

Race and Education Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
With
Students at ZK Matthews High School
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ZK Matthews High School, King William's Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa
August 20, 2015

Interview with students at ZK Matthews High School

Interviewed on August 20, 2015

Location: ZK Matthews High School, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Interviewers: John Morrow (I), Nyree Addison, and Lucy Richman

Language: English

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(Narrators (N) labeled 1-5 from right to left)

I: I thought to start, I would introduce myself, my name is John, I'm a third year student at our university and I study political science. I know because there are so many of you, you could go around and introduce yourselves, your names and what grade levels you are.

N1: Hi, I'm Sisanda and I'm doing grade twelve here at ZK Mathews.

N2: I'm Alithole, I'm doing grade 10 here.

N3: Okay, I'm Sibusiso and I'm doing grade 9 here at ZK.

N4: I'm Sinovuyo and I'm also doing grade 9.

N5: I'm Aphelele and I'm also doing grade 9.

I: So I thought to start I would ask if you could describe what a typical day is like here, sort of like what goes on here or how the school operates. And anybody can feel free to answer.

N1: Yes, I'll do my best. We come across very difficult challenges at school, every day is a very difficult day because we live in an isolated area and rural areas so its kind of difficult. It's not easy, like the homes we come from are very different and

when we come to school the first challenge is the late coming of the learners because when they come late they disturb some of us who are already in class and we want to concentrate on our studies but they disturb us. And I think we deal with drugs at school every single day. There are drugs. It is hard for us to stay for afternoon classes, even if we want afternoon classes we can't because we have to walk home. And when we walk home to road is very dangerous. In fact, every week the walk home is very dangerous. There are stories of rape, some get stabbed, we fight among our own selves on the walk home. It's very difficult at school but we try our best.

I: Wow, typically how far away do you guys live from the school? Is it a large area?

N1: Some of us live very far away; we walk to Bisho because there is no scholar transport. Some even walk [unclear] kilometer because in Bisho, there is another village outside of Bisho.

I: You mentioned all of these terrible problems, do the teachers at the school try their hardest to handle them or is it out of their control as well?

N1: I think it is out of their control because we report the incidents but there is nothing that has been done about it.

I: Is there sort of a typical day in the classroom? How do students interact? I know you must have a set schedule throughout the day.

N3: Yes.

I: Could you describe what the feeling is in a classroom? Are teachers very disciplined with students? Like what's it like with the different subjects?

N1: I wouldn't say they are disciplined with their students because some of them are not... we don't discipline ourselves, you know? And then the teachers do not try to discipline us too. They fight, fight, and fight too. So its that kind of situation in class but some of them they are best to communicate to us, being parents to us.

I: So what are some of your favorite subjects?

N4: Maths.

N1: Life sciences.

N5: Maths and sciences and English.

I: Your English teacher, is he or she a good teacher?

N5: He is a good teacher.

I: What makes him a good teacher, from your perspective?

N5: Because he explains what he is teaching and also he is an understanding teacher. Yes, that's what I can call him.

I (to N4): And you said maths. What about your maths teacher – is it the same thing?

N4: Yeah it's the same thing. He is a very good teacher. He is good at explaining things.

I: Do you mind telling a story about a day that was really good or a moment in your class that was good?

N3: A day in particular, okay, it was a class in English, an English class. So the teacher was telling us a story about something. It's actually a legend, the story, and so it's actually not true. It was very funny, you know, like everybody was laughing. We even named the teacher [unclear]. The name for that is called Tekwani [spelling?] – I don't know how that is in English but it's a bear. It's an ancient bear so that was one of the coolest moments.

I: I remember some of the best teachers I had did the same thing with me. They told stories, they were funny, they were just like another student in the classroom. But what about on the other side? Is there a teacher you had that wasn't good? Could you tell a story about a class like that where it wasn't as good?

N1: I would say a class that wasn't as nice to me was economics class. The teacher didn't do anything to me but to some of the students like the way she communicated to some of the students I didn't like it. It was not appropriate for a teacher to behave like that. In class, you need to communicate with all the students, all of us. Even though some of the students are slow learners, so they have to help us and make us understand. But this other time, most of the time, I should say, she usually talked to the ones that are fast learners. She even points at them like 'so and so [unclear]'. So even if she asked questions she's going to point to them and then what about the rest of us? Every day when we get to class we know that she's going to point to them every time but we want to try too but it is hard for us because she is saying "no no no you are inactive in class" but she doesn't ask why we are inactive. She doesn't go beyond and research we are we so inactive in class it's because we do not understand sometimes and when we try to understand she says "No, some of you understand so you will get it from them." We're not here for that we're here to learn from the teacher itself. So it's hard for us.

I: You mentioned the difference between the fast learners and the slow learners. Among the students is there sort of... do students try to help each other or is it up to the teachers?

N1: Some of us do try to help each other, we do. Those who want to study, like, if some of us are slow... but if I didn't understand, and I know that she is not going to help me, so we put our heads together like "I didn't understand this and this and this, so can you help out?" and "yes I can" and then you understand it even better when the teacher taught it because she's patient with you, she is not rushing you and she is not shouting at you like "You don't know anything!" I've been saying this over and over again but they don't get tired. We students do not get tired of each other. We sit down with each other and explain things very well.

I: You mentioned that the economics was a class was one that you didn't like and that maths and English were ones that you do. Are those the subjects that then you might want to study further or when you're older do something that relates to English or maths or life sciences, I know you said that was one of your favorites? Since those are the good teachers that you had, are they encouraging you to go into a field that relates to those subjects?

N1: Yes, my life sciences teacher is amazing. She's amazing; she's very patient with every student. We're not the same you know? There are the 80% students who [unclear] and the 30% students. She treats us all the same and not different, she helps us and provides us with everything she can so that we succeed.

I: We've been here for a few days now and have talked to some students from different schools and they've brought up life sciences. I think we have a similar class in the United States, but could you explain what life science is? I know its something we would like to know.

N1: It's biology and the human body. For instance, this year, in grade twelve we learn about the world outside, the environment, the hypothesis, the out of Africa hypothesis. We learn about everything about the world.

I: So since you're in grade twelve you're taking the matric exams right?

N1: Yes.

I: Do you think you might want to go on to university and study something in the life sciences?

N1: Yes I would because it's very interesting. It's everything that is happening around us.

I: Are there fields in the life sciences? What kinds of fields would you like to go in to?

N1: What I would like to study next year is paleontology. Yes, I would like to study it, yes. It's very interesting for me. I love it because it teaches us about history and the history of the world from the apes to the first African human life to us.

I: How about you guys? What are your favorite subjects?

N3: I'll take this one, I actually like social science it's actually a combination of geography and history so it's what I'm prepared to do next year grade 10 history because I like history you know it's actually very exciting you learn something new everyday for example World War II, it's actually interesting because it is a story that goes on and on it has no end you know because maybe today you learn this chapter and the following day you learn this chapter it's actually like a movie to me I take it as a movie or a book it's like something I'm reading I'm interested like what am I going to study tomorrow what am I going to learn.

I: Yeah I agree I think there's this feeling like history is just so boring it's just everything that happens in the past and it doesn't matter you're right it is exciting history happens everyday. I know the Matric exam, graduation exam is that

something you guys in the younger grades think about or is that sort of something that is in the future a couple years ahead?

N5: Yes we it's is something that we think about a lot of people want to just study just because they want to finish grade 12 and just sit down, but we want to study because we want to go further and achieve our dream yes it is something that we think about.

I: Do you think that feeling of, is there a feeling that you guys are just in school just to get to the exam just to pass it or do you feel that there is a personal connection to the work that you are doing? Does that make sense? What do you think?

N1: I think that we've got a personal connection I don't just study to pass I study to keep to keep in my heart to know what is what I love studying it's not something I do just to pass time. I love studying. It's me. I love it.

I: I want to change the direction a little bit, I know you mentioned before how difficult it was the area where you guys are coming from to school is there in the school is there a difference the area where people are coming from? Is there discrimination between people stick together in their groups or is there a collective feeling?

N3: Well, okay I'm going to take that one too. There is a different because for example the place I come from is less, let me say, it's less richer than Bisho. For example there are student from Bisho also stay here. They actually stay in groups because they come from, let me say, [unclear name of area] you know so the student will come from the rural area they're actually not that rich poor rural student everyone that way, so there is some kind of discrimination.

I: I'd like to know about sort of the difference between girl's perspective and a guy's perspective on class and the classes that you are taking is there sort of a difference? Is it typical for guys to do one thing and a girl's do another?

N1: Most of the time we are doing the same things. And most of the times it is the girls that are having a problem. The girls like to cause problems between guys.

I: Could you talk a bit more about that?

N1: Um, what can I say? I don't know, but girls have a bit of a problem with guys. Like yes, you're not the same, its normal for us, but they treat some of the guys like they're not human, like they're not people. Or they look down, I should say, girls look down on guys. I don't know what their mindset is but its what they... In my class its what I have experienced. It's a very bad thing.

I: Do you at ZK Matthews High School, is there a feeling that most people will go on to university and continue to study, or is it some will, some won't? Do you know what the matric pass rate is like and what is typical of students?

N1: The matric pass rate is very, very, very low. Very low. As much as we would like [unclear] this year, but you'll find that the people who pass next year its only 20 out of one-hundred-something and its not because of the teachers, I wouldn't say that, but its also up to us because, yes, the teachers do not focus on us that much. But it's also up to you as a person what you want. You can't [unclear] because you've got books at home, so people should learn to study for their own.

I: Do you think the standards of what you need to pass are too low? Do you think if courses were made harder then students would be pushed more and more to learn? Do you think that would be a good thing?

N1: I think it will make it worse because the passing percentage is very low. It's very low. It's 30% to pass, but some people cannot even reach that 30% so it would make it very hard.

I: You mentioned that you thought the problem wasn't just the teachers. Is teaching a profession that any of you would want to go into?

N3: No.

N1, N4, N5: No.

N2: No.

I: Why?

N3: Okay, as a teacher in South Africa, most students have a dream to be rich, to have money. So as a teacher, I don't see it. You know, when you're teaching you actually have to do something else on the other hand. For example, if you're a single parent and you're a teacher you're actually suffering in SA because teachers don't get that much money, they don't get paid that much money. So maybe lets say you're a doctor or something, you actually settle down, you actually have money to provide for your children and buy stuff for them, you know. 'Cause our children are out there with wants and needs – they maybe want a PlayStation or something so as a teacher you actually can't afford that. You have to pay for a house, pay rent or something so the money just goes there.

I: Yeah, it's definitely similar in the United States. People, kids, don't want to be teachers for the same reasons. They don't think it's a noble profession.

N1: Not exactly for the salary [unclear]. But I wouldn't want to be a teacher because it takes a very patient person to be a teacher you have to be patient with the kids

you have to love the kids. In fact, you have to know your job. But I wouldn't say I'm very patient with kids. As in my school the kids in our school are very naughty very very naughty they do not listen and make things difficult and I wouldn't want to be a teacher because of what I've seen I cannot stand that.

N3: Well it is actually something about passion and not about teaching because men have more money in something but something you like teaching people giving them knowledge you know.

I: I want to ask now about it's my group is interested in is student achievement but I think something related to that is curriculum and what you guys are learning I guess this questions will be better directed to you I know that CAPS is something that has changed two years ago what kind of difference do you feel with the new and old curriculum?

N1: I have experienced, I've been doing essays before but now that the slippers have changed to CAPS it hasn't really change but the way of setting thing and the way of teaching's but not that study haven't changed, it's the way of doing things that have changed. Yes I think it's very difficult then the one before it's very difficult CAPS than before.

I: Teachers are struggling to teach it the new structure?

N1: Yes, I would say some teachers are struggling, they are really struggling we even ourselves some of us we can do it better than them. And we say teachers are struggling maybe you can help him or her but as teachers of our school will not allow them to.

I: I guess to maybe wrap it up I was hoping maybe you can tell a funny story form something that has happened? Entertain things like that you guys have any sorry that maybe highlight your school spirit at ZK Matthews?

N: I actually have a funny story it was back, but now I look on it it was not that funny. Ok it was a day we plan a match against some other school in King William's town new play the coach said you should try to play in this match because it was a friendly match. So this guy who was a striker forward so the coach said he's expecting a goal from him, you know so it was like okay he's gonna try and score. So when we were playing the ball was crossed the guy doesn't really know soccer. I don't know how he's in high school but he doesn't know soccer. It was an open space the ball went straight to him he must had to shoot at the net. He didn't know what to do with the ball. The ball was just kicked away. He didn't even need a shot he was like "what should I do coach, coach." Ran to the coach "What should I do?"

[Everyone laughs]

N1: And our principal is very funny to because he liked to nods his head lie this when he talks. When we were praying when he talks or something he be like [imitates principal in native Xhosa] he knows better people than us. He's not discriminating it is something he says to motivate us more. He nods his head like I know better people than you or something. And he likes to make jokes if you don't play sport and you are not good at your books then what are you good at? Like I know better people.

[Everyone laughs]

I: What kinds of extra circular activities do they have at ZK Matthews? Sport, drama?

N1&3: Sport and music.

I: What kind of music?

N3&1: Choral music.

I: Very nice. Alright guys thanks so much all of your insights your experiences and the teacher and the community everything that you've answered have been really good and really helpful if you have any question for me and any of them we can answer about our school.

N3: thank you so you coming from the USA. I have one question I always wanted to ask a U.S student. In movie we like movies from U.S.A the actually in school they don't wear school uniforms. Is that for real for all schools you don't wear school uniform you just wear your clothes?

I: well it depend some schools do and some don't most of the time it's public school that you don't wear school uniforms, but at religious or private schools you have to wear school uniforms. For instance, I have a friend that went to private school since to your khakis and shirts and tie. And some religious schools girls wear shirts and skirts and guys same thing and even sweater and jumper you have on. I went to public school and we didn't have uniforms.

N1: What is it like there?

I: But there is also some sort of narrative that there is a debate about schools uniforms for especially poorer areas is good because students something to dress and they don't have to buy clothes. It is a narrative and debate.

N1: Is it like their like your studies is similar to ours?

I: Yeah from my perspective a lot of the classes that you guys are taking economics and some of the other areas life sciences those weren't offered at my school it was very much English history science. Science changes from year to year the first year of science was biology, second year chemistry, third year physics, but um I think the

courses offered are mostly the same but there are some that sounds that there are different courses offered. Which I think is a good thing.

N1: Many different subjects, which is a good thing because everyone is included.

N3: I actually wanted now something about how do divide your school terms because I actually heard from a movie they it is like ok we are going to summer schools, winter school can you please explain that to me?

I: Yeah well, I think it also changes from region to region but where I grew up northeast united states I think that typical are divided into four term you guys call them terms we call them marking periods. The first marking period was when school started in earl September, so we go from early September to maybe like end of October beginning of November and then second marking period third and fourth and school would end right before school summer would start so middle of June.
[Lucy: But it's slightly different. You have four terms throughout the year, correct? You start your new grade in January. So we start the new grade in September. So we go from September to about Christmas time and we get a two-week break and then go against from January to June and then we have our summer, 'cause our seasons are flipped. So summer is then normally June through August so it's a bit off.]

N1: Do you face any challenges, like us here in this country?

I: I think, from my perspective... well, I know our professor here would have a better understanding of the education system as a whole so if you'd like to answer please go ahead.

Professor: John, you go first then I'll add in.

I: Okay, well It seems as if one of the bigger problems you were talking about was that teachers were not so involved or very good. From my perspective and at least

where I was from, maybe our teachers were more involved or engaged with their work. They liked to do their job. But that also depends, it's always changing, sometimes they're good sometimes they're bad.

Professor Bair: I think one of the things we've noticed during our time here is that there are many similar challenges but they might look a little bit different because our countries are different and our histories are different. But some of the challenges we face are what we would call inequalities in the system. We have, as John was explaining, some very good public schools and some that are struggling because of a lack of funding and some of the similar challenges here. One of the challenges that we share is teacher recruitment. Getting really bright, strong, excellent students into teaching and I'm fortunate to teach at the college that I do where we have a lot of great students who go into teaching. But we do have challenges, there are those teachers who go into teaching but then leave after only a few years especially in some schools more so than others, and that's a challenge. There are a lot of debates in our country about what is the best way for education. And we have an important election coming up in a few years in the United States. Barack Obama is nearing the end of his term if presidency. Even last night there was a debate in one of our political parties about education and it was interesting. Last night I was reading about the debate on the Internet and it's interesting. There are a lot of different views about testing. We haven't done as much testing as you do; we haven't had as many exams as you do every year and that you have to pass the exam every year to move on to the next grade. We haven't really had that in the United States. So if you're going from 3rd grade to 4th grade or 4th grade to 5th grade, you don't have to pass an exam to do that.

N1 – N5: Oh!

Professor: No, no, it's based on your grades over the year and if you get, we have A, is a really good grade and B is a good grade too and you kind of go down from there. I don't know how you do grades. It's based on those grades and you get grades from

tests and exams but you also might have homework grades or projects where you might have to make something or essays. Things like that, so there are lots of different things that you get grades on so at the end of the year if you've done well on this things that you usually move on to the next grades. So we don't have very much retention, or holding back from the next grade. We don't have that a lot but it happens sometimes - if a teacher feels that a student isn't ready to move forward. In high school you have to pass the class to move on. So let's say that you took a class like algebra in math, in high school because that's a required course at most schools so you have to take it in order to graduate. Let's say you took that class and you didn't pass it, you would have to retake that class again but you wouldn't have to retake the whole grade again. You would move on to 10th grade but you would just have to retake the algebra math class again. So it's really based on subject to subject rather than the whole grade. And there's no single test. Another thing that's different about the United States is that it varies from state to state because we have 50 states so each state has a different system. So for example some states require you to pass certain tests to graduate similar to your matric exams so if you don't pass those tests you cannot graduate and go on to a job or university. Well you can go on to some jobs but there are not as many options, or to go on to university. Some require passing certain tests and we don't have a national test. There's no single test that everybody in the country takes, like you do. Um we don't have that if you want to go to college—

[Camera cuts off for a short period]

N1: here we have people here who are the age of 25. The passing age is of 18 years we have those people because they didn't pass the other grades. And here we have project assignments and test during the course of the year we still every term we have other test March, September test, June test which is final exam in December. We have to pass those tests we have level here like from level one to level 7. From level 1 which is 29% and level 7 is 82% so you have to get at least one level 1 if you get two levels 1. Fi you get maybe two level 1 in those two subject maybe you get

200% and 80% in other subjects you still have to repeat the same grade each and every subject for a whole year.

Professor Ball: Let's wrap it up.

[End of Transcript]