

Race and Education Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
With
Mrs. Xoli Grootboom
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King Williams Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa
August 25, 2015

Interview with Mrs. Xoli Grootbom (N)

Interviewed in August 25, 2015

Location: King Williams Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Interviewer: Lucy Richman (I)

Language: English

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I: So as you know we are learning about the South African education system and our group in particular is focusing on student achievement. So just to start off can you state your name and what your role in the education system is?

N: I'm a teacher by profession. I started teaching in 1985 and I've been teaching matrics the past 28 years. But since last year and this year, I've moved to the lower grades to give my new learners at high school a base because we in our department, the accounting department, felt learners come from primary schools without the knowledge of what EMS is – Economic Management Society. In the primary section, there is no dispensation but in high schools you teach what you have specialized in. What your majors were. We felt giving a new teacher new learners sometimes gives us a problem because she is new in the teaching community and she gets new learners from other school's primary section to high school. Therefore an old horse is seen as [unclear] to teach for them to get a base. I'm currently teaching grade 8's and 9's.

I: What is the name of the school you're teaching at?

N: I'm teaching at (unclear) primary school in the King William's Town district. Eastern Cape.

I: Overall in your school, how do you feel your students are doing academically?

N: I can rate my school as *the* school in the district. Why? We have got most learners in our area. Most learners from all the different areas are there in one school. Most of the schools are closed to be specific. Because of the caliber of the school we are, discipline

so each parent wants each child to be in my school. So as a result, now we are getting more applications for next year. Each parent wants the child to be in my school. So in the district we are doing so well except for 2010. 2010 was the worst year. We were under 50% for the Matrics. Which is something that we don't get. We have expectations to perform. That's why; I think that is one of the reasons why my school is performing. Just yesterday there was an orals – the examination has started already - the languages, the Xhosa and English languages. They are doing Xhosa as a first language and English as an additional language. So before they write their exams in September, some of them must (unclear) orally. So yesterday it was the oral examination for grade (unclear). Not all learners participate but few learners are taken to do the oral exam so that the entire mass belongs to all of them. It's a group type of thing that is happening.

I: You said not all of the year 12's would take these trial exams. How do you decide who does and who doesn't?

N: Everybody, every learner has to write and do the trial exam, it's the requirement. Because part of the marks will be added to the November/December examinations. No learner will write an examination in November without having written in September, June, and March – that's the requirement.

I: And do you think having these trials helps them do better on the final?

N: Exactly. Just like now, there are evening classes that they are getting in. They are getting on right now. Because, we feel they must be engaged. In fact, they are there themselves. There's no teacher there at this time. It's them that are doing these extra classes during the night. There is a specific time. So there's a discipline that is... there's also discipline. Whatever the students will write, the teachers will know. You see? The parents are also in the know because there are meetings before whenever something is to take place in our school. The parents have to know. So it does help really, because they are going to write on Friday until the end of September, then close schools for September. But during the holidays, that week, my school is not going to be

closed. Revision is going to take place – and for everybody, not only for those that have done badly, for everybody. Then we teach, we open, and we teach about a week again. It's not proper teaching except doing again their revision. Then thereafter the examination, the full examination, it starts again. That is early October until November. So by December no one is at school. No grade 12 learner is at school. By that time, teachers are now preparing to go and mark. That's how it is done. Teachers have to apply according to subjects. I cannot go and mark maths because I don't teach maths and I'm not involved in maths. Because I am teaching grades 8 and 9, I am not going to mark at the end of the year because I know the subject. I must be involved. That's how we do it. So the teachers are going to be employed according to experience, you see. Then they are going to be scattered all over the Eastern Cape because schools are closed. There's going to be centers for each subject. For example, Xhosa is marked in Umtata. How many learners are here in the whole Eastern Cape so at their school one teacher is employed, two or three teachers are employed, but to mark the grade 12 question papers until they are finished. There is a specific time area for results to be out. First week January... last week December. Depends.

I: And so you said that a lot of the schools have been closed. What criteria does the government use to decide when a school is at a point where they should close it?

N: You see, we as teachers in the school, we don't make the decision. We get all the information from our districts. I believe that they are people that are employed to say schools are going to be open for so many weeks but then only so many days per week, you see. Taking into account that there are public holidays involved in those weeks... So not us, but I think it's the education planners. We as teachers we just teach according to the specified instructions that are given to us.

I: And those specified instructions, do you feel like those prohibit you from teaching the way you want to teach, or do you feel that they're pretty good?

N: Sometimes we feel... we are not okay with all what they do... with the planning. Because we plan according, I mean we teach according to their plan. Sometimes what if my learners do not understand what I am teaching and then I lag behind because I have not taught them all. In fact they have not grasped whatever I teach. So we are not always at par with what the department is giving us to do. You see what they want whenever they come and do the inspection, they expect me to do what is in the paper. I cannot. I cannot... we feel that they make us robots. You see? Because the learners most of all, they come from different backgrounds. You see sometimes a learner is upset for about a week without having been reported, we don't know the problem. When the child comes, how will the child know what I've been teaching? You see? In the meantime whiles I was still busy with this one who was upset who had [unclear]... What about the others? They are waiting for this one. You see? But in the meantime we give them work, or to keep them busy with something, you see? Just now today there was a program in my school, it was a casual day. Part of grade 8 and grade 9 learners were not at school. They were in Bisho with [unclear name], okay, performing. That's part of what the department is planning for us. You see? It was the creative arts teachers with the subject advisor. The subject advisor is not at school, but the subject advisor is in the department of education, you see? So those teachers are obliged to leave school, and my learners, to go and attend. Now what about the others that are left? And I as an EMS educator, I was left at school. I have to teach those that are left at school, and then the other [unclear speech}... "Ma'am? Are you going to teach something new?" I said "No." Because she was torn between them. She wanted to be there but she also wanted to leave behind, you see? So That is why I say we don't always agree with what they are saying to us. Do you understand?

I: Yes.

N: Yes, and when you do have students that are lagging behind what do you do to help them get caught up.

I: That is why we have the extra classes in the afternoon, in the mornings, you see. so once you let them write something it's them that will detect that they don't understand. you call the parents you let the parent know that so and so standard is not what is expected for the grade. Sometimes you see the child feels that she or he is not treated fairly when he has to stay behind and do the work or be given extra work so that i see that he understands this, you see. The involvement of the parent is needed that is why we call the parent so that we don't let the parents know that at the end of the term that the child has performed this. Because the parents will have questions why has the child not performed. Some patience you need to call the parents not that the child is behind because he does not understand it is because the problems at home for instance. That's how things are done you see.

N: Is there a lot of parent involvement at your school?

I: Yes. first of all there is a governing board. How this governing board is chosen there is a meeting that is called. So that they elect the parent they themselves elect the parents. Those parents are going to know they are going to govern the school with the teachers, with the management of the school. So whatever happens at school the parents know. Then they reporting will always be done when there is a parent's meeting. Each term there are meetings that are set aside for the parents to know what are taking place at school what's going on, who does this, why is something is not done. Even the learners that are not doing or performing well at school this needs to be reported to the parents. So that is the parent's duty to talk to other parents about their children's score.

I: So then do you feel like parent involvement has an impact on student achievement?

N: Very much. In term when the child is to be expelled. We don't expel the child alone as teachers that is agreed upon in the meeting situation with the STG the student government board. So whoever does something against the school rules, impacts the school negatively. So that type of a learner needs to be caught, pardoned. You see so no one wants to be expelled because of the behavior. So it does have...

I: But say not in terms of behavior but in terms of their grades. If a student is struggling and you call their parents, will the parents generally help the student improve?

N: For instance, in my area not all parents are learners, not all parents are enlightened, so they are not able to help. Because one problem in my school is the learners that stay with their grandmother. Their parents are working for us for you. For whoever they are employed in different types of jobs you see. So how will an old lady know she is not learned herself. So whatever we are doing at school the parent does not know. Some do understand what is taking place, but they can't help their child. So they could see that the child is not doing what is expected. Some do come to school to say us i have notice this that that that is this the way is this that. Some they just leave the children.

I: And so for the students that tend to lag behind and don't have so much help at home, is there a large dropout rate at school?

N: Yeah, very much. There's a lot of drop out not because of of not understand the schools. There many areas, pregnancy for instance. teenage pregnancy is life. It is life in my school. you could see the reason why they are not staying with their proper parents. Automatically, the old granny would sleep then the child will [unclear]. Not because of the school work that makes them to drop out. Pregnancy. It's because of use of substance abuse, and how should I call it. And lack of parenting. I think yeah lack of parenting in the sense that whether the child is coming to school or not lack of parenting, so that type of parenting is giving the school a problem. Automatically the child will not last. You see. Sometime the child comes from the [unclear] so we teach such learners. we got emotional problem, my mother isn't at home, my father has this this this that. We are staying with, we have gone home, out of home because my mother is gone, my father isn't working. It's only my mother is working. When my mother gets home my father is always drunk. This, this you see. Such problems.

I: And does your school have a system such a counselor to help some of these students that come to school with some of these issues?

N: Let me talk about my school per say. We don't have a counselor at school but there are committee that are made out of all the teachers at school. For instance, there is a welfare committee. Once it detects there is a problem with the child in grade so and so we need to go and report to the welfare committee they will take charge. How? They will investigate the problem interrogate the child involve the parent if the parent is there. Call both parents some will come some will not come. There is social development in the department in our government which also help the school because there are social workers there. Each area has been allocated in social work. Let me be honest, they sometime do and follow the work, sometime they not. You will have to take them they will tell you do many stories no car available. Too much work on one person. so many problem you see. Otherwise there is no social worker that is available in my high school. Except the department of social development that has social workers. That works hand and hand with the department of education helping these learners those are some of the challenges we as teachers think needs to be addressed by the department. we feel school should have a social worker because the teachers become social workers they become doctors they become parents. For example, what do I mean by workers. A child becomes sick I have to take the child to the clinic with my car leaving other learners behind. Fortunately, we have a clinic in my area in my location where my school is. What about those schools that do not have clinic right there so they have to travel. Something that the [unclear] cannot leave the child in that type of situation, you have to attend to the child. And then take the child to the clinic which refer the child to the hospital. Who take the child with the ambulance the teachers, no one pays for the transport you see we do that because of passion. We don't feel like we are doing extra job that somebody else's job. You see sometimes there are not telephone in schools we use our own telephone to inform the parent that so and so is sick. This this the situation is like this ok. so that's why i say we become social workers we become doctors, we also become police, women or policeman. Why? When there is a dispute in our school what do we do? These learners they carry lots of [unclear] in this school? They bring substance abuses? We have to

reprimand sometimes when a child is high. You automatically have to be above the child you see so that the other have to be protected. That is the kind of life we as teachers have.

I: So how would you go about disciplining a student who does come to school high or bring the weapon to school or even just some other sort of bad behavior?

N: One, they should not be fighting at school because teach class should be at peace. Students are not left alone, you see. So the very person that's supposed to be there. She or he has to take the matter up. Children fighting in front of you, you take the child to the office where the principal is. The principal is going to call the class teacher. Because each class belong to a certain teacher. I am the subject teacher not the class teacher. so if something happens during my period, I have to take the matter to my office. It is the office that is going to call the class teacher. The class teacher is going to engage the parent. The parent has to come to school the following day. The matter will be resolved if it needs to be resolved. But if the matter needs the SGB, then it goes to the higher office that is the SGB. If the child has to be expelled, then both the parents and the teachers and the SGB should know what has taken place.

I: And I know some of the schools we've been to have talked about issues with teachers not showing up when they're supposed to and lots of classrooms being empty due to shortage of teachers. Is that the case at your school and if so, how do you manage that?

N: We are 24, to be exact. We are 24. We have got... stream one is commission, stream two is social sciences, stream three is sciences. So, we feel that we are understaffed. There are lots of learners. For instance, in grade 8 we've got three classes. 166 learners.

I: Per class?

N: No, all of them. All of them. So we've got 70, 80 learners in one class. They're cramped. You see? So it is a problem really to all the schools in this decade. It is a problem. It is really a problem. For example, I have, what, three grade 8s. I'm teaching the MS grade 8s. I've got two grade 9s. Teaching the MS. I've got three grade 8s teaching creative arts. Do you understand? So it's the same person preparing how many times? 3 times. Some are teaching maths, physics, and life sciences - different grades. You don't teach only maths in grade 8s and that's the end of the story. You see? That is the problem. The problem is the question of teachers not being employed. You see? The problem is with the system of education.

I: And so if you could change a few things about the system, what would you change?

N: If I was there?

I: Yes, if you were in charge, what would you change?

N: Okay. What I mean, first of all, I would say learners are grouped according to age. Because, let me say, in one class we've got different ages in one class. I take pity for those that are very young. Thirteen-year-olds and twenty-year-olds are in one class.

I: Why does that happen?

N: Uhh the problem is that the child has been in the primary school for *so* many years now they feel that the child is old to be in the primary school, you see? Whether he qualifies to be in high school or not, because of the age cohort, he has to be sent to high school without us telling that this child is old, you will get to know during the course of the teaching that [unclear] something is wrong with this boy. And sometimes you'll say, "How old are you?" and he'll say "I'm 20 years," and then the others would frown that we are in the same class as... because the problem is that child has not been rerouted to where he belongs. That's the first problem. That's why I'm talking about the age in the schools. I mean, no child... and in our case and in our society as amaXhosa the boy is no

longer a boy, the boy is a man because he has been taken to the bush. So now he exercises the manhood in class whilst the others are still boys. And they would call that boy "Booti" [spelling?], you see? Because he does not want to be called by his name, you see? That is the problem: having to send certain learner, you mix that learner with the young ones - what would happen in the absence of the teacher? Or when they are in the playfields? What are they teaching each other? You learn during the course of teaching that something is happening here. They are no longer the small kids that they were at the beginning of the year. Something has changed. There is a teacher here, you see? Automatic that child is not going to pass at the end of the year, because he does not do the work. You see? In other words, that child is ineducated. He does not belong to be in this school. He belongs somewhere... I cannot say that this child belongs somewhere. It would be as if I am discriminating the child. The parent would come there shouting doing this and that, I'll be reported to the Department of Education because the children who [unclear] mother, the teacher. I wouldn't suggest that this is not the right school for the child. Can you see the problem?

I: Yeah.

N: Those are the things that needs to be changed. Because when they send the learners in my school at the beginning of the year we should have their whole profile, that so and so is like this, so and so is so much... if we don't admit that child, we would be asked the reason. Because they don't send us the scores, how much - we just receive the report. Who knows if the report is authentic or not?

I: And what information does the report give you?

N: It gives me that somebody has got so many marks, so many marks, the child is good good good good good. But teach that child, you get to know that one, he cannot write. I'm talking this honestly, the child cannot construct even one sentence. You see, my principal, I had to take some scripts to the principal to show that what is this, how can you mark this? The child makes his consonants... I mean, there's no way to write with

consonants only, without vowels. I don't know, but in my language, it's a consonant vowel, a consonant consonant vowel. Its vowels all the time. Consonants all the time, you see? Let's take the "you". Why you? It's a Y-O-U. So it's the consonant and the two vowels. The spelling problem, you see? Because of these gadgets, our learners are not writing good spelling anymore.

I: So you mentioned you've been teaching since before 1994, when schools were integrated in the curriculums were changed - um, what do you think about those changes?

N: I'm the victim. Because I started teaching having taught at the college, yes? Within no time the education system changes. I have to be taken for a training of about two to three weeks and then government expects me to teach the way the new system is. Do you think that I will do justice? I will never. I will use the old system and mix it with the new system. Do you understand? Changing this education isn't that, isn't that... Let me tell you about Luto, my child. During her... Luto was doing in grade, grade 10. 10. She was doing another, this system because it was introduced to her. I am a teacher. When she wrote her Matric, the system she started with, eh, did not allow her to write the Matric in the new system. It was something that I don't know. I don't know what was happening. She would ask me questions, "Mama I'm doing OBE." OBE OBE, but the certificates were not in OBE in Matric. And then I learned that they have gone back to the old system. And then in the other years from OBE we went to NCS - National Curriculum Statement. Fine, but we have changed now again. The same teacher who was introduced to OBE has been changed to NCS, has been changed to CAPS. The same person. Do you think that is fair? This demoralizes every teachers. You see? This changing of the systems all the time, all the time. We feel its not fair on the part of the teacher as well as on the part of the child because not everybody will do justice. Do you understand what I'm saying?

I: Mhmm, yeah.

N: So those... If I was also... If you were to ask me what other changes, why not stick to one, to one system? Why not stick to one system? In my case, I did not feel that I was taught in an inferior system. I did not feel that. I did not feel it. Here I am today. I understand everything that is happening. And this is the question why parents are having. They do not understand this changing, this changing because they would hear this changing, these changes through the media. The parents are not called. You see? And when I look at schools there are books and books and books of different systems of educations that are there. You see? How is that?

I: That's tough. Do you feel though that the new system is still preparing students for life after school?

N: Yes, it does. It does. For those who want to learn. It does. I was looking at my child's school on Saturday, on Sunday evening when we went from your place. Although she was showing us, she was making fun of what was in her phones, I as a teacher could see that this child has learned something from school. The child, during breaks at prep, at school, would, uh, imitate the news readers on TV. This child would imitate the weatherman, you see? The way she changes her voice to be a male, the way she changes her voice to be a presenter, a woman presenter, she is not reading from a paper, but she is creating those [unclear] but you could see that this child knows where she wants to go. She wants to be a journalist, so though this system of education is good - it's good, it is good - but it should have come very early, even with us, you see? Even with us. Because in my days we were prepared to be teachers, to be police, policemen, policewomen, to be nurses, you see? you see? But today, there are different spheres that our children can be. You see?

I: Absolutely.

N: You see?

I: Well I think we're about done, I want to say thank you so much, we've gotten so much from this. I really appreciate you sitting down with me for this, this was really great. Is there anything else you think we should –

N: My mother. I was not asked by my mother what I want to be in life. I chose to be a teacher instead of being a nurse. Excuse me. [side conversation with Narrator's daughter] You see? So in my case, with my children, I never said you must, you have to be this and that. Luto, for example, she wanted to be an administrator. She is an administrator. You see? She said "Mama I want to follow human resource management courses. I want to work with people. I want to work in a factory. I want to work in a government office." That's who she is.

I: That's wonderful.

N: And my boy, I never chose a university for him. He did that on his own. He wanted to follow this and that, this and that, this and that. And even diverse subject that they didn't chose for them, they chose the subject for themselves. That is what is happening even today. They start doing grade 8 and 9 with the same subjects, but once in grade 10 that's where the streaming starts. They follow the social subjects, the economics, and the physics. You don't tell them. It's just that. [side conversation with Narrator's daughter] You see, you don't tell them what to do because you are teaching them, you are teaching them Xhosa, English, Maths, EMS, Natural Sciences, History, Geography, Arts and Culture, Life Orientation. Those are the nine teaching subjects that we teach there. The reason is it gives the child the opportunity to say which out of these nine subjects, the streaming will come out of 9, once in grade 10, it's then the child knows that I want to follow this. And out of following this we teach them that these are the types of courses that you will do once you finish the Matric. So this really prepares them, even the parents are being called that so and so is choosing this, you need to discuss this at home. Before they'd go to grade 10, this is in grade 9 at the end of the year, just before the end of the year. So that the following year, once they get into grade 10, the child knows exactly. And we guide the parents that the child must not look at friends, that they

are doing this stream. It depends on your, on the child's strength. No child will have to do maths and physics once she knows that natural sciences were her greatest problem. You get the point.

I: Yeah, yeah.

N: That's why I say this type of system is helpful. You see, in my case, that's how I see it.

I: Yeah. Well thank you so much for sharing that with me, that's really valuable. That's a really different perspective; it's great to hear it. So I think that's probably everything, so I guess I'll stop this.

[End of Transcript]