

Note from *people and places*: this volunteer's placement was designed specifically for them – they went through our full matching process, as we've been doing with you. The placement report indicates their particular skills and experience – yours may be similar or completely different – your own placement will make best use of **your** experience and skills. Every volunteer is different – in what they give and what they gain. Reports from previous volunteers serve to give you as good a picture as possible about the project. If you have any questions about any of the detail in this report please do not hesitate to contact me at kate@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

Margaret (Maggie) Powell - Emafini Primary School, Port Elizabeth - 5 February to 11 March 2015

As both my husband and I undertook this volunteer placement, I would urge anyone interested to read this report in conjunction with Bob's report in order to avoid too much repetition.

He has already mentioned our very fruitful visit to the People and Places social event in November. Apart from Kate, Sallie and Harold, we met the person who set up the Library in the school and learned a great deal about the practical difficulties and the cultural and social differences that we would face. Dianne Ashman, volunteer programme adviser, spent a long time on the phone answering the many questions we had before going. Her knowledge of the project from 2012 and her realistic expectations were of great help. Since we were already in touch with Paul Miedema at Calabash Trust, we were also able to obtain links to the government website www.education.gov.za so that we could read up about developments and access school materials. A word of caution, however, the materials available are not of necessity the ones being used in the school to teach with.

The most rewarding preparation that I did was to try to learn as much Xhosa as possible before going. I set myself the task of being able to greet people with confidence, ask how they are and answer how I am. I learnt short conversations about where we live, what we are doing, expressions about the weather, explaining that I do not speak Xhosa but that I am learning it. I was also armed with the firm determination that however difficult the names I encountered I would learn them and remember them by repeating them to myself ad infinitum. This paid off a thousand fold in all sorts of meetings - in the market, in the shebeen, in the informal settlements, in a taxi, in a Women's fellowship Meeting, just talking to anyone and everyone. Reactions were heartwarming. Of course one of our drivers, Nelson's lessons were invaluable on the way to and from school adding impressively to my meagre language knowledge. In fact interacting with our three drivers, Nelson, Xolani and Boyce was one of the highlights of our stay. They are great fun.



chatting with Lulu in market

First impressions

As Bob mentioned in his report, Nelson, one of the drivers for Calabash Trust, took us on an orientation visit on our first day in Port Elizabeth. We were extremely lucky to have such an informative, knowledgeable and experienced guide who was willing to share with us his family's experiences as well as the historical facts of the Apartheid era and up to the present day.

I was shocked by the extent of the townships and the desolation and degradation of the informal settlements (a deceptively innocuous name for the shanty towns with no legal electrical supplies, with standpipes for water and rubber buckets for toilets and where the flimsy structures were unable to keep out the rain or withstand the often present high winds.) Though housing improvements have taken place

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

and there is an ongoing programme of rehousing, it would appear that hundreds of thousands of people are crowded into ghettos on the very outskirts of town far from employment opportunities with no regular transport services apart from the ubiquitous overcrowded minibuses and no rubbish collection. This latter fact was especially distressing as rubbish was everywhere - not helped by the animals roaming freely and the almost ever present wind.

The School

Emafini Primary School is located in a rather better area. Kwadwesi has better housing and amenities so the school itself, though it looks like an old fashioned army barracks, is a pleasant surprise in the context of what we had seen up to that point. Great efforts are being made to tend the gardens at the front of the entrance and it is obvious that the children take a pride in keeping their classrooms as tidy as possible.



In our first meeting with Mr McKay, the Principal, he explained that though the school was in a 'middle class' district, only 20% of the children came from the surrounding houses while 80% of the learners came from deprived backgrounds at some distance from the school. Its location regrettably had an adverse effect on the funding the school received.

We were given a very warm welcome at the school by Mr McKay, M'am Tambo and the two educators with whom we would be working. Unfortunately, a hastily arranged Sports' Day was to take place the following day so we would be unable to start our work until the following Monday.

The Teaching

On Monday morning, we were formally welcomed at Assembly which was held on the school playground as there is no School Hall. This was a moving event with wonderful singing on the part of learners and educators and brilliant sunshine. One thousand two hundred bright eyes and beautiful smiles greeted us and won our hearts immediately.



I did not have time to talk to my educator before being whisked into her classroom so I had no idea of the standard of the learners, of their interests or of any problems that might be present.

The classroom was very cramped, the desks the old fashioned two seater kind with the bench attached. The worst feature of the room was the immense metal garage door which separated it from the adjacent classroom but did little to muffle the sound of the lesson taking place on the other side. (The two rooms with the door up sometimes acted as a meeting hall). After confiding in the Head the impossibility of doing paired and group work with the children in that room, we were moved to a much better room with a proper wall, with tables and almost enough chairs!

After a brief presentation of myself followed by a short question and answer session, the educator read out a list of 22 seemingly random words which the learners were expected to learn for a spelling test on the following day. Words included ingredients, library, friendly, corrections, kitchen, some of which an eleven year old mother tongue speaker of English would find difficult. The learners repeated the words and were then asked to copy them down from an A4 sheet which was stuck on the board. I was standing pretty close to it and could not read it. I decided I had to ask if everyone could read the words and on finding unsurprisingly that they could not, the educator suggested that the learners come and sit on the floor as near to the board as possible in order to copy down the words.

I went around the classroom and checked as many of the classwork books as possible but it was generally expected that the learners would have copied correctly from the sheet and therefore would learn the correct spellings. This proved not to be the case.

I only mention this as it was apparent from day 1 that teaching methodology was not in evidence and much of classroom time was taken up with testing what learners had managed to learn on their own. Despite this, it was amazing to see just how many learners were able to cope and even excel. On the down side, there were quite a few learners who were completely lost. Fortunately the lesson was a very short one as Assembly had taken up much of the first period.

I would explain this rather old fashioned approach by the fact that the assessments rely very heavily on testing reading and writing skills and writing accuracy is highly prized. Of course, it is only a snapshot of one aspect of the teaching but teacher led rote learning was commonplace.

In the second lesson of the day, I was asked to read out the 22 words. It was a huge test of my ingenuity as I was determined that these would be some of the most exciting words ever uttered, that most children would understand what they meant, that they would be used time and time again by the learners in context, that most children would put up their hands with a contribution and that the words would be written in large letters on the board for them to copy. Elementary teaching methodology.

By the time the learners had completed the copying of the words, I became aware that I was the only teacher in the classroom and had to hurriedly find out what page the class had reached in the book, to skim read the next few pages and come up with a lesson plan - not the best start and certainly not my finest hour!!

I hit the floor running. It was hard to get used to the fact that the learners ranged in age from 9 to 15, that most teachers would regularly absent themselves from class, that there was no bell for the end of lessons resulting in arbitrary lesson lengths, that the 'timetable' which was written in pencil on a sheet of paper in one of the Grade 6 classrooms was not adhered to, that lunch could arrive at any time after 10.30 thus taking out another lesson, that learners were apparently left to their own devices in the playground with no supervision.



Things improved, thank goodness - more of that later

The teaching resources

The important thing to know is that each learner at least in the higher grades i.e. from Grade 5 upward, now has access to the

- 1 a Platinum Course Book at the appropriate Grade;
- 2 a reader in the same series;
- 3 in theory an English dictionary - new in boxes on top of the cupboard
- 4 each learner also has a Grade relevant English, First Additional Language Workbook.

I made the unfortunate mistake of basing all my lesson preparation before going on the latter only to find that the class was using the Platinum Grade 6 Course Book as the main teaching book and the one which contained all the assessments.

Note from people and places: even with thorough and detailed preparation and placement planning, realities on the ground may differ – adaptability is an essential approach to all placements.

The fact that the learners have access to quite good resources is obviously a great improvement on the situation pre-2011. However, both Bob and I have a few reservations about the suitability of the materials on offer.

1. English is taught as an additional language where it is assumed that learners have regular access to the spoken word. This is blatantly not the case. Most learners speak Xhosa or in some cases Zulu at home and in their communities. So English for them is a foreign language far removed from their own click language.
2. The books are mainly aimed at Afrikaans mother tongue speakers who are generally from dual language backgrounds with access to television and mother tongue English speakers.
3. The books deal with often inappropriate situations and use inappropriate language from the majority of learners' point of view. It could be argued that this is a good thing as it takes learners out of their own situation. However, a few chapters set in a typical community setting would be helpful in my view as it would at least recognise that such communities exist.
4. The texts in the books are mainly written in the third person and contain very few dialogues so little that would aid communicative language teaching. Apparently talking about I and You and We is not that important!!! In fact though lip service is paid to it in the teachers' manual, there seems to be scant knowledge of the concept of communicative language teaching.

The staff

Where do I begin? The educators were exuberant, friendly, supportive of one another and of us. They would burst into wonderful singing and even dance on any occasion. The noise in the staffroom would at such times rival any football stadium. They began each day with prayer and their faith was of paramount importance to them.



Below the surface, all of them have faced extreme hardship for much of their lives, most of them are in a better situation now. They have had to struggle against so many odds to get to the position they are in today. Despite their outward outgoing response, underneath one detects the fatigue of years of having been downtrodden.

They have not had all the benefits of the education and training we have received, they do not have access to all the subject specific and general educational literature that we take for granted. Some workshops take place off site but what they are like I do not know. In the UK, creativity and the sharing of innovative ideas are encouraged. I did not see evidence of this there.

The Principal was an exceptionally kind and sensitive man who was aware of the personal circumstances of all his staff. He had been in the school for 12 months first as acting Head until his formal appointment seven months ago. He is an Afrikaans speaker with English as a second language. He is now learning Xhosa. His first task was to obtain chairs and tables for the formerly empty Staff Room. By adding shelves made in his own garage he has established an urn with tea and coffee making facilities and now staff gladly congregate there. He has wisely concentrated on winning over his staff and in his gentle manner he is beginning to urge better time-keeping as a start to changes which must inevitably come.

My colleague

My own teacher colleague confided that she had lived in a shack until six years ago, that she had somehow lost her creativity along the way and for me this was the saddest thing. I hope that as we became a team and she took up the challenge of dramatising her lessons and trying out different methods of group and paired work that she began to rediscover the wealth of creativity that she possesses. What I would have valued more than anything else would have been more time set aside to talk to her, to share and discuss, to plan and evaluate lessons. Taking her out to dinner and going with her to her Women's Fellowship Meeting were the best things for establishing our friendship.

The accommodation

We stayed in the Beach House at Fifth Avenue which was a wonderful haven. Anthea, Mush and their team are lovely people, so friendly and helpful in every way. Theresa's cooking was incredibly good and it was lovely to come home to beautifully prepared and presented meals from Monday through to Thursday and not to have to worry about going out to eat when we were often pretty tired. Anthea and Mush were also a mine of information and had interesting friends and guests visiting. Anthea does a lot of work in a township school herself and has a very worthwhile project in the pipeline for providing learners with recyclable shoes. We really felt at home in this comfortable and welcoming guest house and would heartily recommend it to anyone.

Possible improvements to the project

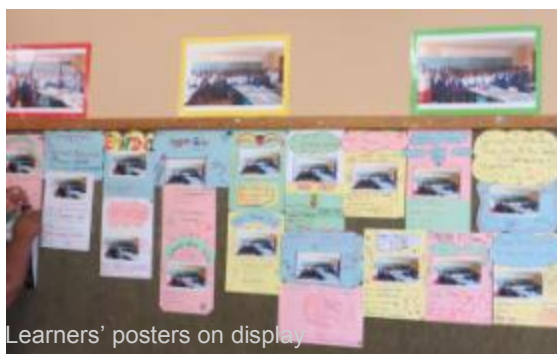
- First of all establishing set times for talking to one's teacher colleague especially at the very beginning to give that teacher the opportunity to set the scene, talk about the learners, say what s/he hoped to get out of this collaboration. It is also important that the teaching remains collaborative and that both colleagues stay in the classroom observing and trying out new techniques.
- Having a reliable timetable with a bell to mark the end of classes. I bought a clock for the classroom and this improved the situation considerably. Knowing that one lesson lasts for an hour would help with planning and delivery. Some lessons went on for 2 hours and some classes arrived for brief periods - as short as ten minutes - before being sent on to a different teacher to catch up on work missed. Though this confused me for the first two weeks, I found that this ad hoc arrangement amongst staff was actually necessary to ensure that classes did not fall behind. For example 6B English was programmed for Friday afternoons but the class was NEVER held so 6B was in danger of being 1 out of every 5 classes down each week for the entire year.
- Where volunteers are qualified in specific subject teaching skills, sharing these with all the subject teachers in the school could be a benefit. Possibly one of the most effective contributions was Bob's workshop on communicative methodology to English teaching staff. One thing that did strike home to them was my ten minute lesson entirely in Italian. It reminded them just how difficult it is to learn what is effectively for most learners a foreign language and just how much repetition is required for new vocabulary to stick. Techniques for doing this effectively can be learned.

Note: we share all volunteers' reports in full with our local partner – in this case with Paul at Calabash – so that volunteers' recommendations and suggestions can be discussed directly with the project principals. Not everything can be achieved immediately, of course, but this is part of long-term development.

My assessment of the experience

I appreciated the difficulties faced by my teacher - her family situation, the hardships she has undergone, the demands on her time, her health problems, her concerns for her learners. I felt that given the limitations placed on her by all these constraints, she was already doing a good job and that at least half her learners were progressing well. Many of these children are incredibly bright.

I felt that there were areas where I could show her by example that a communicative methodology would involve the whole class rather than the few. Tragically, the learners who throughout their school careers had missed out were irrevocably lost. There was no remedial help available inside or outside the classroom except for the precious few who could afford it. Hopefully one of the new volunteer programmes being set up by the other People and Places volunteer, Susan, will provide much needed help in this area.



Note: and is most definitely something which is being followed up, by current volunteers Susan and Sonia, soon to be joined by volunteer Abbey ... (March 2015)

It was not up to me to impose but to invite. I felt that my colleague and I had as good a relationship as anyone could expect to build in the month we worked together.

We had the makings of a good team. The fact that she was absent due to ill health meant that she was not present for the preparation of group work which was a real shame as she really enjoyed the creative element of actually producing the posters.

In the end, I was heartened to find that we managed to cover

- exploitation of text in teaching rather than testing mode which was all I had observed until I demonstrated the teaching mode
- paired work - dividing the class into A and B learners to learn dialogues - a new technique for my teacher. We even succeeded in getting the children to move around the classroom - a much more stimulating experience for them.
- power point presentations which I also had to learn to do were a valuable means of taking the learners outside the classroom. They were awe-struck by the Tsunami and by snakes in Limpopo.
- dramatisation which my teacher embraced wholeheartedly after the second week - even earning applause from the learners.
- group work (6 per group) working on producing posters for a fund raising event - discussion of what they were raising funds for, how the poster should look, how to make the most eye-catching and attractive poster, information required etc...
- displays of children's group work on the wall. It is always extremely motivating to see that their work is valued.
- they received emails from our grand-daughters and have written them beautifully decorated letters in return which I have delivered to two overjoyed girls.

I did not dare to hope in my wildest dreams that we would be able to do all these things. Of course I would need to stay for another six months to really help with these methods. I will keep in touch with my teacher as a friend and will also send her all sorts of materials, lesson plans and suggestions as I have brought a very old copy of the book home with me.



The truth is that nothing can prepare you fully for a voluntary placement. It is only after being there that I fully appreciate the difficulties that schools face. It is hard to prepare someone for a teaching role in a situation which is so fluid - where new teachers and new learners are arriving every day, where new roles and new rooms are being assigned to existing teachers and where very few recognisable patterns in timetabling have been established early in the school year.

But, the children are an absolute joy to be with. They are bright, enthusiastic and eager to learn. They are well behaved and courteous. They responded, whatever their age, to the ridiculous songs we taught them - their absolute favourite being the Hokey Cokey which all 360 of our combined learners duly performed on the school playground on our last day before eating chocolate cake! What a wonderful memory to take away with us!

Thank you People and Places and Calabash Trust for this unique opportunity to experience and share in the lives of these lovely people with their amazing sense of community. Emafini means 'to the clouds' and the school motto is 'the sky's the limit'. Our fervent hope is that the majority of those young people will reach their potential and be justly rewarded.

Please note – this report is supplied by a former volunteer and the contents are intended solely for your information and personal use. *people and places* has permission to publish this information to you as a future volunteer.

Please check with us if you would like to publish it beyond your own circle of friends and family. Thank you.