



Mirriam Vinger

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On Sundays, the Africa Ethiopian Baptist Church in Mbekweni, outside Paarl, is filled with congregation members, singing hymns of praise and worship and enjoying fellowship under God's word. However, first thing on Monday morning, a group of women gather to pack away the chairs and prepare the venue for the large group of energetic preschoolers who attend Monwabisi Educare during the week.

One of these women is Mirriam Vinger, principal of Monwabisi Educare. For this 51-year-old mother of two, her love of children extends beyond the classroom. "I love children with all my heart. That is why I have four children from various homes living with me at the moment," Mirriam explains. Her own children are grown up and have moved out of home so she made her home available to four teenagers who were unable to stay with their families. "I like the children to be happy. I wake up at five o'clock in the morning to put the heaters on so that the house will be warm when they wake up. Then I make them tea."

Mirriam began working in the early

childhood development field in 1985 when she and her husband lived in what was then called, the Orange Free State. "I like children to be educated so that they can achieve what they want to in life. That is why I always enjoyed teaching," Mirriam explains. When she moved to Paarl with her children she became a temporary farm worker, but soon realised it wasn't for her. "I knew God wanted me to teach so I started Monwabisi Educare."

Mirriam is more than the local preschool's principal. She is a pillar in her community where she chairs the Mbekweni ECD Forum. "Even though the people here are very poor, I love it here because I believe God put me here for a reason."

Not only is Mirriam in charge of all administrative duties at the school, but she also insists on teaching a Grade R class in between conducting all her principal duties. "I never want to leave teaching because that is how I build relationships with the children." Mirriam goes on to explain how she enjoys changing her teaching themes. "This month we are

focusing on the xenophobia. Even though these children are young they know what is going on around them, so I helped them create a drama about stopping xenophobia."

Miriam recently completed her ECD Level Four qualification through the Centre for Early Childhood Development, and according to her, she enjoyed it "too much!" and wants to study further. "I loved having the opportunity to learn, and am so thankful to my facilitator, Alice Phirime, who is a very humble person."

One of the most beneficial aspects of the course for Miriam was learning about childhood disabilities. "Most of the disabled children in Mbekweni stay at home with their parents and don't get any education because they can't go to normal schools. We have no special schools for them in the area, which is very difficult." Miriam says the course has motivated her to challenge local government to create a

special needs school in the area.

Poverty in Mbekweni is rife. Part of the problem is that most of the people are employed as seasonal farm workers, and thus, they do not have a regular income to rely on. "The parents want to send their children to our educare, but cannot pay the fees," Miriam explains. Monwabisi Educare charges R50 per child per month. This is considerably lower than the average R100 per month charged at preschools in townships in Cape Town. "I try to fundraise the fees, but most of the parents don't attend our meetings so we struggle a lot."

Crime is another problem facing the school, and Miriam says she often worries about the security of the children. "I wish Naledi Pandor could give us better security, and maybe a building of our own," Miriam sighs.

However, Miriam says she cannot complain about her salary and the salaries





of her eight staff members. "We are subsidised by the Department of Social Development, so I am very grateful." The R5000 per month that she takes home is considerably higher than most other ECD teachers working in poorer communities.

Monwabisi Educare is also one of the few underprivileged preschools that has a computer. "It was donated to us, which was a blessing, but I don't know how to use it properly, which is frustrating," Mirriam laughs.

The rain continues to thrash down on the tin roof as Mirriam speaks passionately about the need for quality education. "Our children must be educated if they want a chance to reach their dreams, and we, as their teachers must attend what courses we can so that we can always improve. That is why I am so thankful for getting the opportunity to do my Level Four qualification." With that kind of attitude, one can be assured that the young children of Mbekweni are in very loving and capable hands.

Monwabisi Educare, Mbekweni, outside Paarl

