

A De La Salle Teacher in the Eastern Cape

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"Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, the son of a mineworker can become the owner of a mine and the child of a farm-worker can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another."

Not the words of some 'crusty' old secondary school teacher, as I have regularly told the pupils at De La Salle, St. Helens, but the words of one of the twentieth century's greatest men - Nelson Mandela - and the prime motivation in my application in March 2001 to spend my summer holidays in Africa. I had heard about Link Community Development from a T.E.S. article extolling the virtues of formal links between schools in the Northern Hemisphere and those in the South (between developed and developing countries, the first and the third world in the less politically correct parlance of the past). I had also longed to go to South Africa partly from a childhood affinity with Michael Caine, cockneying his way to stardom at Rorke's drift, and partly because my maternal grandfather had been there as an army medical orderly in the Boer War (a man I admired so much I took his eloquent Edwardian Christian name for confirmation).

South Africa had also been central to my adolescent awakening of interest in the history we are a part of : a tattered paperback with Sharpeville in the title was probably the first serious non-fiction text I read (as far back as 1964) at a time when black consciousness was awakening world wide and Mandela, Biko, Tutu and Boesak were to my white liberal consciousness part of my heroic pantheon alongside John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Archbishop Romero. Like millions world wide I had followed the rugby boycotts, Free Nelson Mandela pop concerts, the cruelty of white against black and black against black in the bloody years of the Soweto inspired uprisings - and then the glorious days of Mandela released blinking into the sunshine and the world's press, his heart-warming words of forgiveness and reconciliation despite a lifetime of incarceration and vilification (27 years which included the infamous Robben Island whose white stone quarries almost blinded him), his prevention of the long anticipated blood-bath and the triumph of democracy encapsulated in the images crowds of first generation voters snaking their way deep into the bush and townships. Given such a history who would then not want to visit the land of Mandela, to witness first hand the triumph of the human spirit that is modern day South Africa and to work with the children whose task it will be to safeguard its future and to conquer the twin evils of crime and Aids which threaten prematurely to stifle this fledgling democracy.

Needless to say I was delighted with my placement in Qumbu Village Senior Secondary School - even if a little taken aback by the school development plan which I received shortly before flying out with the other 22 'Global Teachers' who were to be scattered over the mountains and villages (lalis) of the Eastern Cape. In the dark days of apartheid, the Eastern Cape was the Transkei, a nominally independent homeland populated by poor farmers and broken families (fathers working in the gold mines of Johannesburg, mothers in the houses of their wealthy white neighbours, children victims of the Bantu education act designed to prepare them to service the needs of the white minority). In A Long Walk to Freedom Nelson Mandela described the land of his birth in these terms:

"The Transkei is 800 miles east of Cape Town, 550 miles south of Johannesburg, and lies between the Kei River and the Natal border, between the rugged Drakensburg mountains to the north and the blue waters of the Indian Ocean to the east. It is a beautiful country of rolling hills, fertile valleys and a thousand rivers and streams which keep the landscape green even in winter. The Transkei used to be one of the largest territorial divisions within South Africa covering an area the size of Switzerland, with a population of about three and a half million Xhosas and a tiny minority of Basothos and whites. It is home to the Thembu people, who are part of the Xhosa nation, of which I am a member."

Today, the Eastern Cape is one of the poorest regions of South Africa. Forty-five kilometres west of Umtata - a large town with its own university and airport, despite sounding like an invention of Rider Haggard - lies the village of Qumbu built alongside the tarmacked road which goes East to Durban and west to Cape Town - eventually. It is surrounded by rolling hills down from which some of the children of Qumbu walk to school. Others are driven in the back of the pick-up trucks (bakkies) or take the crowded minibus taxis which are sometimes reliable but which also have a reputation for exploitation of young girls who cannot pay their fares and for whom Aids is an ever present threat to their young lives.

A short climb up a dirt track which leaves the tarmacked road at a sharp right-angle leads you to Qumbu Village Senior Secondary School. Continuing past a bright yellow sign, which proclaims the school motto ('Without God We Labour In Vain'), some incongruous public telephones surrounded by aloe vera bushes and a pile of rubble you come to the main school buildings: three single storey blocks with a water tank at the end of each (water can be scarce especially in the hot summer months), a grassed area, in front of a low verandah, used for assemblies and corrugated toilet blocks in the fields which roll away to meet the grasslands surrounding the school in one direction and a dirt road into the village in the other. I had walked up to the school from my lodgings the evening I had arrived and visited the undecorated, graffiti covered classrooms, the broken windows and furniture and the charred remains of an outer building (destroyed by fire five years ago and only now being replaced from money that the school has had to painstakingly raise from parents). I wondered then how I could possibly make an impact in such a place and what kind of an education the 726 learners, whose ages ranged from 15 to an unimaginable 25, could possibly receive here.

Schools are however more than bricks and mortar as I was reassured to discover the next day. There was frost on the ground when the smiling deputy Archie Willem picked me up at 7.30 to drive me the short distance to school. (Archie was a lovely man. He looked after me in Qumbu, showed me the local bars and even drove to Umtata to buy me an expensive bottle of Glenfiddich for my birthday.) The young people immaculately turned out in yellow and blue uniforms assembled on the grass in front of the teachers, late comers running, I later learnt, to avoid the switch they were greeted with on arrival. Corporal punishment has been banned in South African schools since 1994, but it is still as much a part of the everyday experience in many schools as chalk and blackboards. A prayer and some words of encouragement in Xhosa from one of the older teachers, a simple instruction in English to 'sing', an introduction from a single member of the choir and the whole school suddenly burst into song. Serendipity - a moment so unexpected and moving that I will remember it all my life! And this pattern was repeated everyday for the five weeks of my stay in Qumbu. Africans seem to have the innate capacity to sing and dance without the slightest degree of self-consciousness. It is something we in the more restrained Northern Hemisphere could learn from them. Africans also never tire of making speeches. I was welcomed with words of glowing praise and then called upon for the first of many occasions to address the assembled ranks with words of (dubious) wisdom. The school day then began in earnest. Classes mixed by age and gender went to the classrooms where they would stay all day. A traditional curriculum of maths, science, English, history, geography, economics, agriculture and Xhosa leads to a matriculation diploma in as little as four years although some learners had to repeat a year or returned to school after a period of absence. Teaching is in English even though the people of the Eastern Cape, like Nelson Mandela, speak Xhosa. This is surprisingly little resented - unlike Afrikaans which was fiercely resisted in the 1980's when the Afrikaner government attempted to impose this on the townships and which was the spark which lit the Soweto riots and ultimate revolution. What strikes a teacher from England are not only the overcrowded classrooms and scarce resources - classes of 50 or 60 were not unusual - but the traditional curriculum.

As an English teacher I had the pleasure of teaching Macbeth and explaining its Jacobean and Scottish context to classes of 19 - 21 year old learners for whom English is a second language, sitting in groups of five around a copy of the textbook. Shakespeare is never easy but to study it upside down is a particular challenge. These were in effect opportunities to demonstrate good practice and share ideas with colleagues as I did also in teaching their examination anthology (a mixture of poems in English by African poets and the sort of twentieth and pre-twentieth century poems found in any standard English anthology of the 1960s). My favourite class however was one I took to cover for a teacher who was long-term absent without leave (a frequent problem in African schools) and was able to explore the theme of 'a day in the life'

using photographs brought with me from some of my own pupils at De La Salle, St.Helens. They thought English learners were very beautiful, very committed and very rich. It is however their commitment to learning in the most trying of circumstances and the warmth of their welcome that was the most memorable aspect of my visit.

My role also involved supporting the headteacher, Mrs Mvana, in rewriting their school development planning - a new phenomenon for schools in South Africa as it was for schools in England only ten years ago. As I mentioned earlier the school development plan which I received before coming to the Eastern Cape did at first seem very daunting. When asked to list areas of concern, reference had been made to shortages of furniture, classrooms and teachers, a scarcity of water, vandalism, lack of co-operation, absenteeism and punctuality of learners and educators, lack of discipline, use of drugs on school premises, crime in nearby locations (including learners involved in car hijackings) and the carrying of weapons to school. Indeed Qumbu village had gained a reputation for violence and even murder dating back to the burning of black homes and the murder of a white family only five years previously. Set against this background the achievement of the school as a beacon of stability was remarkable and made me determined on my return to the UK to do a small part in supporting its future growth and development through a formal link.

On the bus back to the airport for my flight home I tried to identify what my visit to South Africa had taught me - a toe in the water compared to all those who have devoted years on VSO or in support of the various charitable agencies. So what had I learnt?

- **Firstly the warmth of the African people.** I had been made to feel very welcome at school, in the family I had been lodged with and, despite its reputation, on the streets of Qumbu. In a short time I had made strong friendships with people who were prepared to go out of their way to ensure my safety and to celebrate my visit (the whole school decamped to the village hall for a day of dancing, singing and feasting to say goodbye to me) . They were also very generous and supportive of each other, clubbing together to pay for funerals and sharing food and materials with those in need.
- **Their love of ceremony and celebrations** and the spontaneity of their singing and dancing which reflects a genuine joy in living.
- **Simple religious faith** which seems to underpin every assembly and gathering, whether a prayer to begin a meeting or the words of the beautiful anthem 'Nkosi Sikelel i Afrika'.
- **A high crime rate** (most teachers have guns) and a culture of violence symbolised by the sjamboks on sale in every market, the heavily armed police and the history of brutality which crosses racial barriers (the horrific practice of necklacing is a South African invention.)
- **The Aids epidemic.** Despite the reluctance of President Mbeki to acknowledge the connection between HIV and Aids there is a great national awareness of the Aids epidemic across Africa. Advertisements on buses and tele-kom cards; an Aids monument and memorial park in Durban, for instance.
- Orwell once commented on the different universes that people inhabit. In South Africa, this is a **juxtaposition of two worlds which exist in close proximity**. Modern cities such as Durban and Johannesburg, airports and motorways, Macdonalds and KFCs, satellite television and well manicured gardens side by side with shanty towns of corrugated shacks, barefoot children living in rondavels, widespread unemployment and circumcision ceremonies which have been unchanged for centuries. In rural South Africa, children are wrapped tightly to their mother's back, heavy objects are carried on people's heads, clothes are still washed in the river and animals slaughtered in public. Yet in the former Transkei, even in areas of poverty there were well educated individuals, more graduates than there were jobs for and modern houses with a high degree of comfort.

- **African time is a lot more flexible than English time.** A fifteen minute delay can easily stretch to two hours, a class period can be shortened or abandoned at will, a few days sick leave can extend to a month or more.
- **Finally,** despite the traditional rites of passage a young South African is prepared to accept greater indignity for the sake of learning than someone of similar age in England. It would be hard to imagine a 19 year old in the U.K. being prepared to dress so formally for school, to accept punishment without complaint or to wash their uniform in the river every night as many do in Qumbu.

It is not, however, the differences between people from the north and south but our similarities which are most striking. Teachers and learners are in many ways the same the world over. Mandela's words which opened this account, and those below which end it, are as relevant for the children of De La Salle, St. Helens as they are for the learners of Qumbu Village Senior Secondary School. It is belief in education and in their ability to change the world that will empower young people across the world. It is in our support for the Link Africa Project ([hyperlink - http:// www.lcd.org.uk](http://www.lcd.org.uk)) that we hope to make this clear to those we teach and celebrate the fact that whether English or South African we are citizens of the same world and children of the same God. I am sure St. John Baptist De La Salle would have approved.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves: Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to manifest the glory of God within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others."