

## SCHOOL VISITS REPORT:

### EAST LONDON

12 & 13 May 2015

After an absence of many years, this was to be our first trip back to the Eastern Cape to visit, in particular, the rural schools situated in East London. We visited schools in the Berlin, Kei Road, Thornhill, Whittlesea and Seymour areas - we made it to 7 of the planned 8 schools (3 schools on day 1 plus 4 schools on day 2). We completely underestimated just “how rural” these schools were: the terrain covered was mostly gravel roads, literally over valleys and hills & through numerous little villages. To say that we were taken by surprise at the actual “size and resources available at the schools” would be an understatement. I have to admit that when we pulled up at the first school, we felt that our driver had made a mistake – “is this it, is this the high school – are you sure?”, we asked of him. In fact, a couple of times during the trip we checked with him to make sure that he was quite sure of where he was going and more importantly, that he was sure he had enough petrol should we need to turn back – this because we felt we were driving along “in the middle of nowhere”.



It felt as if we had stepped somewhat back in time. It was amazing to see that herds of cattle (goats, sheep, pigs & cows) were still being ushered along by their keeper - small groups of 6 OR much larger groups that could easily have been 60+. We did not see a single horse - donkeys seemed to be the preferred “workhorse” ☺.



### Overall impressions (comparison to the more urban schools visited):

- It is at these schools where the ASF impact is really felt and truly appreciated:
  - Staff members knew exactly who we were and what service we provided
  - Learners were clear about what the award was to be used for and what was expected of them
- Learners are transported by busses/taxis to the schools (a school could be servicing between 3-7 little villages)
- The passion for the profession and commitment to the learner was evident at all the schools we visited
- Learners are well disciplined (it seemed inbred rather than imposed), they took pride in and were all very neatly attired in their uniforms (despite being in such isolated areas)
- Challenges were tackled in a positive manner, rather than being lamented as an “additional burden” by both staff and learners

- Where possible, sport is played (soccer and netball) albeit in isolation (distances between villages make it difficult and costly for schools to engage with each other)
- We were completely shocked to hear that access to and use of drugs, since last year, was becoming a problem at ALL the schools we visited. We could not fathom how, in areas that were so desolate, drugs had found its way into the communities.
- From an ASF administrative point of view, we could now have more empathy with the Bursary representative when s/he stated that “we have not yet been able to go into town to fax back the signed list required by your office” (a 2 – 3hr trip to town and back) OR when a learner expressed difficulty in posting their report or thank you letter.
- Communities value education and are concerned with the children’s future (at one school –Student Governing Body members were there to meet us). Money to do proper maintenance is an issue, but there are no signs of vandalism at the schools.
- Our visit, in itself, seemed to serve as an affirmation that the institution mattered – that they were not just this “backward little place in the middle of nowhere trying to make the most of what was available”.

### **SILIMELA HIGH SCHOOL – Day 1 (12 May 2015)**

The school was officially opened in 1976 and was named after Chief Silimela Makinana. This is the ONLY high school in the area servicing seven villages. Learners come via transport provided by the Department of Education from as far as 14km away. There are a total of 362 learners (49 of these learners are supported by the ASF) and 16 educators at the school (quite a number of the educators were former learners from the school). Most children at the school are from child headed households or live with relatives – their parents/guardians are forced to seek employment and thus live in the towns. In a number of instances, this has led to an increase in behavioural challenges. The need for parents to seek employment in the nearby towns has also had an impact on the enrolment numbers at the school - the principal recalls numbers of 1200 (prior to 1999). However, over the years the lack of infrastructure & development has also led to entire families migrating to the towns.

The school has no sporting facilities, since inter-school interaction is virtually non existent. The school lacks even the most basic requirements e.g. furniture. They are forced to recycle and fix the old chairs and use some of the left over steel to make burglar bars for classrooms. There is no proper sanitation and water. One of the educators Mr Prasad took it upon himself to approach his fellow churchgoers and since 2008 they have been making collections for basic requirements (a water tank for the school, food parcels and the purchase of uniforms for a number of learners).



The matric pass rate dropped considerably in 2014 compared to previous years – it is felt that the recent policy adopted by the department of education – that of learners not being failed more than once in their FET phase (gr10 – gr12) – is partially to blame. It has resulted in a learner who has already failed and still underperforms in grade 11, to be promoted into grade 12. It is then no surprise that they fail or perform poorly in matric, which makes further studies an even bigger challenge and many end up roaming the streets.

It is noted that, since 2013, drug usage has become a problem. In an effort to curb access, parents are discouraged from giving learners any monies to bring to school. It is felt that a meal is provided (school feeding scheme), hence there is no need for the learner to be given additional funds.

Despite their many challenges learners are highly motivated, educators are passionate and the levels of enthusiasm, the desire to achieve is encouraging.

## NOWAWE HIGH SCHOOL

This is home to a total of 336 learners and 11 educators - 34 of the learners are ASF bursars. We arrived at the school just as interval came to an end and were warmly received by Mr Nair (Principal and ASF bursary representative). He promptly gathered our bursars who were enthusiastic and excited to meet us. Our conversation with the bursars was interactive and we advised them to strongly consider continuing their studies at TVET colleges should they not immediately get in at University level. Grade 12 learners seemed mindful of what they want to become in the future and expressed gratitude for the Information Pamphlets handed out.

On enquiring of Mr Nair (who at the time was the chief invigilating officer) regarding the matriculants (12 of them) who were implicated in the 2014 final exam cheating saga, he informed that their parents had rented a house close to the school where learners gathered and studied in groups, hence they gave similar answers to exam questions. Since investigations are still underway the implicated learners had not yet received their results. Mr Nair highlighted that there is no real concrete evidence of wrongdoing and the delay in making the results known is causing much frustration. Having experienced the long distances between the villages, we could understand the logic behind the grade 12 parents agreeing to have their children stay closer to the centre where exams were being written and having them support each other in preparation for their final exams. We spent about 30min at the school before we had to rush off to the next school – 1.5 hr drive.



## SMILING VALLEY FARM SCHOOL

Finding this school was no easy task. The estimated 1.5hrs turned into 2hrs of driving back and forth, but we eventually found it – with just 10 min to spare before the end of the school day. This is a Junior School where 329 learners are registered (grade R – grade 9). 58 of these learners are in grade 8 and 9. The ASF only assist learners from grade 8 upwards and we have 33 bursars registered at this school. The principal was ecstatic that we made it and immediately informed the staff and learners that we had arrived. It was wonderful that everyone was only too happy to stay at school longer to attend the impromptu assembly that the principal then called for – including the transport gents. The school does not have a hall so we gathered outside to have the assembly. Learners greeted us in song and sang with great enthusiasm – smiling from ear to ear.

This is a rather isolated school built in close proximity to the N6 Route between Kei Road and East London – the school services the surrounding farms. Learners are completely dependant on transport provided by the department of education to get to school – if they miss the bus there is no way they can get to school. It is interesting to note that Smiling Valley is a public school built on a private property that is owned by the Catholic Church. The principal notes that it is somewhat like working for two bosses, where they have to adhere to the Department of Education and Catholic' moral code as well. It does have a positive effect on discipline and the principal is the first to praise his learners on their excellent behaviour. Here too, there is no interaction with other schools. They have partnered with a school in UK (Burchell High School) – which also affords educators the opportunity to travel abroad and share ideas which enhances their teaching proficiency.



Funding for such trips is organised by their UK counterpart. Travelling takes place over the June holidays to ensure minimum impact on the learners.

There is no proper sanitation and the school has no running water. Educators share rest rooms (toilets) with learners. The school has a water tank, which lasts for about two months and if there is no rain then learners bring water from home. Regardless of the fact that we arrived at the eleventh hour, educators and learners willingly stayed until we were done – again affirming the interest and passion that the educators and learners have for their education. Photos aplenty was taken and we departed amidst squeals of delight and good wishes.



## IKHWEZI SECONDARY SCHOOL – Day 2 (13 May 2015)

Good heavens – finding Smiling Valley Farm School was a challenge, but navigating our way to Ikhwezi Secondary School was nothing short of miraculous. I was convinced that we were lost and kept glancing at the petrol tank. However, our driver was quite confident so we sat back and relaxed into “the adventure”.

It was slow going - the rocky, potholed road snaked through the mountain and the herds of cows and goats demanded their “right of way”. On one occasion a bakkie passed us and for a while we plodded along in the thick orange dust it left in its wake. Dotted along the road were older folk of the surrounding villages who were employed to fill the potholes. Armed with just a spade and rake we wondered how much they could actually do to mend this kind of road – especially since they seemed to have to gather the clay from the side of the mountain and use it on the road – this in addition to the fact that they were “grandmothers and grandfathers”. However, this is seen as a Godsend for them, since the area offers no other opportunities.



We finally got to the school after an hour’s bumpy drive and was warmly received by the Principal (Mr Ntlemeza) who had a learner and her guardian in his office – he asked them to excuse him for a while so that he could attend to us. Mr Ntlemeza immediately drew our attention to the two individuals he had in his office. He informed us that the guardian and himself were engaged in conversation with the learner – trying to discourage her from dropping out of school (grade 11). Since last year (2014) the school had been challenged with learners that were getting large amount of monies from the government (R150000). This money was meant to compensate families that were moved from their original homes (in Sterkspruit) to where they now find themselves. The compensation battle was a long one and as such some parents are no longer there to receive these monies. The children were mentioned as beneficiaries and therefore the government allocated the funds to the children. It is these children that now do not see the point of further attending school. For them these are large amounts of cash - they assume it can sustain them for long, even boast to educators that they have these large sums of money and many sadly opt to drop out of school. One would have thought these funds would be put in trust for the youngsters so that they could only access it after having turned 21yrs.



Conditions here were much the same as we experienced at the other schools we visited. Again – the mention of drugs becoming a problem and the fact that there are children with large sums of money at their disposal did little to minimize the challenge. We met with our Bursary Representative and the 21 ASF bursars where we addressed some of the issues highlighted by the principal and advised on various issues especially careers (what to consider when choosing a career, where, when and how to apply for bursaries and admission criteria at higher education institutions). Two ladies (Specialists for Maths and Life Sciences from the Department of Education - Cradock District) arrived whilst we were still busy with the kids and they participated in the discussion.

### FUNDA HIGH SCHOOL

There are 21 educators and 570 learners registered at the school – 33 learners are beneficiaries of the African Scholars’ Fund. The school grounds are well kept and the learners, who were outside enjoying their lunch break, were well disciplined and noticeably curious about “the visitors”. Those that gathered around directed us to the Principal’s office where we met with the HOD and the ASF Bursary Representative. It was interesting to note that the staff complement were also served the basic “samp and beans” meal that the learners received.

Here, too, was a school that faced a number of challenges and our attention was particularly drawn to the fact that the shortage of educators resulted in the school not being able to offer a wider choice of subjects. This had, in turn, led to a decline in enrolment figures.

In 2014 the matric pass rate dropped to a disappointing 61%. The fact that the grade 11 learners had no textbooks in 2013 impacted hugely on their readiness for their matric year 2014. Much was done to try and get them up to speed, but the results were a clear indication of the negative effect of the non delivery of 2013 textbooks.

Drugs, again, is a major problem, but sadly there are no facilities to keep learners busy after school. Educators are determined to assist those learners that are committed to and focussed on their academics and especially the grade 12

learners are assisted with completing and submitting application forms regarding their further studies. The school keeps in touch with and have a good relationship with former students and those who have achieved/succeeded are invited to come and motivate the current cohort of students.



When the lunch break was over and the learners were back in their classrooms, the ASF Bursary Representative was able to gather our 33 bursars together. We had a quick inspirational chat, reminded them of their responsibility to the ASF and fielded their many questions. The group was very interactive and there were a couple of bright sparks that did not hesitate to share their dreams and hopes for their future. We had time for a few pictures, which the learners loved having done and then made our way to the next school on our list. Funda High School is located close to the actual Town (Whittlesea) and the learners do not experience the same sense of isolation that was so prevalent with the previous schools visited.

### **EKUPHUMLENI SECONDARY SCHOOL**

This school is located in the town of Whittlesea, so it is no wonder that the number of learners here are substantially higher - there are 875 learners enrolled at this school and 66 of them receive support from the ASF. The Annual SADTU AGM was in session at a nearby hall on the day of the visit and both the principal and the ASF Bursary Representative were in attendance. Our Bursary Rep was aware of our visit and had left word that she was to be called from the meeting when we arrived. Ekuphumleni used to be one of our problem schools (signed list were not returned, learners did not send their reports or re-application forms), so when the HOD met with us, as we were waiting on our Bursary Rep, she jokingly remarked “oh are you the ASF people who kept giving us headaches” 😊.



After a short while our Bursary Rep made her appearance and when Ms Maxazanza saw us, she exclaimed that “I am delighted to finally see the faces of the ASF”!. It did not take her long to gather the 66 ASF bursars in a classroom where we met with them. They were attentive and interacted freely with Nthutu and myself. We turned our focus to the grade 9 bursars (what to consider when choosing subjects, staying at school VS finishing off at FET College, deciding on a career and understanding that your interests & hobbies inform on the career choice that could be best suited to you, etc). The grade 12s needed information on bursaries regarding their further studies and guidance on how to go about pursuing their chosen careers should they not qualify to attend an institute of higher learning. We gave as much insight as time allowed, handed out the grade 12 Information Pamphlet and informed the grade 9 bursars that they would receive Advice Booklets in July.

Highlighting the challenges faced at Ekuphumleni would be a mere re-iteration of those very challenges present at the other schools we had visited.

### **THOBELANI HIGH SCHOOL**

Thobelani was about an hour’s drive from Whittlesea - again we arrived just as the school day ended. This did not deter the Principal and our 47 bursars who, along with 3 of the SGB members, keenly waited for us. We gathered in one of the classrooms and they were all quite happy for us to meet and chat for as long as we needed to. There was a lovely sense of fellowship and mutual trust, and it was especially encouraging that the Principal and SGB showed such interest in what we had to share with the learners.



We addressed various issues; respect for the self and others, responsibility, drugs and relationships, discipline and the need to have a vision for the future. It was evident that the grade 12 learners were informed and have conducted some

research, with the assistance of their teachers, and as such have elected the right mix of subjects in relation to their particular career choices. In addition to handing out the grade 12 Information Pamphlets, we further advised them to apply to higher education institutions in good time and to make doubly sure that they are aware of the relevant entry requirements.

When the principal invited that a word of thanks be given, a young female bursar literally jumped from the desk in order to ensure that she be afforded the opportunity to address us. She did so with such confidence and sincerity that it left us thinking: “yep, that’s an ASF Ambassador – right there ☺ “. Thereafter one of the SGB members (Luthando Gwayi) added his expression of gratitude to that of the young learner and informed us that he was also an ex bursar of our fund (1995). After a short “photo session” the learners were dismissed. We had one more school to visit, but we realised that we had, in fact, run completely out of time. When we called the school to inform them as such, disappointment was expressed but our apology was gracefully accepted.

We were then invited to have a quick bite with the Principal and SGB members in the Principal’s office. This was extremely thoughtful of them as we were starving from the long drives with no food consumption (there was literally nowhere we could buy food as we journeyed from one school to the next). The simple chicken and salad proved an absolute feast and provided the necessary sustenance for the 3.5hr drive to East London for our flight back home! We gratefully touched down at Cape Town International at 21h30.



“Enkosi Vuyisa, these visits would not have been possible without you. There is absolutely NO WAY we would have found our way to even the very first school. You got us there safely and in one piece (on the outside atleast, since the bumpy roads must have shaken some bits of us out of alignment☺)”.

#### **ON A MORE PERSONAL NOTE:**

Although we were very inspired with the commitment, discipline & enthusiasm we experienced over the two days, we also felt somewhat heavy hearted - one could not help but wonder what opportunities would be available for these learners when they complete their grade 12. There is absolutely no industry, no opportunity, no resources, little to no outside interaction. The only way to engage with Life outside is to leave the little village – either to work or study further. And should you choose to stay in your little village, you would end up possibly starting a family, tending your little garden, herding your few heads of cattle, communing with the neighbours before resting your body at night simply to start the cycle again in the morning. I wondered if these villages, of itself, would one day cease to be – as the younger ones left to make more of a life for themselves, leaving the older folk to carry on with their relatively “simple lives” until there is no one left to carry on. It seems unacceptable – this eeking out of a life, this splitting of the family nucleus, this survival on a day to day basis.

Despite making this observation however, we did not feel a “sense of despair” . Could it simply be that we “city dwellers” would find it difficult to ease into this way of life – a life so devoid of our taken for granted creature comforts? Every moment in life presents a lesson – every lesson impacts differently on the individual, and the essence of who you are might just reveal itself in the impact of this “second hand” insight / report.

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