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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

Jane Coomber & Robin Meakings - A V Bukani Primary School, Nomathansanque, Eastern Cape, South Africa, 5th to 30th September 2011

Pre departure preparation

It was useful to have reports from previous volunteers. We would probably have benefited from contacting them before the placement, however, practicalities (we were in a camper van in New Zealand!) meant that we did not get round to doing so.

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement

The session we had with Paul at Calabash was comprehensive and helpful.

What did we do well?

- Providing a detailed breakdown of how our money would be spent (few other volunteering organisations seem to provide this).
- Matching our skills and experience to the project (ditto).
- Calabash looked after us very well; we appreciated the weekly meetings with Paul, and the 'extra-curricular' activities they organised for us.

Your experience and work – including what resources you may have left behind and with whom
We worked mainly in the computer suite at the school, with the aim of helping the teachers, and therefore the learners too, get more out of the educational software (CAMI). This involved training sessions with the teachers (a model lesson using the software, and a session on obtain reports on learners' progress). We also corrected the learner database to allow each teacher to get accurate reports about the progress of the learners in their class. In addition three database administrators were given training on how to administer the database, to keep it correct and up to date. We also gave training sessions, both formal and informal, covering Microsoft Word, for example creating classroom resources, and Excel, for example creating marking sheets to calculate percentage scores and grade for each student.

Robin also helped the grade 4 Technology teacher create a scheme of work for the Systems and Control module, and delivered some of the lessons with her. (This involved creating and racing cardboard buggies, a practical activity which the children much enjoyed.)

Just before we arrived both the Principal's and the clerk's computers had been stolen. We assisted with installing the SA-SAMS software on the clerk's replacement computer, and acquiring the most recent backup copy (unfortunately 18 months old) of the database from the SAMS helpdesk.

We left behind written guidelines for teachers on how to get the most from the CAMI software, and how to access the CAMI reports. These guidelines were posted on the wall of the computer lab, and also on a memory stick we left with the teacher responsible for the computer lab, along with guidelines for the CAMI database administrators and some example mark sheets.

Your recommendations for the input of future volunteers – a particular area of your work which could be continued by others and how would you suggest this could be done?

A volunteer with IT and training skills could look into the use of the SA-SAMS software and how it is used; we felt the school could get much more benefit if this software were fully and correctly used.

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One area which we felt worth investigating is the automatic production of end of term reports, at present there is a lot of manual copying out of information by teachers which should be available from SA-SAMS. In addition, had we had more time we'd have trained the principal and clerk in basic procedures such as taking backups.

The wireless network in the computer lab works well, but a network expert could include the Principal's and clerk's computers within the network, and create 'user areas' for the staff so that they can store documents they have created and access them from any computer. In addition, the network could be connected to the Internet (when we left only the Principal had Internet access) and virus checking software should be updated.

It would be good to know whether teachers are continuing to adopt our suggestions on getting the most from CAMI, and making good use of the progress reports available.

Successes and disappointments of your placement

Successes were getting the CAMI database up to date so that teachers can get really useful reports on their students' progress. And seeing the children's' evident enjoyment of their technology lessons. It was disappointing though not to have enough time to do everything we'd have liked to do!

What was the highlight of your volunteer experience?

- The friendly way we were welcomed by teachers and staff alike.
- Working with children who valued the opportunity to learn was a pleasure.
- We really enjoyed the children's singing at morning assembly; they often started singing tunefully and in unison even before their teacher arrived!

Would you recommend volunteering to other people? If so, please tell us why?

Yes, it is very satisfying to be able to use one's skills and knowledge in a setting where they can be of real practical help. And we both felt we learnt a lot too.

Would you advise others against volunteering? If so, please tell us why?

I would not advise anyone against volunteering, but I (Jane) feel if I'd gone alone I would have found it much harder, and perhaps been quite lonely. That's obviously a very personal view, but I very much valued working as a team together with Robin.

How did you spend your leisure time?

We spent weekends in Port Elizabeth, not doing much, just relaxing and shopping for resources e.g. items needed for buggy-making!

Calabash organised a city tour and a shebeen evening, both of which we enjoyed.

We also spent a weekend at the Addo Elephant Park; Calabash provided the transport and a very enjoyable game drive.

In the weekday evenings we planned our next day's work, read, talked to our hosts, and watched our host's TV.

How was your accommodation?

We stayed with one of the teachers and his wife in the township. They made us very welcome. We had a comfortable room, and the food was good. The whole township had no running water for the first 10 days we were there, this we soon learned was one of the realities of township life!

I hope this is helpful!

Jane Coomber and Robin Meakings

PS: Paul: thanks for the recommendation to stay at The Backpacker in Cape Town, we stayed there for almost a week and it was great!

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Thank you.