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Children learn lessons of suffering

TOGETHER with four test administrators, I spent a week testing Grade 3 learners at 17 schools in the Nkandla district of KwaZulu-Natal. This formed part of the Assessment Modelling Initiative project funded by the Research Triangle Institute in the United States. The paper-and-pencil test aims to evaluate learners' performances at the end of the Foundation Phase (Grade 3) and to provide support to educators.

Since 2000, the number of schools participating in the project has grown to 480 in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Northern Cape and the Eastern Cape. In 2003, we tested 17 percent (30) of the 126 sampled schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Nkandla district in KwaZulu-Natal is well known for several reasons: it is the birthplace of South Africa's Deputy President Jacob Zuma and is the home of popular maskandi music and the evergreen Ekhombe forest that houses unique species and promotes eco-tourism.

But for me, Nkandla will forever be associated with abject poverty and the desperation on the faces of the children. Despite government policies, resources and structures to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of education, it seems nothing has filtered down to the poorest of the poor.

We arrived at the first primary school at 7.30am. The school was de-

KGABO MASEHELA conducted a study about schooling in rural KwaZulu-Natal and concluded that if no drastic measures are taken, the children will continue to experience pangs of hunger, inadequate schooling and crippling disease. They will also be broken in mind and spirit

serted although we did pass several learners a few kilometres back. A teacher emerged from a cottage on the school grounds. We explained the purpose of our visit and asked to see the school principal.

"She is not coming today because she is not feeling well," said the teacher.

The children started arriving in dribs and drabs. The bell rang at 8.30am and the children were shivering from the cold. All the windowpanes were shattered in the Grade 3 class. Old pieces of chalkboard covered the back windows. The pot-holed floors had not seen polish in years. Because there was no fence, goats roamed around the school. The test administrator went through the instructions in the manual and the tests got under way.

The principal arrived at 10am. "Why do you attack us?" she asked immediately.

I said our co-ordinator was at the school a few weeks ago as part of informing every sampled school of our visit. I reached for a file containing a form indicating the receipt of letters with the school's stamp on it.

I asked the Grade 3 teacher about the living conditions of pupils.

The level of poverty was "terrible", she said. "Many parents are unemployed and there is no work here. Many people just stay at home and grow dagga in the mountains, then the police arrest them. They just sit at home and drink traditional beer."

I asked about Aids-related deaths.

"No," she said. "People living here don't die of this illness. Those who have Aids get it in Gauteng and Durban. When they come back, they just come to die."

One child wore a threadbare red jersey and worn-out black open sti-

lettos. Her name was Nonkululeko, meaning "freedom".

"Where is your mother?" I asked. She smiled, looking doubtful. The teacher interrupted in English.

"Her mother died three weeks ago and she is not even aware of it."

Another child seemed angry.

I asked: "What would you like to be when you grow up?"

"Alive!" he responded.

Against this background, I could hardly look at the children taking the tests. The results were poor. There was a tremendous gulf between the required skills and their capabilities.

In many cases, learners could not distinguish between an addition sign and a multiplication sign and struggled with the addition of numbers larger than 100 - implying that they did not understand basic arithmetic.

The implications of this gulf were frightening. In one set of tasks,

which learners should be able to answer in Grade 3, these were some of the responses:

$$3 \times 9 = 7$$

$$92 + 8 = 41$$

$$2 \times 8 = 10$$

$$500 - 300 = 400$$

We found a similar response from several learners in nearly every school. At eight of the 17 schools the principal, class teacher, or both, were absent. On average, three teachers in each of the schools, including the principal, were late.

Of the 17 schools tested, only six had active feeding schemes and only two of the five circuits had feeding schemes. Absenteeism and dropout rates were high.

Some teachers were eager to improve conditions at the schools. They asked for advice. I said the priority was to apply for social grants, to start feeding schemes, to do what they could do to plan better and to provide the department of

education with more accurate projected enrolment figures for the next year in advance.

They should order enough education materials, furniture, classrooms and ablution facilities.

"And stop corporal punishment," I pleaded, remembering how I had heard a male teacher (who arrived late) beating children in the class next door.

Where will these children end up, I thought in desperation. Like Jonathan Kozol in *Savage Inequalities*, I concluded that nine years from now, half the class would have dropped out. Eighteen years from now, when they were supposed to be graduating, some would be in prison.

It dawned on me that if these children were not provided with proper education to lead healthy and productive lives, society would suffer. We would pay the price in violence, hijackings and rapes.

I ponder the words of Ali Mazrui on the ultimate carriers of the modern world's "new revolution". In Nkandla, will the carriers of the "new revolution" be the children who could not tolerate the status quo?

I agonised over why a society as rich and frequently as generous as ours would leave these children in such destitution. Children in rural areas deserve the same quality of education as those in affluent suburbs. If the children of politicians were enrolled at these schools, things would definitely change.

At one stage, former education minister Kader Asmal wanted schools to display national symbols like the South African flag to symbolise equality, prosperity and justice. Children from Nkandla would probably not share the entitlements symbolised by the flag.

If no drastic measures are taken, they will continue to experience pangs of hunger, inadequate schooling and crippling disease. They will be broken in mind and spirit unless we, as a caring nation, do something about it.

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There are not enough classrooms in the

