

CASE STUDY: LINDIWE (THANDI)

Lindiwe is a fourteen-year old girl in a crowded and poorly equipped Grade 6 class in rural Mpumalanga. She started school eight years ago and had to repeat the first two years of school, after which she was promoted on age through to Grade 6.

Her teacher says that, despite Lindiwe's age, she is not sure that she can master the expected outcomes for this academic year. Although she can read slowly in Ndebele, her first language, her understanding of what she is reading is not very good. Her writing is neat and she can copy accurately but she finds it very difficult to make up her own sentences. If she has learned something over and over, she remembers it reasonably well.

However, she struggles with any kind of problem-solving or answering questions that require more than rote memory (memorization based on repetition of content). Although the teacher is aware of these difficulties, she does not know how to help Lindiwe. With 40 other learners in the class, Lindiwe just has to keep up as best she can. No support services are available to the school and there is no one to assist or give advice on learning difficulties such as this. Anyway, neither the teacher nor the school as a whole see learners like Lindiwe as 'problems'. There are many others like Lindiwe at her school. Disobedient and disruptive learners are seen as the 'real problems'.

Although there are some other older learners in the class whom she finds more difficult to handle, the teacher says that she likes having Lindiwe in her class. She is obedient and she wants to be helpful. She is often given things to do, like 'taking messages to the principal or sweeping up the classroom'. Although she can be quite 'bossy' with the younger learners, they accept her almost like an older sister so that she has her place in the social life of the class. Lindiwe is also physically strong and enjoys school sports.

At home, Lindiwe is the eldest of four children. Her mother is a single parent as she lost her husband to AIDS some time ago. She works long hours, so she has to leave home early and gets home late. Her mother's younger sister, who runs a sewing trade from home, lives with the family together with her own two children.

Under these circumstances, a general expectation in this community is that the eldest daughter should take on much of the child-minding and housework duties when she is not at school. According to her mother, Lindiwe does this willingly and well, as she is patient and methodical. However, she thinks it is time for Lindiwe to leave school. Her aunt would like her to assist with the sewing, and her mother agrees. This would help pay for the younger children's schooling – especially the boys, as she wants to see them get their Senior Certificates. Although the family is poor, the mother is a strong figure who takes pride in her family. She is an active member of a nearby church group in the local community, and Lindiwe has recently joined the church choir along with her mother and aunt.

Extracted and adapted from Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana (2010)