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Bob Powell - Emafini Primary School, Port Elizabeth, South Africa - 5 February to 11 March 2015

From the outset, I cannot overstate the importance of thorough preparation for a volunteer experience. It is difficult to separate the different elements of that preparation in terms of their influence but it is worth defining what they were.

Firstly there is the [People & Places website](#) which contains a wealth of information about volunteering in general and the particulars of each project.

Then, nearer the time of departure, there are email links to other people who had taken part in previous years. In reality, I made only a little use of these because I was able to attend a P & P social event where I was able to talk directly to the staff and to people who had been to Emafini or other Port Elizabeth (PE) Schools before. These conversations were very helpful. I also met another volunteer who would be in the school at the same time as my wife and myself, so a potential 'team' identity was established.

Note from *people and places*: Calabash Tours are our local partners in PE and the Eastern Cape. The Calabash web-site itself: <http://www.calabash tours.co.za> is essential reading, not just to understand the scope of the projects which Calabash facilitates and serves but also to use the links to other web-sites. For example, www.education.gov.za was helpful in providing publicly accessible stuff e.g. general background to the education system and recent press releases but also grade specific syllabuses, workbooks and assessment schemes.

Finally, I should add that my wife and I were not stepping into the unknown, in geographical terms at least, because we had spent three weeks in South Africa the previous year. We had deliberately built in a few days in PE and had managed to arrange a visit to the Calabash Offices to speak directly to Paul Miedema. Our meeting was a sort of two-way interview with both sides gaining lots of relevant information over an hour of intense conversation. Leaving the office, we knew that we would soon be returning to PE.

The morning after arrival was induction time. This consisted of a city tour during which the main historical sites were viewed as well as several townships. There was also a brief visit to the placement school. The induction was revelatory not only in seeing parts of PE that we had not visited before, especially the townships, but also hearing first-hand from Nelson (more about him later) some personal stories of life under apartheid and since 1994. His narration was a judicious blend of history, politics, real life and cultural messages.

One tip: do try to learn a few Xhosa phrases before departure. There are plenty of short clips on YouTube with enthusiastic Xhosa speakers helping you pronounce the three clicks and say simple greetings and courtesy phrases. For a Xhosa mother tongue speaker, the positive impact of meeting and talking to a white person who has managed to pick up a few words of his/her language cannot be under-estimated. All the Calabash drivers are keen to help with language 'lessons'.

1 Naboth's Nursery, Canterbury Road, Faversham, Kent ME13 8AX
tel +44 (0) 8700 460 479 | email info@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

General personal preparation is one thing but I would advise against very specific homework preparation. In my case, I had been told that I would be working with Grade 7 learners (pupils) so I could have spent hours on lesson preparation for that grade in vain. When I arrived at the school I was told that I would be allocated to an educator (teacher) in Grade 5. That was no problem for me but it was just one of those moments when I had to adjust quickly to a new situation in the South African context.

Note: no matter how carefully placements are planned, specific details may need to be changed due to local circumstances – hence the need for volunteers to maintain an adaptable approach to their placements

My wife, who had prepared for and was fortunately placed in grade 6, had bought lots of resources in the UK - which she left in the school. I made some use of these, too. The laptop was invaluable, as were memory-sticks of professional development material I had used when I worked as an initial and in-service teacher trainer. There was no internet access at school during my time there but I was able to produce dialogues, work-sheets and presentation material during the evenings and get copies done the following day at school.

One source of occasional frustration was having to find the printer cable each time I wanted to print something. If I return I shall take a few cables to ease the situation for everyone. There is a good laser printer in school and excellent photocopying facilities - and apparently no shortage of paper. There was a promise of six new computers arriving before the end of term, mostly intended for teaching staff use. The computer-room contained out of date, broken machines and was used primarily during my stay by another volunteer working on one-to-one learner literacy support. Attention Mac users: data-projection is possible but their system uses VGA connectors so one is obliged to use school laptops and therefore convert to a version of Word or Powerpoint which the school laptop can read and function with - currently Windows 7.



Monday morning assembly in the sun

One thing I regret is not having asked for a proper visit of the school with explanations as to who was responsible for what. For example, I had to work out which of the three secretaries was officially in charge of allocating work to the other two; I wasted some time asking for access to a printer or a photocopier; I was even not sure where to leave my sandwiches during week 1 - all rather trivial, of course. But I also wanted more information about the children I was teaching and this never really materialized. When we were asked to make a presentation to parents or a workshop, we had to organise the venue (the school hall is two classrooms with the partition garage door removed) as well as the content.

Note: Bob & Margaret were clearly able to sort out these details, with the help of their partner educators. Having regular contact and meetings with Calabash means that volunteers can ask for help if needed

In retrospect, the beginning of the school year is not a good time for volunteers to arrive. I knew that in advance but the reality should be stated. The day we arrived, we were told that the school was seven educators short. The Principal was persistent in his visits to the department of education and his persuasive skills worked. After a week the school was fully staffed through various redeployments. However, these educators did not always match the specific needs of the school. The situation was improved in some grades but grade 5 remained as it was, composed of four classes the smallest of which was 48, the largest

52 learners. It took at least two weeks before the time-table settled down so for at least half my teaching time I was never really quite sure which class would be coming through the door. Note: the children move to the English language teachers' classrooms for lessons.

Note: Term 1 of the academic year is a challenge in the first few weeks – for local staff as well as for volunteers. Without prior knowledge of the numbers of learners, principals are always faced with the challenge of allocating staff and classrooms. This is why we try to avoid placements in the first couple of weeks of the new school year in January.



5C waiting while the classroom door was being forced open by the school janitor after all the keys had gone missing.

On the subject of the children - they were wonderful. After some initial reticence, most were eager to learn and to participate in lessons. Sure, any group of 50 children, if allowed too much freedom in the classroom, will become noisy but for the most part, these children's lively nature could easily be channeled into productive activities. I have to say that they are remarkably patient given the general style of teaching observed, the skills demanded of them in the text-books (mostly reading and writing) and the over-emphasis on testing - sometimes before the subject-matter had been thoroughly taught. I suppose my approach was possibly more active - I used games, songs, pair-work, group-work - so it was easier for me to stimulate a positive response from the children.



Bob setting up a letter-writing task.

However, there are at least two real challenges facing any teacher in Emafani apart from the size of the classes and the lack of space. Firstly there is the age range - 9 to 12 in grade 5. And then there is the range of ability and aptitude for English as an additional language. Some of the children were struggling to keep up, with poor comprehension and reading/writing skills. A simple copying task could take them much longer than their class mates. I was often faced with difficult decisions about pacing and progression, moving on to the next activity. After a working life in teaching, mostly in higher education, I was confronted by the reality of a system which had little by way of remedial support for young slow learners. Teachers tend to rely on the most willing and able to provide answers to keep the pace of the lesson moving.

It would have been useful to observe more classes/grades at the beginning before becoming attached and embedded with one grade. I did observe one class in grade 3 and one in grade 4 but both for English as an Additional Language whereas watching other subjects - even in Xhosa - would have provided insights into learners' whole school experience.

Initially my teacher was very timid and seemed rather insecure. I assured her that I had everything to learn from her, never having taught primary school classes before. Gradually, her reticence dissolved and we established a good working relationship. After planning together what needed to be covered, I taught a few lessons and she then followed, delivering the same lesson content using some of the communicative strategies I was trying to promote. This did mean that I was teaching quite a lot but I think it was the right way to proceed.

Future volunteers should be aware that punctuality, detailed preparation and record-keeping did not seem to be high priorities among the staff. That may sound harsh but it was the reality for all volunteers in the school. There is also a steady flow of people in and out of the classroom during lessons. These movements included other pupils looking for brothers or sisters, secretaries looking for a specific learner, dinner ladies bringing in plates and then lunch (always at unpredictable moments), adjacent teachers seemingly needing a chat and the regular teacher who absented herself to attend meetings or to go to the office on some business. I had to remind her early in the placement that I was there to work with her not instead of her, after which things improved.

An excellent rapport was established with the Principal from the start. Mr McKay was a very welcoming and attentive mentor. From what I could gather, the school had been through a rough patch after the retirement of the previous, long-established Head. It was a challenging placement for Mr McKay, not a Xhosa speaker, but after a year in post I think he is moving the school forward. We were privileged to be invited to his home one Saturday to join in a traditional family braai.



Maggie and Bob with the Principal, Mr McKay

The Principal was keen to involve us in running a language teachers' workshop. This we did and it was rewarding to see the majority of staff turning up.

Also, together with the other volunteer, Susan, we organised a parents' meeting the topic of which was how parents could help their children with English learning and practice at home. It was a major task to send out invitations to hundreds of parents.

It was actually quite thrilling to see the massive level of response with around 400 parents choosing to attend.



Maggie and Bob's double act during the parents' meeting

Many of the children have lost one or more parents through disease so there were quite a few grandparents, aunts and other relatives in the role of guardian. Out of these meetings (parents attended according to the grade of their children) it was hoped also to set up some parent volunteers who would carry the literacy work forward in school or at home with small groups of learners. Further meetings were held to help 'train' these potential volunteers. It remains to be seen how this parent volunteer work - high on the wish-list of the Principal - will be sustained after the departure of the volunteers.

Note: future volunteers will continue to build on the work of Bob and Margaret, as well as their co-volunteer Susan – this is what we refer to as 'passing the baton'.

My wife and I stayed at the 5th Avenue Beach House. It is truly a wonderful place to stay. Anthea is so attentive - as are all her staff - and the food, cleanliness and facilities (including a slightly out of tune piano) could not be better (apart from the piano!). I really appreciated the calm and comfort and the reassurance of a good breakfast and evening meal. Wifi is not really expensive and reception staff are only too happy to do the odd bit of printing so that I could avoid the hassle with the computer/printer at school. A wallow in the small swimming pool was a real boon after a very hot day at school. The Indian Ocean is just at the end of the street and a range of shops and restaurants all within a ten minute walk.

I cannot speak highly enough of the Calabash team. All the drivers were careful, punctual, efficient and very polite. Xolani repaired a puncture on the way to school on a dangerous road in 12 minutes - must be a record! Most of all, conversations with Nelson will remain in my mind for a long time. He was especially valuable and helpful with regard to Xhosa lessons, deepening my understanding of the history and politics of South Africa providing critical local knowledge. There was also flexibility shown by Calabash regarding later return journeys from school because of our involvement with teacher workshops and parents' meetings.

Each day in school brought its frustrations but also its rewards and minor successes. For me, the children and teaching were the main source of positive feelings, for example:

* the buzz when children, initially very quiet and unsure, began to develop more confidence in speaking and generally participating in more open-ended classroom activities and I was able to witness their unfettered enthusiasm for games and songs in English. On the last morning in school, we asked permission for the whole of Grade 5 and Grade 6 children to be released for class to come to the playground. The pretext? Why to sing the Hokey Cokey of course! My wife and I had taught all our classes this 'traditional' song, with all the actions, and the sight and sound of 360 children performing this together will be one of the lasting memories of our trip. After the singing and the dancing show that some of the girls put on for our display, every child was rewarded with a slice of chocolate cake! I don't think the Summerstrand cake-shop had received such an large order before.

* more seriously, on the last day, my partner local educator identified areas across the teaching where, through her self-evaluation, she recognised that she needed to change: better knowledge of individual learners; introduction of pair-work/group-work; more differentiated tasks and more 'dramatisation' of the language to be acquired; more opportunities for practice and repetition before the page is turned.... I committed to: the provision of dialogues to enliven the rather distant language of the text-book; provision of more worked examples of differentiated exercises.

* realising at first hand just how many challenges these children face in their daily lives and their education and the enormous gap that exists still between different sectors of South African society was also something that I shall take away from my placement.

* on a personal level, the project was extremely stimulating and invigorating. Hard work - yes - but I believe in hard work and there was so little time to be idle. I feel so much richer for having taken part. It is as if my brain has been re-ignited after a period of retirement in which it risked becoming a dull ember - a fire going out. I re-utilised skills that had not been practised for over seven years. Perhaps these skills were appreciated by the learners and teachers.

I believe that I have made a contribution:

- by just being there - a friendly white face with a different world vision and cultural background;
- by giving children fun lessons in language learning;
- by being available to the Principal to be 'shown off' to parents, other schools and the education department - thus raising the profile of the school;
- by organising and delivering (with colleague volunteers) a teacher workshop and parents' meetings;
- by making sensible use of my financial contribution - the provision of a stipend for a librarian who had been working on a voluntary basis for the past few years.

I hope to continue to support Emafini School and the Calabash projects however I can in the future.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity.

Bob Powell

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