

# Chapter 10

**“Sifunda ukuphila: We are here for our future lives”**

**Renée Rossouw**

This chapter begins with a comparative account of the development through life of two girls, Nosiphiwo and Nombeko, before, during and after they come to live at Ons Plek. The chapter also gives an account of the education programmes and vocational preparation at Ons Plek, and asks the question: What really happens when the girls grow up?

In all the previous chapters we have narrated only what we as staff have actually observed and been told by girls. In this chapter I add imaginary developmental moments and thoughts in the girls' lives, based on what these girls and other girls, as well as their parents, have shared over the years. These imaginary moments frame the realities of the children's human development in their multiple contexts.

Once the children have crossed the threshold into Ons Plek they are not there as street children, but as children who are looking for a new place in society. They are looking for an identity as ordinary children. For them, Ons Plek is not a project for female street children, but a place, “our place”, where “sifunda ukuphila - we learn for our future lives”.

The core of every programme lies in the personal relationships between the children and staff. We share in the children’s lives, joys and sadness. Without this, transformation in the children’s lives would not be possible.

The girls vary greatly in background, educational history and ability. Most of them experience smaller or larger developmental ‘gaps’ caused by poverty, neglect, social circumstances, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse at some stage in their personal history. They experience many barriers to learning. Most of the girls who remain at Ons Plek for longer periods of time will need to be their own primary or only breadwinner, once they leave Ons Plek.

Nosiphiwo and Nombeko: two development paths through life	
Nosiphiwo	Nombeko
Babies	
A small baby rests on her mother’s breast, contented after a feed. Her mother chats away gently, about the doings of those around them.	The baby cries. She is wet and dirty and hungry. Her mother is sleeping in a deep drunken stupor. No one responds to her cries. She gets listless. When her mother wakes up she is angry about the nappy smell; she takes off the wet nappy roughly and realises that she doesn’t have a dry one. She suddenly feels sorry for the baby. She puts her on the breast and slips into a half sleep.
Her mother, Nomfundo, is sober. She is present. She has cleaned the house as best she can during the baby’s last sleep. She is tired and lonely and a bit depressed, but committed to this baby. She has to go out to work, but she has the bottle feeding and the nappies under control and she pays someone to help with the baby during the day. Baby is dry and fed and loved and comfortable. When she stops being dry and comfortable she cries, and her mother responds.	Her mother, Priscilla, is mostly like this; because of her own hunger - for food, security, love, dignity - she swings from oblivion, to anger, to regret, to exhaustion.
Nosiphiwo is learning to differentiate between comfort and discomfort, as she will in time learn the difference between feeling safe and not feeling safe, trusting and mistrusting people, and other important responses to what goes on around her.	Nombeko is learning that nothing she does makes much of a difference to how she feels or what happens to her.

Toddlers

She scribbles with crayons on pieces of paper on the kitchen table, while her mother washes up. Twenty times in the course of the drawing process her mother says, “Watch out that the crayon stays on the paper. On the paper. Draw on the paper, careful of the table. That’s lovely, watch the green, that it doesn’t go on the table.” While she is drawing, she has a glass of cool drink. “You say?” ... “Thaaaank Youuu.” “Hold it like this, careful the table. Careful your picture. Hold it like this. Watch what you are doing. That’s a lovely yellow. What a clever girl. Careful of the table. Watch when you drink.”

Nomfundo is tired, but there is food to eat; more than this, she has bought crayons and scrounged used paper at work. She likes spending time with her little girl, she thinks this child is growing so quickly, she is worried about the table getting messed up but it’s a happy way to do the dishes without tripping over the child all the time, she knows the child is not messing on purpose. Tired as she is, Nomfundo has dreams and hopes for this lovable lively little bundle of hers.

Nosiphiwo is learning about boundaries, co-operation, motor and visual skills, as well as social skills. She learns that being corrected is a way of being loved.

She is playing in the road with older children. She stumbles and hurts her knee. She cries for her mommy, but runs into the neighbour’s home. But the nice auntie there is out trading at this time of the day. Nombeko doesn’t know where her mother is, maybe at the local shebeen. She stops crying and keeps playing, not wanting to be left alone by the bigger children. She knows that she should be around in case one of their parents gives her a scrap of lunch.

In time, the sore gets infected and by the time it has healed there is a big ugly scar.

It is just past morning tea time, and Priscilla is dancing wildly at the local smokkelhuis. Her abusive boyfriend is going through a ‘please forgive me’ phase, and she has money to spend. She is dancing the hollow feelings away, and filling up empty space inside her with hot liquor life.

Nombeko is learning how to hang around a crowd in the hope of getting what she needs to survive.

Eight-year-olds

Nosiphiwo wakes up one morning and says, “I love flowers, I love learning about seeds.” Mother and daughter chatter away about flowers and seeds and sun and growth, and her mother tells her about growing up in a rural area, and going out with her mother, Nosiphiwo’s granny, to plant and hoe and harvest, on their little piece of land. “Once your granny had fruit trees, and whole fields, big pumpkins, and calabashes but I wasn’t even born then, when the apartheid government took our land.” Nosiphiwo suddenly feels a cold shadow over them. Her mother gets up to make warm tea, and keeps talking about the warm sun and warm earth and seeds.

Nombeko says, “Mommy. Mommy. Mommy!” Her mother doesn’t wake up. She is dreaming of her own childhood. She dreams of roaming and roaming and roaming the streets of Johannesburg with her mother, Nombeko’s granny, seeking her father who had disappeared. It was said that he had died on the mines. They could never bury him. Roaming and cold, roaming and hungry, roaming and hiding from the police, roaming and scared, roaming without a pass. Roaming while her mother was slowly losing her mind, losing track, nobody to help them. Having to keep track, look for food, watch out and hide. Dreaming of waking up and calling, “Mommy. Mommy!” Dreaming, she hears herself say, “Mommy. Mommy. Mommy!”



Nomfundo remembers with sadness and pride the stories her mother told her, of prosperity and fertility, and long hard brave resistance to the apartheid government. She remembers with joy the harvests of her own childhood.

From her family history Nosiphiwo is learning that difficult situations have been survived with dignity, and that her mother expects no less from her.

Ten-year-olds

Nosiphiwo gets home, and lets herself in with the key around her neck. She makes a ‘missed call’ to her mother’s cell phone to let her know she is home on time. All that she needs to eat for lunch is in the fridge and on the table. She reads the note from her mother about going to do her homework over the road with the neighbour, and not to forget to lock the door. She knows that when the phone rings she must say something like “Daddy is just fixing something can he phone you back when he’s done,” so that nobody knows she is alone at home. She knows she must come back by 5 p.m. and peel the potatoes for supper. Her mother has taught her carefully and she is really proud of all the things she can do.

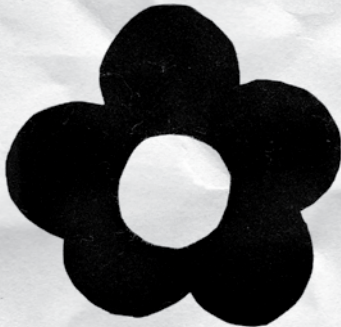
Her mother wanted the school to know that she was there for her child, despite working long hours. She wanted the school to help her be there for her child when she could not be there in person. She even once got up early, took off work (losing some hours’ wages in the process) and went to explain to the school how important it is that they contact her if anything worries them about the child or if she is not at school. She saved her Christmas bonus for school fees. Her sister was going to come and live with them, but now her sister is very ill, and some of her carefully budgeted money has to go to the Eastern Cape so that her sister can travel to the clinic.

When Priscilla wakes up at last, she looks around for Nombeko. She calls, “Nombeko!” Nombeko is not in the house.

Nombeko sits with a group of raggedy boys and sniffs thinners off a dirty rag. Her thoughts and her loneliness recede for the moment. She has learnt that you can escape pain, even if only for a little while, and even if you feel quite sick later.

Nombeko hasn’t been to school today and is not planning to be at home until this evening. She did get a pair of school shoes from a kind motorist last week when she was begging in town, but somehow her mother discovered her hiding place and her shoes have long since turned into wine. She is not sure she wants to be at school, either; she can’t understand what goes on in class and the other children make fun of her, especially when she has an epileptic fit. But school children seem to have so many things that she does not, and she wants to be one of them. Today she is roaming around the shebeens - in a neighbouring area so as not to bump into her mother, who frequents shebeens closer to home - collecting cents by lifting her skirt for drunk men to look. It has become difficult to beg in Cape Town itself because of all the security, and she longs for chips and sweets and all the nice things other children buy.

In fact her mother isn’t at the shebeen any more today. Her boyfriend found her there and beat her up so badly that she was taken to hospital.



Nosiphiwo is learning to regulate her own day with support, to do her homework, to succeed at home and at school, to be helpful and feel pleased about the fact that she is a good, capable child.

Nombeko is learning how to fulfil her immediate impulses and needs. She is learning to avoid what is difficult and do what seems easiest. She is also learning that her existence is of little value to anyone.

Fourteen-year-olds

Extracts from Ons Plek admission forms

**Name:** Nosiphiwo

**Age/d.o.b.** 14 years, born 5 December

**Reason for admission:** My mother was shot dead by a man when she supported me when I refused that he take me as his girlfriend. He then said I had asked him to kill my mother because she would not let me be his girlfriend. Neighbours were scared to help me because he is a dangerous man. We don’t have any other family, all my aunties died, they all became ill of cancer. I decided to run away to Cape Town but I did not know anybody in Cape Town, a ‘kind’ lady I met on the train offered to help me but then she wanted me to sleep with men to pay her back, I refused so I was raped, but I managed to escape so I went to the police.

**Last school attended:** XYZ Secondary, a Xhosa-medium school near East London.

**Highest grade attended:** Grade: 8 (last year until mother was killed)

Despite having experienced massive trauma, Nosiphiwo knows that her mother died to keep her safe, and she wants to be the child her mother would have wanted her to be. Although she has been betrayed by neighbours and a stranger, she still seeks help from adults in authority. She feels terrible and confused and she knows that life is not supposed to be this way.

Extracts from Ons Plek admission forms

**Name:** Nombeko

**Age/d.o.b.** not sure, people say 14

**Reason for admission:** My mother drinks. There is no food at home, because my mother went to hospital. My ‘stepfather’ wanted to rape me. I ran away to town. I heard about Ons Plek from Nomsa and Lulu.



**Last school attended:** XYZ school in Philippi.

**Highest grade attended:** Grade: 2 (about four years ago)

Nombeko has heard from other children on the streets that you can eat nicely, get clothes and go to school if you stay at Ons Plek. Also, two girls from her old group at home are there now. She feels that she has nothing to lose, so she hangs about the gate and tells her friends she wants to come in.



Extracts from Ons Plek weekly supervision<sup>1</sup> notesThe staff use the categories of the Circle of Courage approach to structure their weekly assessments of the girls.<sup>2</sup>

**Mastery:** Nosiphiwo is skilful at all household duties and at the basic scholastic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. She concentrates on whatever she does. She is always keen to be part of groups where she can learn more.

**Generosity:** While she hates it when other children use her personal belongings, which she is not at all used to, she is always willing to help - clean, explain, cheer up others, encourage others.

**Independence:** She is able to organise her own cupboard, clothes, cleaning and time without being reminded or assisted.

**Belonging:** She does not feel that she belongs with the other girls at Ons Plek, since many of them seem rough and rude to her, and there is one who seems really mad. But she identifies with staff, and longs desperately for her mom and her home.

When Nosiphiwo is not sure what to do next or how to handle something, she sits down somewhere and thinks of her mother, and tries to imagine what her mother would have recommended, advised, expected, insisted on, chosen. Some of these choices and decisions make her more popular with staff than with the girls, but in time the girls realise that she stands up for herself, but also that she can come up with lots of fun and jokes and songs when she is not sad, and most of them warm to her.

**Mastery:** Nombeko is quick to understand situations and make sure she does not get caught when there is trouble. She makes new friends quickly. She is good at finding out what is going on in social situations (or put colloquially, she knows all the gossip!).

**Generosity:** Nombeko easily shares what she has with others without making any fuss about it (except her Kaizer Chiefs clippings!).

**Independence:** She is trying to stand up to other children when they take her things, rather than just get into trouble for losing all her clothes, shoes and toiletries.

**Belonging:** Nombeko does not have a strong sense of belonging in her immediate environment, but she is a passionate fan of Kaizer Chiefs. Her dreams of belonging are usually concerned with uniforms - soccer kits, police uniforms, and the robes of church members as they sing and drum in the township streets.

Nombeko is happy to eat, watch television, be with many other girls, and feel that she is included. She hates it when the housemother corrects her on anything. She feels that some staff ‘push her down’ all the time, by pointing out her mistakes. Then she thinks of running away and sniffing thinners, to be away from that pain of rejection, which is how she experiences correction.

<sup>1</sup> Each member of the staff team at Ons Plek has a ‘supervisor’ and a weekly ‘supervision’ session. In contrast to some associations one may have with the word ‘supervise’, these sessions are the lifeblood of the work. We discuss the situation of each girl we are working with, together with our own responses to her, in the light of our joint professional training, our experience, our common sense and the light of our hearts.

<sup>2</sup> The strengths-based concepts in this section draw on *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future* by Larry K Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg & Steve van Bockern (1990, Bloomington Indiana: National Education Service).

The education situation of each girl is discussed weekly by the members of the staff team who deal with education directly. The team looks at school test results, observations from the homework sessions and reports from teachers and childcare workers. We monitor progress in relation to the developmental plan for each girl. The school support teacher keeps detailed reports and evaluations of all work that she does.

The girls in the programme are encouraged to express themselves, and to bring concerns to education and childcare staff. In a project such as this, perhaps the most enduring and effective form of evaluation by the girls is their continued or discontinued participation. In all aspects of Ons Plek’s work, girls vote with their feet. More settled girls also vote with the amount of concentration and interest they show in the various aspects of the programme. We take the girls’ opinions on activities seriously. Ongoing informal interviews help the girls to clarify what they really mean when they express either enthusiasm or concern.

## Extracts from Ons Plek weekly supervision notes

**First language:** Xhosa. Reading, writing and comprehension at Grade 8 level.

**Second language:** English. Reading and writing fair for second language Grade 8, comprehension limited.

**Maths literacy:** At average Grade 8 level.

**Baking:** Nosiphiwo can participate in all aspects of baking muffins - budget for ingredients, shop for ingredients, measure, mix, time, handle hot trays, not steal dough, serve muffins in a clean attractive way, solve problems with other girls who are rude and steal dough.

**Health:** While her first HIV/AIDS test was negative straight after the rape, the follow-up test after the

**First language:** Xhosa. Nombeko can copy anything she sees written in a book accurately in a large handwriting, regardless of which language it is. She cannot read or understand what she writes at all. She speaks Xhosa fluently.

**Other languages:** She can understand a little of both English and Afrikaans.

**Arithmetic:** She can count to 20 by herself in English, and she can point to the correct number of bottle tops, as long as she is alone with the teacher, otherwise she gets distracted. She can add 1 to 9 but struggles with subtraction and cannot multiply or divide.

**Baking:** She is a menace in the baking group! She gets over-excited, wants to be involved in everything but bumps into other girls. She does not understand how to measure cups etc., and she so badly wants to do the mixing that she frequently ends up in an argument when her turn to mix is over. She argues with the teacher, refuses to wash her hands, and opens the oven when the muffins are baking. Alternately she gives up and sits outside and refuses to come back into the class. But she is very proud when the muffins are nicely put out on a plate and she loves having been part of the team that made them. She is fine about sharing the muffins with others.

**Health:** Nombeko suffers from epilepsy. Soon after intake she has a seizure, and the childcare



‘window period’ is positive. She is devastated by the news.



**Psychological needs:** Nosiphiwo now has to deal with her HIV-positive status, in addition to the disorientation and depression associated with the experience of trauma.

She has a capacity for insight into her difficulties. She realises she is not feeling well either emotionally or physically, and she expresses this and seeks help. She starts seeing Carmen for counselling.

**Development:** Nosiphiwo is the child of a single mother from an informal settlement outside East London, whose family lost their property and historical land as a result of apartheid, and many of whose family members themselves have been lost to the very disease she has now contracted. Yet her mother Nomfundo gave Nosiphiwo the gift of a socially, mentally, and physically healthy early childhood. While Nosiphiwo's current situation seems as bleak as it can get, Ons Plek staff are cautiously optimistic about this child. Staff observe: “Dit is mos `n huiskind”.<sup>3</sup> “This child knows how to behave.” “Look how quickly she learns new things.” “This child is not easily influenced by others.” “This child likes her books.”

**Systemic barriers to learning:** As we start the process of looking for possible schools for Nosiphiwo, she explains that she is very scared of the trains since her experience of the ‘bad Samaritan’, and is willing to repeat Grade 8 if this

staff are only too thankful for the staff training in CPR they have received. Ons Plek uses the public health system so that the children can be confident and competent in the art of accessing public health services when they return to the community. Nombeko is excited to hear at the public day hospital that she can have tablets that will help her with her seizures. However, as soon as the girls see the tablets they start saying, “Nombeko eet mal pille, Nombeko eet mal pille.”<sup>3</sup> It takes a girls’ meeting and several talk sessions with Nombeko before she will take the tablets. She also has a chronic sinus infection, but improves rapidly with good food and a (complete!) course of antibiotics.

**Psychological needs:** Something frequently reported by street children is that the one thing they want is not to feel bad inside. The staff team make sure to give Nombeko a steady stream of positive feedback, in addition to the stream of instructions and guidance she constantly needs. For Nombeko, adapting to mainstream life sometimes feels like a nightmare not worth the special attention, warm bed and good food she gets out of it. Ons Plek staff know this, and staff help each other to stay patient when her impulsive energy causes another plate to break or a pair of socks to be missing.

**Development:** Nombeko's development has been compromised virtually since her conception. She has some of the physical features of foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and other symptoms, including lack of concentration.

But more than this, Nombeko lacks experience of structure in her day, lacks confidence and good self-esteem, and lacks discipline in personal hygiene.

**Systemic barriers to learning:** Nombeko is in the Catch-22 situation in which many learners who are developmentally compromised find themselves: education policy requires that she be placed in

will help her learn in English and not have to travel to school by train. All the local high schools refuse to take her, saying they have no Xhosa-speaking staff, they don’t offer Xhosa as first or second or third language as a subject (it is how many years since 1994, and I want to know why not, but I dare not pick a fight with the school either), and Grade 8 applications were due in the previous year. This is not the first time the apartheid legacy has cast a shadow over Nosiphiwo's life. A possible placement is at BEST Centre, for this year, and we could then make application for Grade 9 the following year, once her English has improved. Attendance at BEST Centre does involve travelling, but with a group of girls. She would be a good influence on the group.

school in a grade which is within the range for her age group. Nombeko would therefore need to be placed in Grade 6 or 7. She needs to be placed in the formal education system in order to receive further assessment, help and support. Yet our experience shows that a child with hardly any scholastic skills tends to feel inadequate and to give up easily, even when educators and other learners are sensitive to her needs (as they often are not). For Nombeko to make progress, she needs to be in a smaller group of learners and receive expert support. If Ons Plek insists that a learner should receive the maximum support, this becomes a stress factor for educators and school administrators, and we will find subsequently that the school is often simply ‘full’ when we apply for places for future learners.

## Education support work at Ons Plek

Very few girls who come to Ons Plek are ready to return to formal schooling immediately, and for some, no suitable formal educational options exist. Most of the girls need to be gently guided into the habit of practising sustained concentration and effort, and cooperating in a group. In addition, each girl needs to be assessed in terms of her developmental level and scholastic skills, to allow us to plan the best possible overall care plan for her. This includes finding the most suitable educational and vocational options for her.

The aim of the informal education programme at Ons Plek is to reintroduce educational activities to girls who may not have attended school for some time, and to contribute to the assessment process for developing individual care plans. The girls call their class ‘Morning School’, and since the concept has gained public currency, ‘Home School’.

Children who come from the streets are often restless. They usually have short concentration spans, and are used to bursts of excitement and longer periods of languor or hyperactivity, often linked to substance abuse. When a child first comes to Ons Plek she may well drift away, simply following her latest desire.

Our aim is to provide a very flexible programme of at least two hours for the girls every morning, to extend their concentration span in preparation for entering and sustaining their future placements, for example in formal schooling or work.

The focus of the sessions is communication, with special emphasis on English communication. An increased ability to communicate in English facilitates the girls’ ability to interact with the mainstream culture, and leads to many work and education opportunities that are not available in any other official South African language. The programme incorporates exercises related to cognitive development, numeracy and literacy in the children’s first language and English, using fun methods such as puzzles and games. In addition, topics for discussion include lifeskills themes. The girls learn to use language to express their feelings and opinions, clarify their thought processes and follow a process of reasoning.

<sup>3</sup> Literally: mad tablets

<sup>4</sup> Meaning that this child is used to living in a fairly well organised home.

While the aims of the sessions are very clear and consistent, the structure is very flexible, in order to accommodate the diverse range of ages and abilities of the girls in the group. Between six and eighteen girls attend the programme daily, when possible in two classes. The youngest girls who need the most personal attention are together in a smaller group, and those who can work independently for at least a few minutes at a time are in the bigger group.

Some girls return from the streets specifically because they like their teacher and their classes so much. Yet formal education is a powerful symbol for all the girls, since it represents to them and to the community a ‘real’ return to mainstream society, and all girls in the Morning School look forward to the day when they can go to a mainstream school.

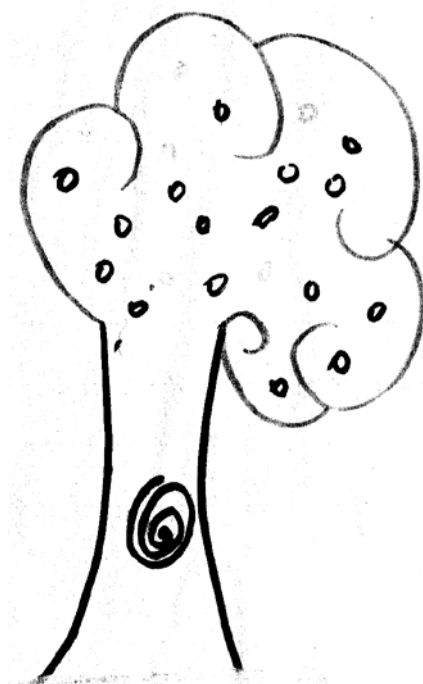
A suitable educational placement is a major factor in making it realistic for a girl to leave street life behind. Wherever possible, girls are encouraged to re-enter the state education system and to attend local schools and colleges. This school enrolment is carried out on a case-by-case basis, when a girl is committed and ready to re-enter the formal education system. Some girls return to school soon after their arrival at Ons Plek without having a significant break in their schooling. Girls who do not experience a break in their schooling find re-entry into the community much easier than those who do.

Girls are placed in a range of local and township primary schools and sometimes at vocational colleges. One criterion for selecting primary schools is proximity and safe travel for the girls, who use public transport to go to school as they would when they live with their families. Other criteria in selecting a school are the extent to which the school is focused on the needs of older learners, language diversity in the classroom, and special learning needs. Schools which have been of particular help for some girls include skills-training schools for learners with special

education needs (LSEN), such as Batavia and De Grendel. At these schools they benefit from the normal peer group interaction, the sense that they are learning a skill they are able to master, and knowledge that the skills they master will put them on the road to supporting themselves as adults. This in turn encourages the other children with special educational needs to persevere. The learner must be between 14 and 16 years old when she starts, and competition for places in these schools is fierce. Other schools include Molenbeeck and Mary Harding training centres for children who experience a more serious level of learning disability.

Often, if the truth be told, there is no suitable placement for a particular child. Not a single school wants the child, and there is no suitable programme anywhere that is aimed at this learner’s needs. Sometimes the designated staff at the Western Cape Education Department are equally unable to help us, since there is simply no facility that is accessible, provides the needed service and will take the child.

Learn-to-Live, the bridging school at the Salesians’ Institute projects for youth from the streets, successfully prepares children to return to mainstream schooling because it



works in partnership with the shelters and children’s homes. Annette Cockburn of the boys’ shelter Homestead initiated the Learn-to-Live project at the end of the 1980s as an education project for street children, and in 1990 it was taken on board by the Salesians in Green Point, and combined and further developed with their other programmes such as skills training for youth.

BEST Centre, a project of Cape Youth Care, is a full-time ABET accredited adult education programme for youth between the ages of 12 and 20 years. Instead of starting Grade 1, or starting in a higher grade where they have no idea of what is going on, these teenage learners, like adult learners, start where they are at, and progress at an accelerated pace through the various levels until they complete their GETC (General Education and Training Certificate, equivalent to Grade 9). From here they can continue to complete their matric at a college or through a mainstream school.

These two schools do excellent work filling gaps left by the mainstream education system.

Support is the key to making education a successful process for the girls. The Ons Plek staff provide liaison, support and information to teachers and schools with regard to teaching the girls. The school support teacher at Ons Plek maintains strong links with the schools through regular visits. Contact with the teachers is aimed at helping them understand the particular circumstances of each girl, which may be affecting her behaviour in the classroom and in her homework, and building an alliance between Ons Plek and the teachers, which creates the most positive environment for each girl’s educational development.

In addition to the homework programme, the school support teacher runs a holiday programme for girls who do not go home for the holidays. Activities include baking, candle making, interactive group work programmes, and visits to museums with interesting activities, traditional African games programmes, traditional African storytelling sessions, and beadwork programmes.

The school support activities also include a computer programme and an interactive drama programme. The computer programme familiarises girls with the use of the keyboard and mouse, demystifies computer skills and provides a range of basic educational options in interactive multimedia format. We also use programmes to provide preschool-level input, to help the girls gain very basic pre-reading and pre-mathematical skills, with the status of ‘working on the computer’.

Experienced education lecturer Jane Lawrence was an early pioneer in doing creative but well-structured English sessions with the girls. The interactive drama and English workshops are designed to involve girls in educational activities which are fun and exciting and make the learning process a pleasurable activity. The groups create plays, read together, and produce dance and music items.

Vocational preparation is an important part of the programmes at Ons Plek. We aim to help all the girls who come to Ons Plek to eventually reintegrate with mainstream society. In practice, some girls only come for a few days, weeks or months, and then return to their families, while others may stay for several years and eventually have to find work and set up their own homes somewhere. Many adolescents arrive with a minimal formal educational background. In South Africa we have compulsory schooling until the age of 16, and labour legislation which bans children under 16 from working. These frameworks also guide us in planning our work with the young women.



The question of medium of instruction is important, in that there are significantly fewer resources available for Xhosa-speakers than for Afrikaans- or English-speakers, and in the ‘Khayelitsha to Kampsbaai’ areas of Cape Town, resources for Afrikaans-medium education are more limited than for English-medium. While competence in English is useful in terms of surviving in the dominant business and work culture, basic education in a second or third language adds yet another barrier to learning for students who are already experiencing a formidable range of barriers. The programme consistently provides mother-tongue support to the learners, while encouraging them to improve their English.

### Education plan

Nosiphiwo is ready and able to return to mainstream school at her actual grade level, with emotional and some educational support, especially for her English comprehension. She also needs careful and considered support for her health. Therefore she needs to continue working on her life story book, to help her cope with the overwhelming feelings she experiences.

The only option for her at present is BEST Centre.

Nosiphiwo will later struggle to remember many details of these painful years - but she remembers the sense of having been shattered, and the terribly slow feeling of transformation, not so much putting together the shards, as discovering that she, like the seeds she so much loved, was planted, and was growing, despite the raging storms around her.

2+2+2=6  
2x4=8

Nombeko requires intensive support with her education at this stage, especially regarding her social skills, her fluctuating emotional states and her impulsive behaviour. She is not yet ready to cope in a mainstream school. She must attend our ‘home school’ and focus on basic literacy and creative and productive activities, while she masters social and personal coping skills for the formal school situation.

In order to access a training centre which could provide her with the appropriate education she needs an education assessment. The only way out of the Catch-22 is for Ons Plek to have the psychometric assessment done privately.

She needs to be settled enough at Ons Plek so that her medication for epilepsy is not disrupted. Nombeko remembers little of her life before Ons Plek, but she can tell many stories of her time at Ons Plek. She loves to sit and tell of the strange doings of other girls, and to joke about the staff and their quirks. At Ons Plek she has started to have her own story valued, and she is learning to weave her life story together with the lives of others. She is also learning new ways of expressing herself, in pictures and later, though laboriously, even in writing.

### Sixteen-year-olds

Nosiphiwo is attending a local high school where she is in Grade 9. She suffers from depression because neighbours in her home area continue to fear the man who killed her mother, and she cannot even go for holidays to neighbours who used to be her mother’s closest friends.

Nombeko was unstable at Ons Plek at first, running away several times in the first few months, but returning after two or three days each time. She longs to be accepted by her mother, which was clear from the fact that she kept running away to her mother rather than to the streets, only ending up in ‘juke boxes’ or with her street group when

She avoids counselling sessions, but feels better after these sessions. She is HIV-positive because of the rapes, but her health is strong and she does not qualify for anti-retroviral treatment (ARVs) in the hospital system. She attends a support group one afternoon a week, and this is really important to her. She makes sure Ons Plek girls do not know about her status.

She is also part of a home church group of a charismatic denomination. She loves the gospel music, but she is even more fearful that church people will find out about her HIV status.

Nosiphiwo is making a deep psychological and spiritual journey. The other girls and even staff cannot really guess what it costs her to keep up an appearance of dignity and joy, regardless of how hopeless she feels. Yes, she did once drink some cleaning fluid to try to kill herself. Luckily she immediately vomited and she pretended the smell of the cleaning fluid was from trying to clean up. But it put her off death! Even though there are many days in which she feels the torment of her situation, and many days in which her school work just cannot find space in her crowded thoughts, she continues her journey into the future.

she was disappointed not to find her mother. In the following year her stepfather was killed in a fight, and her relationship with her mother improved. Her mother became very ill and started to drink less and is trying to put her life together. She fetches Nombeko every second weekend when she is well enough. This has encouraged Nombeko to try harder, and she is now a stable Level 1 learner at BEST Centre. Her education assessment showed that she was not a suitable candidate for a training centre, and she was by then too old to apply for a skills school such as Batavia, for which her level of education was too low.

Nombeko loves drawing pictures in her life story book. She has done a series in bright, happy colours of men being killed in fights, perhaps reflecting her relief about the death of her mother’s boyfriend. Her great joy is going to school, even though her presence there is initially nearly intolerable for the poor teachers. Our school support teacher is called virtually daily about the conflicts with other children which swirl around Nombeko. But somehow she starts to grasp the basics of writing, and is able to read words and phrases like Snowflake Flour, Coca Cola, KFC, Nombeko, I sit, I stand, I write, I read, Rondebosch Station, Albertus Street...

She writes to her mother: “Dear Mommy, Happy Valentine’s Day, Love Nombeko.” She is gradually settling down.

### Eighteen-year-olds

Nosiphiwo is now in Grade 11. She studies really hard, despite her ongoing struggle with depression, and manages to pass her subjects on the standard grade level. She does homework from Monday to Thursday with the homework teacher. She also has some volunteers who help her with specific subjects. She is a bit puzzled about how to relate to the volunteers at first, but she is happy for the help, since the presence and focus of another person takes her out of her own thoughts and right into the work. She preaches to other girls at times, exhorting them to appreciate the opportunity of having a classroom and teacher at home to make sure one is never ‘in the

She is doing Level 2 at BEST, and she is struggling with the idea that she should ever do anything except go to school and do homework. She loves the identity of being a BEST Centre learner with a neat grey uniform. She has become more nurturing, and is very good at helping the younger girls to keep their clothes in order. She still visits her mother every second weekend, and spent December holidays with her. She became involved with her mother’s church, which conducts exciting processions and all-night vigils. Initially we were opposed to a schoolgirl spending Saturday night without sleep, but during a home visit the mother explained that their church involvement was



eyes’ at school for not understanding and not being up to date.

After a particularly moving service at her church, she spilled out the story about her HIV status, luckily to a group leader who is completely accepting. At first she thinks of witnessing to the whole congregation, but in conversation with her group leader she decides that she actually only wants to tell the three people in the group she trusts best. They cry with her, pray with her. Even better, they do keep her secret over time. She feels happy in a new way.

building a new bond between them. We decided to keep an eye on the situation, since we have had other situations in which girls have claimed to us and their parents that they went to all-night church vigils when in fact they had been to all-night ‘jukebox’ (shebeens with music) sessions.

Girls from Ons Plek attending formal education programmes face a range of barriers to progress in their learning, including the language of instruction, attitudes of teachers, lack of facilities, emotional barriers, peer group problems and lack of previous guidance with homework.

The aim of the homework support programme at Ons Plek is to provide structured support to the girls in all aspects of their schooling. The girls are supervised in fulfilling their homework assignments in the same way that parents would supervise their own children at home. Of primary importance is the fact that someone is paying attention to whether or not the girls are doing their homework.

The school support teacher is able to help girls when they experience difficulties in their homework and need some assistance. She helps the girls to understand concepts which they have not grasped, and helps them to use the knowledge they already have to complete their assignments. She guides them in searching for information, either with material in the in-house resource collection or by paying a visit to the local municipal library. The emphasis in all this work is to assist girls in gaining the study skills they need to make the best of the opportunities that the school offers. Volunteers are key in expanding this work, so that girls have the maximum individual support.

### Twenty-year-olds

Nosiphiwo has passed matric. Her results are much weaker than she expected. She is disappointed not to have obtained a university entrance pass level, but because she is a full orphan we manage to support her in getting a bursary to Cape College, where she will do business subjects for her N4 technical qualification.

At church, her group leader approaches her to find out if she is willing to talk to a young church member who has just received news of her own HIV status. Nosiphiwo’s heart opens to this young woman who confides in her. Her new young friend

Nombeko’s mother has become very ill, and Nombeko has left school and returned home to look after her. They live on the mother’s health grant. Her mother has made contact with long-lost relatives in the Eastern Cape through our family and roots programme. While she feels only tenuous links, the family have embraced Nombeko and even slaughtered a goat for her. While the mother may not live long, and the current situation is not ideal, Nombeko is getting some domestic work from neighbours when they are ill and cannot go to their regular jobs. Whereas she used to hate cleaning, associating

recommends her to others as a good person to talk to about problems, and in the next year several young people with all kinds of problems with boyfriends, mothers, and so on pour out their hearts to Nosiphiwo. Using her own counsellors and housemothers as role models, she grows in confidence as someone who is trusted by people in her church community.

cleaning with getting her own money is making a difference! Her friendly personality and aversion to conflict make her pleasant as a house help. Her old friends in the area are still there and still drinking, but Nombeko is proud to be clean and sober, and to speak better English than them and know people outside the area. She loves this, since they used to laugh at her at school and now she is an adult with work and they are still drunkards. She is also proud of being able to read and write basic English and Afrikaans and to understand how to work correctly with money.

### And at the age of twenty-two

Nosiphiwo has passed her N6 courses. She has done much better at college than at school, and she has earned a place at a technikon<sup>5</sup> to further her business studies. She has a partial bursary and partial loan, for which she applied by herself this time, with our support. She has moved into the Technikon residence. She is amazed at how immature the students are – getting drunk, getting involved with dead-end relationships, getting into debt! She finds this difficult to understand, because she has grown up to assume that the kind of things Ons Plek girls get up to are a result of their backgrounds, and having drunk parents. Now she sees wealthy young people doing things the Ons Plek girls would be in deep trouble for!

Nosiphiwo comes to see Pam for counselling. She has her first real boyfriend, and this has brought back memories of love and loss. Since they met at the HIV support group, at least that is not something she needs to disclose. But Nosiphiwo feels desperate, because she feels that love should make her happy but she is more miserable than she has been for a long time. She is especially concerned that he will find out she is not only an orphan, but grew up at Ons Plek, and that he will reject her. Her marks plunge and she is terrified of losing her bursary. Eventually she gathers the courage to tell him the truth about her background, and in turn he tells her about the difficulties in his family and background. He is completely accepting, but it takes her a few months of regular chats with Pam before she regains her equilibrium. Her marks recover enough for her to keep her bursaries, and she can start to enjoy the relationship.

Nombeko’s mother’s older cousins from the Eastern Cape have joined their household. One of them is pregnant. Nombeko sometimes gets frustrated with them and feels jealous of her relationship with her mother that has cost her so much, but she also enjoys the company and she needs their help in caring for her mother. A new way of understanding unfolds for Nombeko, as these relatives and her mother remember old times.



<sup>5</sup> Technikons are now Universities of Technology.



## Shaping lives through home and school experiences

All the girls at Ons Plek come to us as a result of both external circumstances and developmental processes in themselves that affect their ability to stay at home and at school.

Problems in the schooling system contribute significantly to children ending up on the streets. A common cycle of events leading to a child becoming a street child is that the child leaves school, and then leaves home. The lack of early identification of learning problems and lack of suitable placements for such children are very significant factors that increase the likelihood of children becoming street children.

The children have often experienced a kind of ‘folding up and falling down’ of parents, and/or extended family, communities, other support systems, people, money, food, things to do, hope, networks, love, affection, warmth, cultural practices, languages, places, buildings, physical health, personal safety and values. Many familiar objects and places, people and processes have collapsed or gone haywire or disintegrated. The child’s resilience gets stretched to the limit, and their options decrease simply to ‘fight or flight’. While the child is the agent, responsible for her life and choices, in response to this phenomenon of ‘collapsing’ she runs away - inwardly and/or outwardly. She feels empty and nowhere. She may retreat into a dream world, and/or get lost, lose the plot, simply suffer, dream of love, deny what is unbearable and/or simply ‘go absent’ from others.

At the time of collapse, the earlier care and socialisation of the child comes strongly into play. If something in her earlier life has built her up inside, the prognosis for her future is generally better. The granny who kept a garden, and had figs on the tree even when there was no money in the house. The granny who spent time with her and taught her to cook. The mother who never let the fire in the wood stove go out. The father who took her to see his cattle, and told jokes. The uncle who worked in the mines in Johannesburg whom she seldom saw, but who always sent money for her education. The aunt who took her side when she was bullied. The granny who she only realised years later would go to bed without food, fed only on the proud fact that she had found food for her grandchildren. These things shape the child inwardly in ways that she draws on in adversity. Where these are absent, it is so much harder for her to find strength and focus for fighting her own battles in difficult circumstances.

