

*Nonzukiso Mpehle*



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Along a pot hole-ridden road in Nyanga sits a small green building. From the outside it strongly resembles a detention centre with extra thick burglar bars and a large iron gate; however, once inside the atmosphere changes as young children chant songs in unison, while others finish colouring their pictures. "We have to always lock up behind the children because the crime is very bad," Nonzukiso Mpehle explains while opening the wrought iron security gate to the school office. "It is dark here because we have no lights. We have no electricity...only gas."

Soyisile Educare is a preschool situated in one of the rougher sections of Nyanga, a Cape Town township notorious for its high levels of crime. Nonzukiso has been working as an assistant teacher at Soyisile since 2003. "I started volunteering as a fill-in teacher when one of the teachers was absent and I really enjoyed it." When her husband passed away tragically in 2004 leaving her alone with their three small children, Nonzukiso needed to make her position more permanent in order to support her family. "I have always loved

children and I preferred teaching to domestic work," Nonzukiso laughs.

Being an assistant teacher to an energetic group of preschoolers means Nonzukiso's day is kept very full. "I wake up early and make breakfast for my children and prepare them for school. Then I go to school and help the children with breakfast. I run the morning ring and circle play and then we have our daily programme." On an average day, Nonzukiso leaves work at four thirty in the afternoon after which she still has to cook supper for her family and help the children with their homework. "But I always make time to watch *Generations*," she smiles. "It helps me to relax."

Like many of the early childhood development teachers in the area, Nonzukiso never went to a tertiary institution to study preschool teaching. All her lesson plans and discipline methods were taught to her in Learnership programmes offered by the Centre for Creative Education. "I completed an Introduction to Level One, HIV and Aids

training, and I recently completed Level Four." Nonzukiso stresses the value of adequate information regarding HIV/Aids. "Even though I knew about Aids, you can never learn enough. It is so valuable and helps us to help the children."

Besides her HIV/Aids training, Nonzukiso stresses that the skills she acquired on managing disobedient children has really changed the atmosphere of her classroom. "You mustn't always shout at naughty children because their behaviour often tells you about what they might be going through at home," she explains. "Keeping the children busy with activities and teaching through play is also very



important because you want the children to really understand what you teach."

For a woman whose school days were spent in over-crowded classrooms, the individual attention given to her by her Learnership facilitators was both enjoyable and constructive. "They (the facilitators)

*Soyisile Educare,  
Nyanga*







always helped me when I struggled with the work, so I really enjoyed class time.”

Putting what she was taught into action has often proved difficult for Nonzukiso. Due to the lack of electricity the rooms are both dark and cold in the winter and all the cooking happens over the gas stove. The soaring crime levels in the community have left parents feeling unsafe about dropping off and fetching their children from school. “A parent will fetch a child and then the next day you will hear that her cellphone or bag was stolen outside our gate,” Nonzukiso comments before quickly adding, “but the children are very safe when they are in the school”

Soyisile Educare does not have a well-established relationship with their ward councillor which, Nonzukiso explains, makes it difficult for them to forward their complaints to those in authority. The atmosphere between the teachers is sometimes tense especially when methods

taught in the Learnership are put forward for implementation. “The teachers who don’t go on the course are resentful towards those who do go, and they act bored when we talk about what we learnt,” Nonzukiso sighs.

One thing that Nonzukiso has learnt is that you must teach because it is your passion, “because the salary is not good.” However, she says her principal discusses money with her staff frankly, so they understand that they cannot be paid more. “We (the teachers) also make sure that we share our leave because the school doesn’t close for all the holidays.”

Nonzukiso values the relationships that she has with each of the children in her class, “especially the quiet ones because I can understand them.” Her dream is that every pupil will go on to achieve something great in their lives. “I want to give them the best start possible,” she smiles.