WHERE LIGHT SHINES THROUGH

KIMON PHITIDIS

TALES OF CAN-DO TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA’S NO-FEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
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*Tales of Can-Do Teachers in South Africa’s No-Fee Public Schools*

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Everything can be taken from a man but one thing:
the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any
given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

VIKTOR FRANKL, MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You’re on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

DR SEUSS, OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!

We don’t have to engage in grand,
heroic actions to participate in the process of change.
Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people,
can quietly become a power no government can suppress,
a power that can transform the world.

HOWARD ZINN

However vast the darkness,
we must supply our own light.

STANLEY KUBRICK
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This book is a testament to the power of attitude to change the world.

Through a number of stories of exceptional South African teachers, it shows that while our attitude to life is often informed by our lived experience, our attitude nevertheless remains our choice.

It’s our attitude that brings meaning and purpose to life, and a life lived purposefully is a powerful tool with which to bring light to the narrative of darkness that sometimes envelops South African society.

It’s a lofty ambition, to write about all of that.

But this book is also about Agnes Mtimkulu and how her future was foretold; Tebogo Msibi and how he longed to fly; Zukiswa Soga and her formidable fist; Thandeka Sibiya and what she hopes to find in Budapest; Helen Madira and what happened when she opened that door; Tracey Naidoo and the deities that guide her; Wilton Phillips and his bird’s-eye view; Gina Strauss and the faith that drives her; Ameera Khan whose childhood games came to life; Favour Litchfield who longs to be the wind; Stephen Adams and that moment he will always cherish; Pertunia Luthuli and her rectangle of blue; Azhar Rajah who makes much out of nothing; Jennifer Harrison and her will to infinity; Thoko Mazibuko and her unusual inheritance; and Freddy Marubini and his ever-shifting goalposts.
SPARKS AND DEFLECTIONS

“What are schools not doing what we expect of them? Is it because they won’t or because they can’t? The implications for school improvement are very different, depending on how this question is answered.”

(National Education Evaluation and Development Unit, 2013, p.19)

The quote above, from a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) report, rang out for me from the drone of a 2018 conference with too much content in a vast room packed with too many people. It suggests that won’t do is a question of attitude. Can’t do is a question of aptitude and is easier to remedy through training, support, resourcing and other interventions. It sparked my curiosity. Can do had never been in the toolbox of my professional vocabulary, but that was about to change.

At Social Innovations, we develop programmes to supplement public-school education. Schools are under pressure to cover the core curriculum. Our programmes don’t get in the way. Rather we offer enrichment – such as after-school programmes and libraries – that supplements the academic programme of the schools.

Our programmes are not about turning around poorly functioning schools; that is the work of those who are tasked with implementing system-wide reform with billions of rand to spend. Rather we rely on the strong foundations of functional schools to host programmes funded by those with millions to spend. We don’t need to select top academic schools. But selecting can-do schools that are more likely to deliver on the partnership – and offer the donor
a social return on investment – is the make-or-break decision we take. While we have a school-assessment method to guide us, our most reliable tools when visiting schools are gut feel and intuition.

On a winter morning in 2019 I visited Hammarsdale, a hilly, semi-industrial area on the outskirts of Durban, where several retailers have set up distribution centres with government incentives aimed to create jobs in the area following mass industrial retrenchments in recent years. I had been managing an early childhood development programme in the area for several years on behalf of one of these retailers, another was considering funding after-school programmes in primary schools. I visited five schools to assess their suitability to partner with us.

My colleague Thabisa shifted down the gears of her white hatchback to get us up a hill, around a sharp curve and to the gates of the fourth school we were visiting that day. A security guard unlocked the gate, we signed in (perimeter security is an important feature of a functional school) and we drove into the grounds. The principal was not there that day, so we met with the school’s Head of Department for Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), who invited us into the principal’s office. We remained standing while speaking to her. She seemed anxious and uncomfortable, and constantly avoided eye contact. She then took us to see a Grade 4 class.

The teacher was seated on her table with her legs stretched out before her and her bare feet resting on a learner’s desk. The classroom was hopelessly overcrowded and rowdy with children shouting and laughing and shrieking. A boy threw something at another learner across the classroom, and giggled into his hand as he saw us walk in. The teacher jabbed away at the keys of her cellphone, frowning into the screen, and glanced towards us without greeting as we stood at the door.

She yelled at the learners to quieten down before once again attending to her phone. There was still no greeting. Her boss didn’t flinch. There was none of the ear-splitting sound of chairs being scraped back that I usually hear on such school visits as children stand and chorus, “Good morning teachers and visitors.” But I got the impression that this nonchalance was normal here. I wasn’t about to recommend this school as a partner for a donor-funded programme. It would be akin to a financial advisor recommending a stock bound to fail.

As we left the grounds, Thabisa asked me, peering into the rearview mirror
as she carefully reversed out of the narrow gate, “Did you see her cane?”

“Maybe she uses it to point at the blackboard?” I suggested hopefully.

Although Thabisa had grown up in the area and still lived here, her parents had sent her to a “town” school in Durban.

“I don’t think so,” she said, “that wasn’t a pointing cane.”

“Maybe her feet were sore?” I offered.

Thabisa just looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

You can quickly get a sense of a can-do or a won’t-do school by looking at its grounds, by experiencing the culture that prevails in the classroom, and by feeling if a place is managed with love or indifference. Each school is an institution with its own culture determined by individual attitudes, and it’s the can-do people who I was really interested in learning more about.

At Social Innovations, we work with about 200 public-school teachers in any given year. I have come across won’t-do teachers, but we work with many who are excellent in terms of their integrity, their ambition for their learners and their efforts to deliver results. I understand the power of a can-do teacher to drive the culture of a school; to transform the life of a child.

The NEEDU quote got me thinking: How can we characterise a can-do teacher? What inspires and motivates her? What is her attitude to her life and work? What brings meaning and purpose to her life? Most importantly, what can we learn from her that may improve the public-schooling system?

At the same time that Thabisa and I navigated our way through the hills, valleys and curves of Hammarsdale in the little white hatchback, I felt weighed down by the avalanche of news that continued to pour out of the seams of rot in local, provincial and national government exposed by the media and civil society organisations.

Corruption, ineptitude, callousness, political manoeuvring and the self-serving actions of politicians and so many public officials have stolen away time, money, energy and creative thinking that could have gone into improving our education, healthcare, economy, job creation and tax collection.

As the interminable and necessary commissions of enquiry ground through their work, and as those who have stolen from us continued to walk free, I wanted to find a parallel narrative.

*While our media continues to cover corruption and the failures of our political system, this book turns our gaze momentarily away from public*
officials who are in power towards those who are in service. It allows glimmers of light to shine through the darkness of the narrative of public education and reveals can-do teachers who are excelling despite the odds.

*It considers what we can learn from these teachers to influence how we attract, select, train, deploy and retain teachers to build the quality of the schooling sector and the public sector more broadly.*

All of the people you will read about between these pages are award winners and/or have been recognised as top performers. Fifteen of the teachers profiled in this book have made it to the finals of the annual National Teaching Awards (NTA), an initiative of the Department of Basic Education that recognises the performance of teachers in different categories. One of the teachers was recommended to me by an organisation working towards improving maths and science performance in the public-schooling system. I hope you enjoy meeting them as much as I have.
A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW BEYOND SMALL-TOWN EXPECTATIONS

WILTON PHILLIPS

Gansbaai Academia, Gansbaai, Western Cape
A schoolboy Wilton Phillips’s dream was to reach beyond the life of his family of teachers in the remote Overberg region of the Western Cape and seek his fortune as an investment analyst in the big city. Fortunately for the learners of Gansbaai Academia, fate had other plans. While he is qualified as an investment analyst, today Wilton teaches accounting and economic and management sciences (EMS) and is the subject head for commerce at the school.

“Morning ladies and gentlemen, goeie môre dames en here,” he greets the 23 learners in his matric accounting class before running through the corrections from the previous day’s work. It’s all cash sales, credit sales, cost of sales. In 42 days they will write their first matric exams. Heads down, calculators out and pens working down the columns, they get on with the quiet, orderly business of accounting.

Wilton circulates amongst the desks. The learners wear maroon Matric ‘18 jerseys with their names embroidered over their hearts and a chortling cartoon shark, which wears the school tie, on their backs. Wilton checks each learner’s work, placing a reassuring hand on his or her shoulder or offering a word of encouragement and a quick calculation to help out.

“Fezile,” he says to a boy in the back row. “Come sit up front so I can help you; you’ve got some catch up to do.” They move on to the work of the day, developing a three-month budget for Mary’s small business, projecting 60% cash sales and 40% credit sales. They work through the expense items. “I’m not going to give you this one on a platter; go back and look at what information they have given you and work from there …
“A reminder that I need your signed permission slips from your parents tomorrow for the accounting camp,” he says as the siren signals the end of the first period. He reminds them about the meal times, late-night snacks and the *me time* in the programme. “Nice day, *lekker dag,*” he says as the class files out. He spends a few quiet moments with Fezile, finding out why he has not been at school … giving him work to help catch up.

Most of the children at this no-fee school are the first in their families to sit in a matric class – and certainly the first with any hope of a tertiary education. Before the school opened in 2010, the only high schools for Gansbaai children were too far away – in Hermanus or Caledon – and transport was expensive. After primary school, many faced a teenage life of staying at home. Some were drawn into the lucrative world of perlemoen poaching that dominates the underground economy of this coastline.

On a map of the Western Cape, Gansbaai is a finger up the coast from Cape Agulhas – the southernmost tip of Africa. It faces the popular holiday town of Hermanus from across the vast curve of Walker Bay. The school draws children from the three primary schools of Masakhane, Blompark and Gansbaai that have typically been split along racial lines. That makes Gansbaai Academia unusual in its diversity.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen, *goeie môre dames en here,*” Wilton says as the Grade 10s file in for their accounting class. They draw up an income statement and balance sheet for Krynauw Stores. Learners work line by line through the numbers and entries … sales, cost of sales, gross profit. There is a discrepancy between what the debtor’s figure is and what the exercise tells them it should be. “They owe us,” he reminds the class, “*hulle skuld ons.*”

Matric exams are two years, 42 days and a dream away for this class. There is some shuffling and scuffling. A girl with a towering bun of braids throws an eraser to her friend across the class, giggling quietly into her hand. A girl with a competing braid-tower blows gum bubbles when the teacher’s back is turned.

“Nice day, *lekker dag,*” Wilton says as the second period ends.

Wilton is a messiah. When children make their subject choices in Grade 9 he encourages them to choose the career-gateway subject of accounting. The
reality is that many students are likely to choose subjects for an easier matric pass over the more hard-won opportunity of a career in commerce.

“Our role here is to give these kids a vision,” he tells me.
“I say, ‘Study for university,’ but Mom or Dad back home say, ‘Pass my child’ – those are two different messages.”
He offers them a bird’s-eye view. He encourages them to think beyond the expectations of this small coastal town.

He helps them to imagine walking up the steps of the University of Cape Town (UCT) 200 kilometres and several mountain passes to the west, or the University of the Free State (UFS) or Wits – a lifetime away, hundreds of kilometres inland of where they sit in Wilton’s class. It is when working beyond the curriculum that he believes the kids really see the opportunity.

He is the coordinator of the JSE Investment Challenge at the school, and he is more than qualified for this role. Wilton was part of the national winning team when he was a schoolboy at Hottentots-Holland High School in Somerset West, and also won the university competition when he was enrolled at Stellenbosch University.

School teams from across the country simulate trading R1 million on the stock exchange, competing to generate the biggest return on investment. In 2017, his team of four investors beat thousands of South African schools by making the biggest gains in their investment in the equity category of the competition. That makes Wilton the only person in the competition’s 42-year history to have won it in three different categories.

To claim their prize, Wilton’s learners travelled from Gansbaai to Cape Town, boarded a flight to Johannesburg and caught a 14-minute ride on the Gautrain to Sandton, the country’s commercial capital.

Four boys, in dark-yellow-trim blazers pinned and embroidered with scrolls and badges, beam in a glossy photograph, flanking Wilton and the Chief Financial Officer of the JSE. They include Llewellyn Davids, one of South Africa’s top matric accounting students in 2017 with a result of 92%. He is now enrolled for first-year medicine on a full bursary at Stellenbosch University.

“He was getting in the 80s for accounting in Grade 10, but I told him I expected a 95% from him in matric,” says Wilton. “But I told him: ‘You will
need my help. Each additional 1% takes work.’” Wilton made sure Llewellyn had the resources and gave him additional material so that he worked ahead of the class. They discussed his future and his work at break times between classes. “He was always a committed child, but what he needed was the motivation.”

This year’s team of Grade 10s already working towards their matric JSE Investment Challenge, is an all-girls one. On the day I visit they crowd around a table in the restaurant (for the hospitality students). They neatly push gold-sprayed Coca-Cola bottles with bristling fynbos arrangements aside to make space for their school-issued tablets. They battle to trade because the computer centre doesn’t have connectivity and the Wi-Fi they rely on is mostly down. This is one of many challenges Wilton and his teams work through to compete with the country’s top private schools. The teams from other schools also have the advantage of generations of their families being invested in the country’s wealth. The children of Gansbaai are breaking new ground.

A week before their JSE victory, Wilton’s team of boys were in Sandton to take part in CharterQuest – another national schools commerce competition. They made it to the top six out of 210 schools. At that competition they presented solutions to the business problems faced by a dual-listed international mining company. They worked towards a win-win settlement to resolve a strike at a Canadian mine, and they worked on a break-even analysis to determine if the company should invest more in deep or shallow mining.

“We had to pull together everything we had learned in EMS and accounting and I had to bring in university-level economics as well,” says Wilton. The team worked late nights and through the Easter holidays to prepare for the five-day trip to Sandton where they took part in various rounds of the competition between the distractions and temptations of buffet meals, as-many-cooldrinks-as-you-like dinners, photo sessions, hotel rooms with fluffy towels, and prize-giving events. The panel included directors of Telkom, Philips and the JSE, and the boys were offered mentorships and bursaries to help them through their tertiary education.

Wilton talks of a declining trend in learners choosing accounting in the province and nationally. “Those competitions show kids what accounting can do for them. That is my strategy to grow our numbers in accounting.” It’s a subject choice that he hopes his Grade 9s will make after touching on accounting as part of the EMS curriculum.
He reminds his learners that accounting is a scarce skill by showing them the job advertisements in the Sunday papers. He compares accounting to tourism – one of their other subject choices. “There are opportunities in accounting but also more generally in commerce – marketing, asset management – relevance for me is very important. It’s the relevance that gets the attention.”

Gansbaai Academia is a dual-medium school, offering learners a choice of tuition in English or Afrikaans. While Wilton teaches his older learners in both languages, he teaches two of his Grade 9 EMS classes in English and two in Afrikaans. The English classes are almost exclusively made up of black learners, while the Afrikaans classes are comprised mainly of coloured and white learners.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, goeie middag dames en here,” Wilton greets the first Grade 9 EMS class taught in English. A boy looks down as he walks in and places his hat – dark-brown felt with a yellow feather cocked out of the ribbon – on the table beside his textbook. He is one of the Xhosa boys who have returned from the June initiation ceremonies on the mountain. These boys are allowed to wear hats – an extended part of the ritual – to school, but have to remove them in class.
This lesson considers the creditor’s journal of Books Galore. “Who did this business buy in credit from?” Wilton asks the class. “Is the stationery part of trading stock or office supplies? … Let’s consider the nature of the business …”

Each of Wilton’s Grade 9 classes is tightly packed with about 50 learners. He strides up and down the narrow aisles between desks as he takes them through the exercises. “Accounting is a puzzle,” he reminds the class. “All you have to do is place the pieces at the right spot.”

“Nice day,” he says as the class files out.

“Wiskunde, mense! (Maths, people!” he reminds the Afrikaans class that battles through the maths of working out percentages before they can get to the accounting. During the course of the morning he repeats the same exercise four times, from English to Afrikaans and back again. The creditor’s journal written up on the blackboard is all columns and figures and arrows and ticks and headings written in two languages and smudgy rub-outs as he clears the answers to start afresh. By lesson four, he chooses to start again, writing up the journal in Afrikaans only.

“Maak jou mond toe, sit jou gedagtes in jou pen, en skryf neer (Close your mouth, put your thoughts into your pen and write them down),” he smilingly tells a restless class. Children sit two to a desk. A boy in the back row – neatly turned out in his blazer – sits upright, an eye on the board, another on his workbook, checking and correcting his creditor’s journal. His finger follows the line of his figures. He reads ahead in the textbook. He occasionally looks over at the workbook of his neighbour, who rests his cheek comfortably in his palm.

This boy works on a Maltese cross engulfed in flames and marked “RIP” in a rectangular plaque in thick black type. Chain links and twists of barbed wire wrap around the cross with each glide of his pen. As the lesson draws to a close, he joins two strands of chain with a perfectly symmetrical and two-dimensional padlock. Click.

“Lekker dag (Nice day),” Wilton says as the learners pack their bags.

Wilton tells me of the many university lectures he sat through wishing they would end. “It’s easy to stand in front of a class and talk for three hours,” he says. “But it is difficult to listen for three hours. We must bear in mind the
experience of the learner. It is the minority of kids who are inspired and who want to be at school.” He believes it is his role to discover the language of learning and the interests of each child, to speak to them in that language and to help them create the links with the outside world.

“I don’t believe in stupid, I believe in hard work,” says Wilton. “I believe that the God that I praise don’t just place certain people in certain places because of the places they come from. It is more difficult for our kids, but they have the potential to get there. As teachers, we must try and set the platform straight so that we see our kids compared with the best.”

“When we get a kid to university, the playing field is levelled and those that we get there perform well. In hostel, they get the food and the place to study just like a kid who may have come from Sandton in Joburg. That is our aim.” Alumni who have gone to university are invited back to the school to tell their stories. “Without role models, without references, kids limit themselves,” Wilton says.

Last year, the guest speaker at the school’s prize giving was Siviwe Yuyu, Gansbaai Academia head boy in 2013. His parents died when he was in primary school and he was raised by his sister in Zwelihle, a township on the outskirts of Hermanus. He was determined to attend Gansbaai Academia rather than the no-fee schools on offer in Hermanus but he lived outside the area. Against his sister’s wishes, he moved alone into his uncle’s empty Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) house in nearby Stanford and took a taxi to school every day. “From staying alone and having all of that responsibility, he developed strong leadership characteristics,” says Wilton. He was mentored and supported at the school and was given extra work to extend him.

Today he is studying marine sciences on a full bursary at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. At the prize giving he told the learners of Gansbaai Academia about his childhood and his aspirations as a young marine scientist. He told them about the two trips he made to Boston in the US to complete his practical work. He told them, “When the lecturer opened the door to my first university lecture, it felt like he was opening the door to my future …”

Being a small school in a small town, successes are noted and celebrated. The entrance hallway is crowded with certificates and trophies. Framed
photographs document the school’s achievements over its eight-year history. “Shark Alley” displays photographs of the children who have made it into the Boland regional sports teams. It includes plaques with quotes about the great white sharks that feed the mythology of the school and its culture.

Gansbaai is a fishing town and the capital of South Africa’s great white shark cage-diving industry. Tourists from up-country with money to spare turn off the R43 and drive past the school and the African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary before reaching the harbour with its fleet of hulking vessels with names like *Megalodon II* and *Apex Predator*. Steel cages are attached to their sterns, with crusty, barnacled ropes and flotation devices affixed to them.

Framed newspaper cuttings hanging on the walls of the school’s entrance hall tell the stories of Bianca de Koning, head girl in 2013 and the daughter of an OK Foods cashier, who achieved five distinctions and is enrolled in a degree in the humanities at UFS; and Andisiwe Wulana, pictured outside the family’s Masakhane shack, who is now enrolled at UFS.

Andisiwe was not at school the day matric results were handed out. She was out doing casual work to help support the family. Gansbaai principal Tommy Wilson crossed the R43 to Masakhane in his white BMW to deliver her results. He drove slowly past the shacks, built with shiny corrugated steel bought from the nearby Build It, past the simple RDP box houses painted in light blues and greens, past the container shop with its row of smiling pigs’ heads displayed on a table on the street, until he came to her shack of planks and corrugated panels. I picture him beaming behind his bristling moustache and dark glasses as he hands the results to her mother. “About 15 people came out of that shack, all living in that one small space,” he says. “And she got five A’s living in those circumstances.”

Wilton shows me a Facebook post of Andisiwe’s, her graduation cap tilted on her head as she kisses her mother in the university gardens. “I would like to thank my high school accounting teacher, Mr Wilton Phillips, for believing in me,” she writes. “You played a huge role in making me believe in myself … you see potential that no one sees in each and every student. I Thank You!”

“My biggest reward,” Wilton says, “is when these kids come back to the school to tell me how they are doing, or when I meet them outside of the school and hear about their university studies.”
He scrolls through his WhatsApp feed, showing me other messages from past students: smiling emojis and popping champagne bottles, words of thanks, requests for advice about university subject choices, and Christmas and birthday blessings …

While Wilton was raised in Grabouw, his family is from nearby Stanford. “I am teaching from my roots and ploughing back,” he says. The son of a school teacher and the nephew of a host of teachers and principals, he was determined not to become a teacher. “School never ended for my family.”

He describes a close extended family that looked for any excuse to get together, with each person contributing their speciality to the table. As they enjoyed the platters of fish and biryani, freshly baked breads and peppermint tart, the talk was always about education. He was a quiet child, more inclined to listen than to talk. He absorbed his father’s concerns for school safety and his belief in extending children through extracurricular activities. He heard his school-principal aunt’s aspirations for her school. He followed the debates about how to help resolve the problems faced by children in their classes.

His father offered extra classes on Saturdays, and more classes still on Sundays after church. He would rise as early as 03h00 to spend his early mornings at a desk in the sitting room when the family was asleep, marking work, setting assignments and working through the mountains of administration.

“And now I have become my father,” he smiles, describing the bags of paperwork he takes home. In the Stanford house he shares with his grandmother, he too sits at a desk in the living room late into the night. He sets test papers in English and Afrikaans, writes out marking memos, marks classwork and writes the reports required of him as the head teacher of Grade 11, Head of Department for commerce and as a member of the SGB.

After school, he completed a Bachelor of Commerce at Stellenbosch University. While his sights were set on an Honours in investment management, God intervened, he suggests, by derailing his plans with a financial problem and one failed exam.

One afternoon his mother, father and little brother visited his small rectangle of a residence room at Stellenbosch University with treats and
snacks. Looking out the fourth-floor window at the calming oak-lined views over Victoria Street, they sat in a row on the single bed – across from the shelf lined with textbooks and tomes of advice from Warren Buffett – and considered his options.

The family pull towards a career in education was stronger than he imagined. “My father told me, ‘If you are going to go into teaching you are not going to do it halfway, you do it for at least three years and take it from there.’” The education sector needed commerce teachers, and Wilton was awarded a bursary to complete the PGCE that qualified him as a teacher.

“But once I came to this school, the bug bit; my love for commerce and teaching grew here.” Even though he was later accepted into the Honours course at UCT and completed it part time while teaching, he has no plan to leave for the promises of the big city. “The investments I manage now are these kids,” he says. “I love seeing them grow.”
THE INFINITE BENEFITS OF MAKING SENSE OF LETTERS AND WORDS

JENNIFER HARRISON

Bedelia Primary School, Welkom, Free State
Jennifer Harrison is anxious about me spending the day with her. “I’m just an ordinary, humble person,” she tells me as we walk down the corridor to her classroom. “I’m not sure I have anything to share with other teachers.”

She is concerned that I might be a distraction to her; and about the dent I might make in her time. There is always so much to do – filing, administration, planning, organising, “or, or, or … the list is endless”, she says.

In class, she guides a Grade 2 boy through reading a four-sentence story so that he can attempt the comprehension that follows.

The boy stands at the table. His finger is poised below the first word. Teacher Jenni leans down opposite him at the table, her chin cradled in the palm of her hand. Her finger waits above the word. They hold each word between their fingers and trace their slow progress through the first sentence.

“Sam ran after the van.”

The boy looks up at Teacher Jenni after each word. She nods and smiles before they move their fingers to the next word.

“She had left her hat and her bag in the man’s van. Sam was very sad. What can Sam do now?”

Jenni’s pointing finger looks like it’s ready for a party. The fingernail that traces its way over the sentences is dressed up in the silvery flecks of a glittery disco ball. Each nail has come dressed for a different occasion. Some are pale blue. Some are decorated with what look like bouquets of pale-yellow flowers, but they could also be stars.

The nails reveal a playfulness beneath Jenni’s sensible, no-fuss appearance.
She is dressed in slightly-too-long flared jeans that cover her takkies, a blue long-sleeved shirt and a black puffer jacket. Her hair is clipped and tied back in a plait, which keeps it out of her eyes. She spends much of her day on her feet, bent at the waist, as she guides children through the journey of learning how to make meaning from letters and words.

Jenni is the remedial teacher at Bedelia Primary School in Welkom, a wide-avenue town set amongst the mielie fields and terraced blonde mine dumps of the northern Free State.

The Grade 2 children of her first class of the day circulate through six stations of activities, each marked with a number cut-out of white polystyrene. One activity tests the children’s comprehension of the story of Sam. Another is about visual sequencing – the child is asked to arrange pictures in the correct order. Yet another considers visual discrimination: pairs of words are listed; if the words are the same, colour in the smiley face. A spelling exercise asks children to look at the image, find the wooden letters in the little compartments of a plastic container and spell out the word.

She circulates quietly, helping each child with his or her task. Some stop when she leaves them and wait for her to come back before they continue with the activity.
She returns to the boy whose fingers followed hers through the story of Sam.

“Was Sam sad?” she asks softly, looking into his eyes. She points at the first comprehension question.

“Yes,” he says, more breath than word.

“Yes. That’s your answer. Now write ‘yes’,” she indicates the space on the laminated card.

He forms the letter “h” with the marker and looks to her for guidance. Together they sound out the word. He erases the “h” and forms a “y”.

The children approach the activities with a shy playfulness, as puzzles that need to be solved. Out of a jumble, they go on a journey of construction to build the meaning of the word or the sentence. And that, of course, is the foundation of reading for understanding.

These children are referred by their class teachers to come to these remedial sessions. They leave classes of more than 40 children to spend about 40 minutes in this quiet, gentle space.

“Very nice,” Jenni encourages a girl who builds a word from the wooden letters: \textit{PAT}.

“That was a good one, now try another one,” she affirms a boy who has built an image and its underlying word from scattered strips of laminated card: \textit{JAM}.

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results showed that 78% of South African Grade 4 children could not read for meaning in any language and were ill-equipped to progress through school. Of the 50 countries listed in the study, South Africa came last in reading scores.

In his February 2019 State of the Nation Address President Cyril Ramaphosa aspired to a South Africa where our schools will have better educational outcomes and where every ten year old will be able to read for meaning. While he announced the implementation of the national Early Grade Reading Programme to support this aim, this level of remedial support in small groups remains a rare privilege in no- or low-fee public schools. (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, 2019)

“I have so many ideas about what we could do,” Jenni tells me, but many of these are dampened by policy dictates or the decisions of those in spheres over which she has little control or influence.

She would like more children who need remedial support to be referred to her.
She would like all children to complete a school-readiness test when they arrive, so teachers can be armed with assessments that would encourage them to teach to the needs of each child from the outset. Jenni is not allowed to implement this initial test.

She asked for a language-proficiency test to be introduced so that learners can sit a bridging year, but this too was not allowed. “I’m not sure if it comes from national or provincial government. The thing is we have to be inclusive and support all learners despite their barriers, and this makes it difficult.”

Based on my reading of it, these kinds of assessments would be contrary to the Department of Basic Education’s 2014 Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), which shifts the emphasis from academic assessment to assessing barriers to learning as a result of the home, school or community environment or barriers related to a disability of the child. (Department of Basic Education, 2014)

Jenni works in a domain in which ideology trumps common sense to the detriment of the child, but despite this, she is positive about the systematic work she does within her direct sphere of influence. “I feel good helping the children I do work with. They enjoy it and they do improve. It makes it worthwhile. Even if the system is like this or that, I am making a difference in that child’s life and that is the main thing.”

The school informally assessed the Grade 2s earlier in the year and found that many are performing well below their current grade level.

“We can get a child here in Grade 1 who has never held a pencil, who has never developed the proper posture to sit in a chair.” Jenni talks of the academic, social and emotional skills that should be in place before a child can learn how to read. “Children need to be playing outside, climbing jungle gyms, and developing gross motor skills and imagination before they come to school. All these skills are needed for reading. Everything is interlinked.”

Most of her Grade 2 children struggle with the class activities, which are mostly set at the Grade R and the Grade 1 level to help them catch up. Despite the need for intervention at the school, the groups that are referred to Jenni are small.

“If you look at the marks and see how many are failing the three fundamentals – English, maths and Afrikaans; I don’t know why I get so few referrals. I don’t know if teachers are just overwhelmed, or if they just don’t know who to refer because so many are needing the extra support. You also
don’t want to send too many, because the classes are supposed to be small. Remedial is supposed to be one-to-one tuition, but there is no way you can offer that. There are too many children who need support.”

Jenni can only work with children who have been referred to her. I page through referral forms that a Grade 3 teacher has handed to her. In each form, the referring teacher documents what she believes the barriers to learning are, the steps she has already taken to remediate the learner, and what further support she believes the child needs.

The fragments of stories common to so many South African schools emerge through the hasty scrawls on the pages:

“She is new to the school and doesn’t understand the language of teaching and learning so is struggling to adapt. She needs to learn English from scratch.”

“His brother – who is the father of the house – told me he has never seen his homework book.”

“She cannot express herself in English.”

“He needs to build his self-esteem.”

“At the parent meeting, the parents say they will speak more English at home.”

“She needs more discipline and help from home.”

“Parents don’t attend meetings.”

“She lives with her grandmother.”

Bedelia Primary was built to service white Afrikaans families living in the suburb of Bedelia, which adjoins Welkom’s central business district. With the transition to democracy, the school introduced English as a medium of instruction to cater to a changing demographic of predominantly black families coming to Bedelia Primary from the suburbs and from the townships and informal settlements on the outskirts of town. As more Afrikaans families left, it became an English-medium school servicing families who mostly don’t speak English at home.

Sesotho is the predominant home language of the children who attend the school. Recently, a group of French-speaking Congolese children were enrolled, attracted to Welkom through their membership of a local church.

“Some kids come to the school and can’t speak a word of English. They don’t understand the teacher, and can’t even ask to go to the toilet, so they arrive with a huge backlog. If they can’t even understand ‘stand up’ or ‘sit
down’, that is a big problem.’ These children are amongst those sent to Teacher Jenni so that she can teach them how to read and write and make sense of the English words in front of them. It is in these small groups where they can more easily be encouraged and affirmed.

Jenni goes about her work in her quiet, methodical way, cloistered in the clutter that surrounds her. Computers lie idle from a well-intentioned maths lab project, chairs are stacked high against the back wall, books and files are thickly piled on countertops and boxes filled with odds and ends sit in fragile stacks against a wall. The walls are covered with charts, including one that shows the letters of the alphabet, another that demonstrates how to write the letters in cursive and print, and one that shows blended sounds such as “pl”, “dr” and “fr”.

As Jenni makes her way through the little clusters of children, I suppress my instinct to stand up and help the group closest to me through their exercise. I sit quietly in my place, wondering what drew her to teaching.

Jenni tells me that she was a quiet, shy girl when she attended the nearby St Andrew’s School through both primary and high school. Now, with 12 years of remedial-education experience behind her, Jenni is most comfortable in her space on her own, working with small groups of young children who love and need the care and attention she affords them.

She is uncomfortable when asked for a story of one child. I suspect favouring one child’s story over another might offend her sense of fairness. “All my children have been special, all have improved. It’s not always easy, but we get there.”

I gently persist, and she finally tells me a story of a boy – let’s call him Sandile – who was one of the first children Jenni worked with.

“There was this one child. He started here in Grade 1. He had a bad start in life. His family circumstances were not that good and he had a major learning backlog. Socially and developmentally – he was way behind. He had to repeat Grade 1.”

Sandile didn’t have a school uniform to begin with, and he was untidy and unruly. On many nights, he would have no place to go to sleep. “He was really struggling,” Jenni says.
She taught Sandile how to read, write and spell. She gave him his stationery. His class teachers would bring lunch for him every day. “It seemed we were the only people supporting him, encouraging him, asking about his day.”

For many years Jenni sat his exams with him, a concession allowed by the Department of Basic Education to accommodate children who struggle to read and write. “First I would read the questions for him and also write down his answers. As he improved I would help him less, so leave him to read the questions and only write his answers. In the end he was able to write his exams alone.”

Sandile always excelled at soccer, and Jenni coached him when he was a rising star in the under-9 team. Jenni got to know him, and she is possibly the adult with whom he spent the most one-on-one time for several years of his life. “That little boy hardly had anything and could have dropped out, but now I see him in town and he is the most polite, respectful child.”

The last time she saw Sandile, in the thick of a group of high-school boys outside the craft shop where she had gone to buy materials to use in making her teaching resources, he told her he had just been awarded a scholarship at a soccer academy. “His friends couldn’t believe that his primary school teacher from long ago still remembered him!”

Often, teachers tell me they would love more of an opportunity to get to know each child better, but their classes are too big and they don’t always have enough time to do so. However, Teacher Jenni, working in small groups or one on one with the learners, is afforded this rare opportunity to connect with children like Sandile.

While Jenni sometimes feels that her role is peripheral – in that she is not responsible for getting a big group of children through a set curriculum every day – the impact on the life of each child who passes through her doors is immense.

While she admits to being indecisive, having a messy working area, and being inconsistent when it comes to certain things in life, she is a perfectionist in the preparation and delivery of her work and has been steadfast in her journey of becoming that loved and influential person in the lives of people like Sandile.

“I never wanted to be anything else. From little. Tiny, tiny,” she laughs. “This is what I wanted to do. I would take all my books and pretend that I was teaching my imaginary class. I would write on my cupboard with chalk, and
I would teach them.”

Jenni also tells me about how she enjoyed attending primary and high school. She remembers all her teachers fondly, and this also influences her love of teaching. Today she uses some of the teaching tricks and methods she remembers her teachers using to teach her.

“Being a teacher, your impact lasts forever,” she suggests. If she had to draw an image of her role in the world, it would be of the never-ending loops of the infinity symbol. “I am still talking about how my Grade 1 and 2 teachers impacted me; I am passing that on to my children, and they will pass it on to others.”

The planning and preparation that goes into her work every day is also infinite. She has been recognised for the 12 years of dedicated work it has taken to build her method and her bank of resources. The Department of Education district office regularly asks her to present to remedial teachers from other schools, and she freely shares her resources.

Jenni was in a hurry to become a teacher. After matriculating from St Andrew’s, she stayed on at the school for another five years as a full-time assistant teacher while she completed her Bachelor of Education degree at Unisa.

“It’s good working at the same time as studying. It gives you a real idea of what teaching is going to be like. The syllabus is theory related – it gives you the problem, but not how to fix it. You need a lot of practical experience to see if this is really what you want to do.”

On a countertop, amongst the knick-knacks that make up a teacher’s world, three framed photographs offer a glimpse into Jenni’s life beyond her classroom.

She stands smiling with her sister, a collection of family snapshots framed on the wall behind them.

Her grey-haired parents smile at the camera, mid-hike in what looks like the Drakensberg mountains. Her father holds a pair of binoculars in his hand and, perhaps distracted from his work of compiling a list of birds he has spotted, is about to step out of the frame. While her geologist father was drawn to Welkom by his work as an ore reserve manager; her mother ran the tuckshop at St Andrew’s when Jenni and her sister were at school.

“I can’t get by a day without seeing my family or speaking to them. Nobody messes with my family; they are very important to me!”
She credits her parents for teaching her the value of hard work and perseverance. She was raised to be polite and to treat all people with respect, regardless of their station in life. “I was taught to clean my room, to do my homework, to persevere.” They have been the biggest influence on her approach to her work.

“I want to know that I have done a good job and that I have done it to the best of my ability. I don’t want to be the person who has done a half-hearted job, floating along and just doing the basics. What’s the point of that? I want to be known as the person who gave her all.”

She understands the value of parents who do their best, and the tragedy that results when parents wear their responsibility lightly. “We may have two children growing up in similar circumstances. One achieves, one doesn’t. What influences that? A big part of it is the people in their lives, I’m guessing.”

There is also a photo of Jenni standing alone in the gardens of Unisa’s Pretoria campus, the buildings of the city low-slung in the hazy background. She is draped in a gown, and the tassel of her graduation cap falls to the side of her face. Her hands are clasped in front of her, and she smiles at the camera.

“It was a proud moment,” she tells me. “I felt that I had achieved something great. It was a lot of hard work, working full time and studying as well. I completed my studies in the same period of time as the full-time students, and I felt that I had really achieved something.”

Later that month after graduating, she started teaching at Bedelia Primary. “I had applied to many posts, and I felt very chuffed with myself that I had been accepted for one.

“I was thinking of becoming a Grade 1, 2 or 3 class teacher and thought there would be kids in my class who would have barriers to learning and I wanted to know how I could assist them – that’s why I then did an inclusive-education Honours degree.”

Bedelia Primary was looking for a teacher to formalise the remedial offering of the school. The principal interviewed Jenni and asked to start the next day. To me, she seems better suited to working in her quiet space, with her small groups of learners.
“They brought me to this class at the back of the school and handed me a pile of referrals. I had nothing – no method and no resources. You think you have a degree, you think you know what to do, but you don’t. I thought I knew how to assess reading, but once I actually started doing it there were things I was not sure about.”

I ask Jenni about her life outside the classroom. “You know what, I don’t want to sound clichéd,” she laughs, “but I enjoy making resources for my class, I just wish I had more time.”

Three more photos give me some clues. In one of them, two spaniels sit on their haunches, their tongues wagging as they stare up expectantly. In another photo, a green-eyed, black cat lying on the lawn stares at the camera. Jenni beams in another one, in which she holds a brown-and-white patched spaniel puppy. Its eyes are wide and its ears are raised as it looks into the lens, snuggling in the crook of Jenni’s arm.

“My babies!” she tells me when I ask about them. “They are like my children. I’ve always had spaniels; they are beautiful dogs. So loving and friendly and good-natured. I can’t stay too late at school because I worry that my babies are all alone!”

Her work area at home “looks kind of like this”, she indicates the classroom with a sweep of her hand and laughs self-consciously. She spends many afternoons sitting quietly at the dining room table that is cluttered with files, papers and stationery. “I’m so happy doing that and have everything I need at home.” She has a laminating machine (a birthday gift from her sister) and she makes her own resources.

As she cuts and draws – and piles of scrap paper fall to the floor where the spaniels lie at her feet – the cat walks this way and that over her keyboard, pressing herself into her busy hands. She has recently tried those hands at baking – “I was quite chuffed; they came out nicely,” she says of a recent batch of biscuits – and I imagine the comforting wafts from the kitchen door.

“I bought myself all the seasons of some of the sitcoms: The Big Bang Theory, Friends; at the moment I’m watching Grey’s Anatomy Season 5.” While she goes about her important work, Derek Shepherd and Meredith Grey go about theirs from the confines of the screen, keeping her company.
“I like these programmes where you don’t have to concentrate, I can be doing my thing and watching at the same time. If I leave the room to go to the printer, it’s OK because I wouldn’t really have missed anything.”

I see the results of her planning at work as she cuts out words from a story she has written and asks a Grade 3 boy to paste them into his workbook in the right order so that the story reveals itself. It is a long task, but he does it gladly, with his shoes kicked off, his feet swinging in a rhythmical dance beneath his chair.

“I hold a cold ice-cream. It melts in my hand.”

“Very nice, well done,” says Teacher Jenni.

Another group of Grade 3s read from a story, “The Good News”, and take turns retelling it in their own words. Coming into this intimate space, with this gentle, soft-spoken teacher must feel for them, I imagine, like coming home.

The dustbin near Jenni’s desk is filled with colourful scraps of Easter egg wrappers and I imagine Jenni and her groups of learners sinking their teeth into the sticky marshmallowy sweetness.

“Your teacher wants me to go through syllables with you,” she tells the children. “Who knows what a syllable is?”

They clap out the syllables of their names.

*Ka/tle/go
On/ka/ra/bi/le
Tea/cher Je/nni*

Their faces light up as they are drawn into the rhythm of the gentle game of learning.

But it’s when Jenni leaves class that the spirit of the rhythm really takes her. “I love dancing. Crazy mad dancing, it’s one of the ways I feel I can de-stress. After loud music and jumping around – even if it’s a step class or a Zumba class at the gym – it’s a way of getting out all the energy and stress.”

It seems so out of character for her to be dancing as she describes, and perhaps she can tell that I think so, because she assures me: “I come across very reserved, but I’m really not.”

This wild side to her brings us back to her fingernails. “I like to do all sorts of weird and wonderful things with my nails. This was done at a salon—” she displays the arrangement to me “—but I’m learning to do it myself.”
I ask her if the nail of her index finger, which guides so many children each day through their reading, is intentionally glittery in order to draw the attention of a child to the text. “No, not at all,” she laughs. “Oh my word look at it, it’s so distracting!”