiative. Most of the schools around here are doing that because they saw it

from us that it gives the results that we want. And ultimately because our results are improving, so they sent somebody from the provincial office of education: 'what is this that you are doing because we have noticed a trend that you are doing so well.' We told them. As a result, last year they gave us a sponsor, like stamps, to buy it at our various supermarkets to help with the kids when they're writing exams. Otherwise it was our own initiative.

I: And also do the teachers stay after school as well?

N: Yes, we have a roster once they start. And today around half past ten we are having the parents of our Metrics – they will be here giving us permission to allow these kids to stay here. So the teachers we have a roster. You come to work and when the school goes out a few, maybe four teachers will stay behind to check that the systems are going, they are studying, they are eating, everything is in order. And then at night their own parents they sleep over and watch over them. So its us, the parents, and the kids. At night from six to six the following morning the parents will sleep over: two males and two females. And then when we come in about half past seven, the parents, they go home and then we take over like that. It's not only us, the teachers, but the community is helping us a lot.

I: Also, I know that probably staying after school for some learners, I know that probably impacts their achievement as well because they can't keep up with everyone else.

N: Yes, of course. And the fact that we also have our own meetings we have discovered that some are not on the same level with the others. You take time, your own time, to make it a point that you bring them on board. It helps a lot.

I: So the teachers have to take their own time to help the slow learners in order for them to catch up with everyone else?

N: Yes, and that is what we are doing throughout our day, even today I'm staying behind. The school gets out at half past two but I will be here until 3:30 to be with my

group, they know that if they have not done well some will ask what was the problem and what can we do and we will go over that so they are not left behind. Because we are still aiming for 100%. We have not yet achieved that. We want all our matrics to pass but so far we have not done that but we know it is going to happen soon.

I: Okay and also do you find that kids drop out or does the same class just pass towards the next grade? DO you find that some kids drop out of school?

N: Those who drop out, I would say they are in the lower grades, grades 8 and 9, because of pregnancy, nothing else. Because in grade 12, our matrics, whether you are pregnant are not you are allowed to come to school and to write a submission so they do not drop out as such.

I: And why do you find that some of the 8th graders become pregnant?

N: Come again?

I: Why do you find that the 8th graders become pregnant?

N: How do I find out?

I: Why are they pregnant at such a young age, do you think?

N: They do get pregnant because it's an end. It's a way to end something because once you have a baby the government is going to give you a sponsor, which you call grants, for your child. So most of our grade 8 and 9s are sort of in a subtle way encouraged to get pregnant by the elder people in their family because if, let's say, we have a whole family that is not working they only rely on the younger kids to get pregnant to get grants from the government. And that grant would buy food for the entire family. So it is in a subtle way but it is still happening.

I: And what would you say to your students who are getting pregnant at such a young age? How would you encourage them to continue with school?

N: I will always tell them that I understand you are young, these are maybe your mistakes, but it is your journey that you have to go, but if you are to get out of the poverty that you are in, at this point in time, education is the only way that I can say will help you. But I know for a fact that I might have counseling sessions with them, their parents have an upper hand because they are parents, always. And I even say to them, if you're pregnant come to school – its allowed – come and get your education, because its going to take you to places.

I: Yeah, I know that you were a psychology major and a psychologist and social worker, and I know that in another school we went to one of the teachers said that its crucial to have a psychologist for some of the children to succeed. How do you find that when students come to you as a psychologist that you help them? How would you help them as a psychologist?

N: I'm also a school counselor so what happens is that, well let me give you a scenario. There was one child who was very brilliant and he was doing very well then after the second term I began to notice that the grades were getting lower and lower. So I called him to my office, what was the problem? Then I heard that he is staying in a child headed family, he is the oldest one so he is looking after his sibling s and also there is no one else at home and then how do you manage? How do you get something done? Who's giving you food? No one. You look at him in his uniform and you cannot really see that there is anything going on but his grades gave me an indication that something is going on and I went to the principle who wrote a letter to SASA. And SASA, they look after the kid's programs and SASA, they give an amount of money every month and food passes, and it went back to normal.

I: If there was one thing that you could change about your school to make it better, what would you change? How would you change your school to make it better for student achievement?

N: I would... how I wish that the learners from this area would really understand and take seriously the value of education because when you see the areas that they are coming from, the houses in their condition, their only way out is through education. If they really focus on that, I think it would be better for everyone.

I: Do you think that people from this area have fewer opportunities than people from say, East London or the Bhisho area?

N: Yes, yes, yes, yes, because they are coming from this area it also has to do with their low self esteem. I'm going to give you an example. We had a debate, our matrics had it and they won the debate so they were supposed to go compete at Bhisho High. The learners from Bhisho High, their mothers are nurses, teachers, doctors, and even being from the types of houses they have with cars at home and everybody's working. So our learners, their self esteem sort of sinks when they meet learner who sort of have everything. You can see that they go back into their shell and it really does affect them.

I: Do you find that there is racial discrimination at your school?

N: Not really because we don't have, we are all, most of us are predominantly Xhosa speaking people so there's none.

I: Okay, if you could get more funding for your school, what would you do with it? Would you use the money for your facilities or would you hire more teachers? What would you do if you had more funding in your school?

N: First, I would try and organize a functional library. We tried to have a library in our all but because we do not have enough space we had to abandon it to make it a hall so they can take exams there. I would have a functional library because books widen ones

horizon. Books will take you places you've never been, especially for kids coming from this area. And secondly, I would organize some extra rooms for them to sleep in because when they start sleeping over they use their classrooms. If I could have just two buildings for girls and boys and let them share a shower and a kitchen so that when it's nearer to exam time they could have a proper sleeping place rather than sleeping on their desks in their classrooms. That I would use and the teachers part as much as I feel it is our responsibility it is the government's responsibility to hire teacher. But for the funding I would simply focus on having their sleeping places and the library.

I: I know you said that books around this area are really important do you have a lot of resources here or do find yourself as a teach having to teach without enough resources?

N: No we do not have a functionally library, but what we do I'm also an English teacher, but what we do we bring our own magazines the magazine we buy for our own use. So I bring them over for them to read for fun. And also if they have projects in their other classes they can get their pictures to make collages and whatever they need to do. Most of us we do bring our magazines and even newspaper so that they can read.

I: And do you have enough textbooks in class?

N: Textbooks yes the last three years there has been an improvement, because the government gives us textbooks. They used to arrive at the end of the year and we used to complain at least now they are arriving at the beginning of the year even December before we close we get our stationary and our textbooks so we start the year on a good note.

I: Approximately, how many students are in a class, one classroom?

N: Plus minus 60 to 70.

I: 70 students.

N: Yes, it is a lot you can't even move around. It's a lot.

I: Wow. How do you monitor where every student is? Cause there is so many.

N: You have to make it work. You have to be there we know them by their name 60 as they are we have to make it work no excuses as that.

I: How many students are in each grade total?

N: 100, yes.

I: So you mentioned that the students would sleep over their Metric year. Is that for their entire Metric year or just leading up to exams?

N: Leading up to exams we cannot afford to do it for the whole year because it involves cooking for them food extra food and all that we used to we usually do that like from tomorrow the last quarter they will be sleeping here until because they start writing their exam October around about 28 of October so from tomorrow they will be sleeping over.

I: And so the students who are suppose to sleep here but are maybe the heads of your households at home are they still able to sleep over?

N: Yes they are because you will notice we those kids will be looked after by their neighbors while this one whose in Metric is at school. So the neighbors will be looking after while even the food percale will be sent to other learners to the neighbors. They will look after the smaller once watch for them until this one comes back because they know he's here at the school we write letter and ask them to do that.

I: so in the past couple year your school has changed dramatically so how do you see your school change in the next 5 to 10 years?

N: It is going to change for the best because the result we've been having it has been improved, but this year we have been working for quality results instead we have our grade level 7 which is the distinction learners we still have a few plus minus 10 learners that get distinction in there subject. The others are more between 60 and 50 from 60 and above but what we are working for if we have 100 let all those 100 if we can get distinction because they are competing with kids form Bhisho who are doing very well and they have all the resources so when they have to get sponsors it because a problem and we have to do all the work here for them.

I: Ok. After the Metrics where do you see your students going to university, or getting a job?

N: Most of them they have gone to university. Most of them are doing very well. As a result they have start giving back to us because last year we got donations from them, which amounted to plus minus 10,000R. That is the money we used to buy the mattress most of them are doing very well they are in the government other are in have their own businesses yes they are dong very well. And what is so surprising they used to be shy having low self esteem issues but once they go out to the university and success now they come out the way they come out I unbelievable. And it shows that once you do well you have confidence in yourself and then the world is your oysters and you just want to do good. Yes you turn out very well.

I: That's good. Okay well thank you so much that was really helpful. Are there any questions that you have for us?

N: Not really. You know what there are two schools here it's our school Funiwe and then another school is Welcomewood. This school is situated about 200 KM from here but it was not functioning well there was no principal, the systems was not working there were no results metric sit for exam and then no one will pass the department decided to take them from there and take them here.

I: Was that recent?

N: It happened earlier one in March. So those kids we had to bring them here now it is such a load. There were teachers there but they were not taught so if we are teaching if I'm teaching something for the whole week now it will take two weeks because those kids do not know anything so we have a backlog we are trying to make it work we will see the results at the end of the year. So the department said fine Funiwe you've been doing well help this school and we say how can we help them let them stay where they are then we can come over and we can teach afterward, and they said no we want those teachers to see what you are doing that is working. So we really that is why everybody is here that is why we are such a big school now it's two school under one administration.

I: So basically they doubled the population but the amount of teachers are the same?

N: No, the teachers who were teaching there are here, but they have not been working so it was a struggle but now they are getting better.

I: That's good. Do you find that in your class the kids that came from Welcomewood are behind now, do you find that some of them stay after school as well?

N: They have to. They have no choice because they can see that they are not coping in the results in June they are not good but you always tell them it is all about attitude, change your attitude be willing to do what works and then you will be fine.

I: Ok thank you. I think we got everything. So can we have you will out this consent form?

N: Yes.