

Richard Jenkin Henry Nginza July 2009

Travelling to PE on 18/7/09 for a month's volunteer placement to develop Science teaching in Grades 7 & 8 at Henry Nginza –KwaZakhele the main questions in my mind were:

1. Not having taught for 7 years would I still be effective in the classroom ?
2. Is it possible to teach physical science in an investigative way with local resources ?
3. Would I be able to make any difference and change one life ?

Before leaving a friend had said that you are going to 'God's own country' and this proved to be true. Every day there seemed to be bad things happening to local people but this just seemed to strengthen their faith.

The African belief in Ubuntu was also very much on my mind

Ubuntu means 'I am because we are together'

During my placement this belief was evident with the Learners, Educators, Principal, co volunteers, Paul, Xholani, Nelson et al at Calabash and Anthea, Mush and staff at The Beach House 5th Avenue. The friendship and support provided by 5th Avenue was a major factor in the success of my placement

The Xhosa people know that relationships enrich your life and bring happiness not material wealth.

As one Grade 7 girl called Naledi (Xhosa for Morning Star) wrote:

'I love my family—we sometimes don't have food on the table but we always love each other'

The Educators at Henry Nginza are hard working and very committed to their vocation despite very poor pay and conditions. Every day, led by the Principal Mr Msutu, they do their best to make a real difference in the lives of young people, while having to confront the post Apartheid legacy of poverty, deprivation, social inequality, economic hardship, lethal living conditions, limited health and support services, violence, HIV, TB, malnutrition, sexual abuse, alcoholism and substance abuse.

The Learners are wonderful. Despite 80% of them arriving at school hungry, they are hard working, well behaved and very keen to learn. They concentrate for 2 hours without a break in contrast to many English children, who find it difficult to concentrate for 2 minutes !

It was an emotional challenge to witness the enthusiasm of the Learners living in such poverty.

They are ambitious to become successful in a variety of careers eg lawyers, doctors, social workers and receive great support from parents and grandparents but with unemployment in the township funds to support future School fees are limited. Henry Nginza is free

However there are success stories.

Velile Mqota grew up in KwaZakhele ----supported only by his single mother. He is now a Professor of Clinical Psychology in New York and returns to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in PE as Director of Education on the 1st October 2009 !

During my time in school I was able to build an excellent rapport with Grade 8 Science teacher Simor Vambe. Simor was very receptive towards strategies which would lead to improved practice and successfully implemented these after they had been modelled. As a team, with Simor using Xhosa at times to increase the learner's understanding, we taught the 'Periodic Table' in a practical interactive way. Being innovative, with local resources—available at 'Pick and Pay' and the local hardware store, it was possible to make learning Physical Science FUN, while stimulating thinking and increasing understanding.

This approach, which was endorsed by the Principal, was also used in Grade 7 to teach Forces.

In many class rooms a didactic approach is used, often necessitated by large numbers, but it is my personal belief that within a class room the person who is doing the most learning is the one who is doing the most talking ! This is quite often the teacher so it is vitally important to create opportunities for the 'learners' to talk. Their understanding will not develop until they can express themselves in their own words NOT the teacher's. This theme was repeated when I addressed 100 students at NMMU and ran a workshop for staff.

How do you know when learning is taking place within a classroom in Africa or the UK ?

Frequent recall and review by the learners using their own words: reduction and transformation of knowledge in a creative way: learners answering and devising their own questions: learners knowing what to do whenever they are STUCK

Ref; Mike Hughes 'and the main thing is LEARNING'

Within two weeks of my placement it was apparent in my review meetings with Simor and Paul from Calabash that my initial 3 questions were being addressed. It was then important to set up some initiatives to ensure sustainability:

. All of my teaching notes were duplicated* and disseminated to Grade 6, 7 and 8 teachers

*Thanks to Elizabeth –very helpful secretary whose husband remembers Richard Sharpe playing for the Lions in 1963 !

This team of Mrs. Catele , Mrs NDony and Mrs. MBo-- ably led by Simor Vambe has the potential and professional skill to make Henry Nginza a beacon school for Science.

This station aims to cover education and health issues and is interested in transmitting the film.

This experience was challenging, very hard work and deeply rewarding. There were moments of great happiness usually accompanied by tears. These memories together with new friendships will always be in my heart.

Richard Jenkin 21/8/09

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