

The power of words

In the tallest building in central Johannesburg, women workers meet together two evenings a week to attend literacy classes. Rosalee Telela went to speak to them

It is half past five in the evening. Workers at the Carlton Centre in Johannesburg are getting ready to start the night shift. They hurry into their changing rooms to put on work clothes, sign in, collect brooms, buckets and dusters and then go to their supervisor who tells them where and what to clean. Among these workers is a group of women who are not getting ready for work, but to learn how to read and write.

These women workers are learners in a literacy class which is being co-ordinated by Kate Menyatso of Teaching English Literacy and Language (Tell). Menyatso has been running classes for the workers since 1988. She told SPEAK how she started teaching adults. "At the place where I work most of the cleaners and security guards could not read and write. This troubled me so I decided to get involved in adult education. That's how I began teaching."

Before she started teaching Menyatso attended a training course. "One of the most

important things you learn is the difference between teaching adults and children.

Co-ordinators are not only trained to run classes but also to find out what learners want from the classes."

Classes at the Carlton Centre take place on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the evenings before work starts. The arrangements for the classes have been made by Tell, the workers and their employer, Anglo American Corporation.

The leading role of workers in organising the literacy classes cannot go unnoticed. Elizabeth Mmabatho who comes from Pietersburg, but lives in Orange Farm has been involved in organising many of the literacy classes. "In the early 80's when I was a shop-steward I organised the first literacy classes here at the Carlton Centre. The classes were a big success. Women who never went to school learnt to read and write."

But time, a place and people are not all that is needed for the smooth running of lessons.



Above: Learners get ready for their class. Below: Elizabeth Mmabatho and other learners about to start work

There are other problems workers face. Many rely on taxis so they cannot always be sure what time they will get to work.

“Often workers are late. This is a problem because there is so little time for the lessons. Sometimes we do not finish our lesson and other times we have to cancel classes,” said Menyatso.

But transport is only one problem the workers have, the other is the attitude of the company's management.

The workers told SPEAK: “Although management agreed to the classes, there is trouble if we are late for work after



Photos: Rosalene Telega, SPEAK

8 o'clock. The change rooms are filled with tables, chairs and lockers so there is very little space to sleep. Then we go home where we have to do all the housework."

SPEAK asked if it was worth attending the classes under such difficult conditions.

"Yes it is," said Mary Nika, 55, from Orlando East, Soweto, who has been working for the company since 1979. "I started going to classes in 1982. The lessons have helped me to read, and understand words I never did before. I still attend classes because I do not want to forget what I learned. I want to learn more so I can speak to my bosses myself and not have someone else speak on my behalf."

Catherine Ntsimane from Orlando East said: "I have been attending classes for two years. I never had the chance to go school. Today I am 39-years-old and I am learning to read and write for the first time. I am enjoying it very much. Getting to lessons on time is difficult because I look after my father who is 93-years-old," she added.

"Workers must understand how important literacy classes are," said Onica Masibi, who has been employed by the company for 14 years. "I used to attend literacy classes when I worked in Braamfontein. I do not attend classes here because I can read and write. I have realised how important it is to be able to read documents you have to sign. I want to tell all women who cannot read and write to attend classes. Learning opens your mind." ❖



attending lessons. We also have a problem with the room which we use as our classroom. There is a lot of noise because the change room is just next to us and people often walk through our room during our lesson. This makes it very difficult to pay attention to the lesson."

The workers said they often

feel tired when they get to the classroom. "We are given very big spaces to clean. When we wake up to come to work we are very tired. Work starts at 6.30 in the evening and finishes at 3 o'clock in the morning. Some of us catch taxis home at 3 o'clock, while others sleep in the change room until