



WHERE FORTUNES ARE MADE: Youngsters from Ngcobo have experienced the thrills of what it is like to work as seamen

Picture: FREDLIN ADRIAAN

Best-kept success story

A rural town is the unlikely partner in an innovative education programme

NGCOBO is the kind of place Malcolm Gladwell might write about. The bestselling author of *The Tipping Point*, *Outliers* and *Blink* has the knack of weaving big stories from the observation of small trends in a local community.

Ngcobo, a small, rural town in the Eastern Cape, sends a steady stream of young people to what, for the local youth, must be the other side of the world — a naval school in Simonstown.

For most South African pupils, there is no longer any point in only finishing high school. A national senior certificate will not get you a job, unless you are prepared to work the lines at a fast-food outlet, or man the phones in that mindless industry of telemarketers.

We all know it — an NSC pass in our country is meaningless, with inflated marks in Life Orientation (supposedly to prepare you for life) and passing levels that are so low (30% and 40%) that no serious employer would take a second look at these Grade 12 certificates.

These days, a first degree is important, but there is evidence that even this post-school qualification is not enough to get a job when short of work experience and post-graduate qualifications.

JONATHAN JANSEN

**AN
EDUCATED
GUESS**



What makes matters worse is that about 30% of university students drop out, and into unemployment.

The long road from the airport to a school in Simonstown was not my idea of mid-morning fun; but my friend, Rhoda Kadalie, insisted that I visit — I trust her instincts.

The school is invisible, well off the main road leading past Boulders (that penguin place) to Cape Point. Then I discovered South Africa's best-kept secret, and a possible solution to the crises of education and employment.

When I entered the school, I noticed three things.

All the children were immaculately dressed in dark uniforms akin to navy dress. They were standing as they learned. Their focus was on a series of large paper maps. Their subjects were new to me for high schools anywhere. In maritime economics, they learn about the structure of the local shipping

industry, cargo clearing, maritime trade patterns, post-studies and maritime geography. In nautical science, the pupils learn about careers at sea, astronavigation, ship construction, cargo stowage and seamanship. Then the surprise: the curriculum was drawn up by maritime experts and approved by the Department of Education.

Here's the innovation: a few metres below the Lawhill Maritime Centre is the rest of Simon's Town School, where the pupils learn all the normal subjects. Part of the day is spent in one set of buildings learning languages, for example, and the other in the centre being trained for a career at sea. Instead of waiting to pass school — then hoping to find a job — these young people learn about careers at school so that they are competent to enter a skilled job right away.

The fun part is that high school children learn about their careers on-the-job. Some of the pupils are placed on Safmarine container ships for sea training when a ship travels to Durban. At least nine pupils went to Antarctica aboard the *SA Agulhas*, an unforgettable training voyage. Others have done sea training aboard Unicorn tankers. Also, pupils visit ships in port as part of their training.

Imagine that every high school in the country developed, with local experts, an enriched (additional) curriculum linked to local industry: platinum mines in Rustenburg, the vineyards of Stellenbosch and De Doorns, the service sector in Johannesburg, the hotel industry in Durban and the grain industries of Bothaville and Jacobsdal. Then imagine this curriculum was taught by local practitioners and that part of the learning experience was to spend time working in the local industry where theoretical knowledge can be tested and applied.

That is so easy to do, but requires a bit of innovation, cooperation and leadership at the local level.

We can continue on our current path and offload tens of thousands of unemployed youth onto the streets, hoping they are absorbed into that still shaky proposition called FET colleges, or we can follow the inspiring example of Simon's Town School.

I hear amazing stories about the first boy from Ngcobo who went on to become a ship's engineer. And, every time he went home to that small place in the Eastern Cape, he would inspire other young people to make the trek to this amazing school in Simonstown.

I must find Gladwell's number.