

# Perspectives

## on KwaZulu-Natal

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### **Rural communities face immense difficulties in learning English as a second language**

Travelling on the rugged dirt roads through the Mid-Illovo school district, **Cheryl Goodenough** is struck by the many problems associated with providing and obtaining an education in a rural environment, including the total sense of isolation.

The Mid-Illovo area, which includes a valley split by the Umkomaas River and mountain tops surrounded by majestic scenery, is just over an hour's drive from the centre of Durban, but a world away from the urban environment. On the way, I am warned that my arrival at one school might cause some excitement and intrigue because visits, particularly from white people, are uncommon.

The 70 kilometre journey from Umlazi township in the modern city of Durban to the Mid-Illovo district is one travelled by Yise High School deputy principal S'phiwe Mpanza, and other teachers, every day. The trip takes far longer than expected because of the bad condition of many of the roads. But it is a condition that's relative: Prior to the grading of several of the roads, teachers were regularly confronted by impassable muddy patches which resulted in the most determined and dedicated parking their vehicles and sometimes walking a few kilometres to school.

The learners face a similar challenge every day. Some Yise High School students walk 15 kilometres to the school, and, of course, another 15 kilometres home in the afternoon. The walk home is usually extended by a journey to the Umkomaas River where the students fetch water to use at home because they have no access to tap water. Some of the schools have tanks that collect rainwater, but they and the surrounding scattered houses have no electricity or telephones.

Attempts have been made to electrify the area, but there is the perception in some sectors that such modernisation would ruin the traditional culture and customs of the Zulu nation practiced by rural people. Mpanza says the culture of caring and sharing is evidenced by the attendance at school meetings of almost 80% of adults who look after his students. In many cases, the children attending Mid-Illovo schools are living with grandparents or other relatives, their parents having left the rural community in search of moneymaking opportunities in urban areas. Some of the pupils have no adults to care for them and live alone. About 80% of the adults living in area are unemployed. A significant number of children born in the rural community are not afforded the opportunity of attending school. Evidence of this is the large numbers of children seen carrying water and firewood, or herding animals. Aids has had a big impact on the

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community. Not only have parents died from the disease, but also several students, according to a teacher.

In such circumstances learning can be difficult for those who do attend school. More so the learning of a language foreign to them, such as English. There are no libraries at schools or in the community from which books can be borrowed and few households can afford to buy newspapers on even an irregular basis. The schools have few textbooks. In many cases only a teacher has a textbook and much time is spent with the teacher writing passages on the chalkboard and students copying them into their own books.

Encouraging children to speak English in these rural communities is also fraught with difficulties. They are unlikely to be exposed to the language in their daily lives and English teachers in Zulu-speaking areas are seldom regarded highly, particularly in rural traditional communities. Attempts to encourage students to speak only English while at school are often hampered by other teachers who would prefer to teach and converse with students in Zulu.

It is such conditions that have created difficulties for teachers of English as a second language in parts of KwaZulu-Natal. Government officials often neglect rural areas such as Mid-Illovo simply because of the difficult environment. But it is these same circumstances that have brought the community close to the heart of Trish Sims, KwaZulu-Natal co-ordinator of the 21-year-old Secondary Schools English Redevelopment Project (SSERP).

Born to a Greek father and a German mother, Sims grew up in a rural island community in Greece. She knows what it is like to learn English as a foreign language. On her arrival in the United Kingdom, able to speak fluent German and Greek, Sims read "everything from the labels on shampoo bottles to pamphlets". It is an experience that stands her in good stead to inspire and motivate teachers of English as a second language in KwaZulu-Natal schools.

Sims has spent 13 years with SSERP and has been in the KwaZulu-Natal office since 1994. The project also has branch offices in Gauteng and the Northern Province, in addition to the head office in Johannesburg. Initially working in the entire KwaZulu-Natal province, with a particular focus on the former Zululand homeland schools, SSERP in KwaZulu-Natal now focuses its efforts on five regions: Mid-Illovo, Umlazi, Durban, Table Mountain (near Pietermaritzburg) and Umbumbulu (adjacent to Mid-Illovo).

The work of SSERP revolves around the provision of in-service training for teachers of English as a second language. The project aims to re-vitalise English teaching, particularly during the two final years of schooling, Grades 11 and 12, raising the overall standards of English proficiency among teachers and their students leading to improved matriculation results. Another of its objectives is "to foster professional attitudes and a subject-oriented esprit-de-corps among teachers".

Sims says that one of her own objectives has been "to work with the teachers to build up a professional respect for themselves". She says that teachers are often flooded with memoranda and attend masses of meetings, but are largely handed down directives. Discussion processes are lacking and there are few opportunities for teachers to be nurtured and to share with their peers.

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SSERP provides such opportunities through workshops, school visits and the development of teachers' material. Teachers are amazingly willing to engage with this approach through participation in workshops to increase their capabilities, according to Sims. Starting from the time that she came to KwaZulu-Natal, teachers were prepared to stay in "the most appalling conditions" when the first workshops were held in 1995 because these sacrifices were worth what they gained from SSERP.

The teachers get no certificates or financial rewards for attending SSERP's workshops, but they reap benefits by understanding the content of their curriculum in a manner that can be passed on to their students. "It enables them to know what's going on and to be ahead of the changes," Sims says.

Mpanza is based at one of the 150 schools with which SSERP works. He started to teach Grade 12 students in 1998 and was introduced to SSERP in the same year. He says that the English second language results in the final Grade 12 matriculation exam have improved from the average pass rate of between 10 and 15% to 35.5% last year. He's hoping the results will improve further this year.

Other teachers said that those who studied English second language teaching during their studies were not provided with assistance like that given by SSERP while they were at training college. Such support was also lacking in the Department of Education's approach.

One teacher said: "What makes these workshops effective is that they are teacher-driven. Teachers discover, unfold things and empower themselves. It's not secret that schools are without books, but the help of SSERP supplements is tremendous, reading boxes with different comprehension passages, study guides for teachers and worksheets help to empower teachers."

Another teacher says that the learning material has assisted her to understand the content of sections of the curriculum and in turn she can assist the learners. She says that the SSERP courses give teachers the opportunity to share their problems. "You may find that the problems that some teachers have, you have as well. Then you realise that you are not the only one."

The enthusiasm that Sims has for education and for knowledge is evident as she talks about her work, but more especially when she briefly talks to Mpanza's Grade 12 class at Yise High School. Generating discussion about George Orwell's *Animal Farm* she's met with fascination. She is unrelenting in her attempts to get answers to her questions, but has them in fits of laughter when she asks if she can ring the hand-held school bell at the end of the class time. More seriously, Sims encourages the students always to ask questions - "why" is her favourite - and to work hard to achieve their goals. As we leave she ponders about spending two months in the Mid-Illovo district encouraging students to learn, not only the English language, but also about life. Although most of her energy is spent on supporting teachers, rural Mid-Illovo students should be warned not to be too astonished if they find Sims in their classroom one morning.

*Cheryl Goodenough heads Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc.*

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