

Without transport, 200 000 black pupils walk to school

IT'S AN ORDINARY day for 16-year-old Siphilele Thasane. The grass crackles under his shoes. His hands are warm in his trouser pockets. His yellow shirt sets the only glow in the dark as he heaves his pink bag on his back.

At 5.30am, he has walked 2km. At 6am, he has walked five. A purple morning is rising. At 6.30am, he is on the bus, a pink band of dawn that plays on his village now many kilometres behind him.

He's climbing past banks of stone picked out on the horizon, the only other instrument in his orchestra the birds.

"I go to school even though it is difficult because I want to change my life in future," Siphilele says, explaining that getting from this point to school will take him another 30 minutes. "Thirty minutes or more. Ja, more than 30 minutes."

Finally out of the wild, he's now on part tar, part sandy track. There's still not another person in sight.

At 7am, when he passes through the gates to reach his classroom in rural Mandeni, he has walked 12km, like another at least 200 000 learners for whom it takes more than three hours a day to get to and from school. In Grade 11, the serious boy confides without a smile: "I have dreams, but we're needing transport so I can pass

Film shows hardship they endure as they dream of a future, writes Janet Smith

my classes well, because we'd get to school fresh. We... arrive tired, and there are dangers on our way."

You have to agree with Equal Education lawyer Sodelele Joseph who, at the end of the Fish School of Digital Filmmaking film *Walking in My Shoes* says: "This is absolutely intense... this stuff makes a person emotional." He's standing on that road, waiting for Siphilele, who's one of the courageous learners who march with the advocacy organisation to claim their basic human right for transport to get to school, considering their circumstances.

At first, Joseph and his team can't even see the teenager in the quiet blur spattered out below them. But eventually the boy's yellow shirt appears like a dot moving across the landscape.

Screening tonight at Cinema Nouveau, the film, directed by Dr Melanie Chant, delivers the legend of an issue that marks so many black children into protracted consciousness. Much like child-headed

households, that itching near upon our nation, the story of children walking vast distances and through rivers to receive what is a horrible education is hardly ever witnessed. It's usually only spoken about, as if with authority when the bourgeoisie point out the government's failures.

Yet for Siphilele and other children, the quest after learning is all-consuming, and *Walking in My Shoes* might be the window that allows its painful light in.

It's surprisingly less emotional when Dr Phumlele Langa, director of rural education in the national department, wipes away tears when she listens to a child talking about growing up with her grandmother. The girl, a pupil in Bethelsdorp, Port Elizabeth, breaks down. A young friend comforts her. But despite her kindness, Langa, once a teacher in a rural school herself, becomes, like so many education bureaucrats, a symbol of everything that is not working.

Many learners whose parents battled



'EDUCATION WILL FREE US': Many black schoolchildren rise before dawn and walk long distances to get to school because they hope it will change their lives.

through similar human betrayal are part of another damaged generation, and it is simply not enough to tell them, as Langa does, that "three of our presidents" also went to school in the rural areas.

In the film's study of 17-year-old Nompilo Zanga, the teenage girl bravely asks why children must still battle this way: "Is it discrimination?"

On her 5km walk home, she worries

constantly about what she's going to give her late sister's young children to eat. That will happen only once she has latched two heavy buckets full of water - one for clothes, the other for cooking and bathing. It's only Nompilo and the children. Her mother died in 2000, her father in 2002.

She thinks other children "out there" live well because they have parents, yet there are at least another 20 000 like her,

living in child-headed households.

"We're scared to be by ourselves," Nompilo says sadly. "There's no one to protect us." School offers her a chance to forget about her troubles, "because I know education will set me free".

Walking in My Shoes will balance. It shows the supreme efforts of a man like Siphilele's Primary School principal Bruce Dlamini, who got the job when he was a self-confessed "reckless and rough 30-year-old". And we meet one of his star pupils, 11-year-old Kharyisa Fatsheane, who tells us that "people said with the brain that I have, you can't do something... easy". We hear her reading Maya Angelou to Dlamini, but the film also reminds us that out of our 20 000 schools, more than 20 000 are under-resourced, 22 000 have no libraries, 22 000 no labs and 10 000 no computers.

Langa says she's "worried about the disjuncture between policy and what really happens, but our responsibility is to try to match the two". It is, after all, already too late for so many children.

Walking in My Shoes, funded by the Ford Foundation, shows on the Encounter International Film Festival tonight at 8.45 at Cinema Nouveau, Rosebank. The film was made with the assistance of Equal Education.