

Education African style: a study in contrasts

Ian Wren spent six weeks in South Africa and Tanzania researching African education



In 2008, Alexandra, my then 18-year-old eldest daughter, volunteered to work at an Edmund Rice School in Arusha, Tanzania. She spent five months volunteering and teaching at the Sinon Secondary School. Alexandra had just finished VCE, so to be teaching English classes of over 50 students, including two nuns both in their 40s, was quite a challenge.

Hearing about her experiences sparked my interest in visiting Africa to see the work that is being done to improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The opportunity came when I was awarded a grant under the High Performing Principal Program; this partly financed my visit to Africa.

I had anticipated life-changing experiences – dealing with poverty and meeting challenges – but what really inspired me was coming to understand how leadership can make a huge difference to peoples' lives. My first leadership lesson came from the amazing Nelson Mandela. I read his book while we travelled and was inspired by his passion, leadership and conviction. His belief that education is the most powerful tool we can use to change the world confirmed my own beliefs. When times got tough, and they often did during our weeks in Africa, I would reflect on Mandela.

We decided to combine my research with a family holiday, feeling that the experience would be educational, challenging and wonderful for our three children. In particular, Alexandra was excited to be returning to the village where she had worked.

We started the South African leg of the trip in Cape Town, bringing with us 60 kg of clothes our school community had gathered to give to an AIDS orphanage. Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, yet the contrasts are so hard to comprehend, the difference between the wealthy and slum areas are incredible. Leaving the airport, you pass slums that seem to go on for kilometers – and then suddenly you are surrounded by wealth and beauty.

Post apartheid Cape Town has an exciting, diverse, aspiring, tragic, creative and hip vibe. Hoping to understand the history of apartheid, we visited schools, museums, attended lectures by renowned historian Francis Wilson, read books and spent two weeks exploring this intriguing city.



I started my research by visiting co-ed St George's Grammar School, at 161 years the oldest private school in South Africa, and Bishops, an Anglican school for boys. These are two of the most exclusive schools in Cape Town and attended by wealthy South Africans. Here it was really great to see the Rainbow Nation exemplified by black and white children in class together.

Both schools offer a culture of inclusiveness and have worked hard on making sure everyone in the school community has a voice. The blending of cultures and colours did not seem to be a problem. Teaching staff at both schools told me it was more the adults' views that they needed to work on. These schools have magnificent facilities and offer a comprehensive curriculum and great leadership with a very English school flavour.

I also visited St Joseph's College in Rondebosch, a Marist Brothers co-ed. This is another wealthy and quite progressive school, where a broad curriculum is taught and there is a special needs program. This is quite unusual as children with disabilities are not normally included in mainstream South African schools.

The schools I visited outside Cape Town were a huge contrast. Most were in slum areas, with poor facilities, big classes and lack of resources; attendance was a major issue. But in all of these poor schools I found teachers with leadership and passion to do whatever was needed to ensure that the children could succeed. Their strategies include school breakfasts, a great way to get empty tummies to school, sewing clothes for their students and home visits to assist families in need. At Dal Jo Sa Phat School near Paarl, teachers had sourced building materials, mostly tin sheets, to assist a student whose house had burned down.

There are huge social problems in the poor areas, but only one social worker to share between 32 schools. Child abuse is a big issue with children experiencing violence and exposed to drugs; marijuana use is a problem in many of the primary schools. School is the most secure place for many students. For some there's no food on weekends and they eat when they come to school.

I was lucky to meet with Dr Barbara Laughton who is doing research on the effects of AIDS medication on learning. This research is important to help the education and health system understand learning needs. AIDS is a massive problem all over Africa. In all schools I visited, rich and poor, there were posters or displays about the dangers of AIDS – this is something we don't see in Australia.



St George's Grammar School Cape Town

We visited an AIDS clinic in a slum outside Cape Town with Barbara Laughton and sat in on some consultations. We met families with children dying of AIDS. The clinic was so hot, so crowded and so sad. Many of the children do not know they have AIDS and parents are keen to keep this a secret – stoning deaths, burning down houses and prejudice are still common.

There is a disclosure policy to protect people and often the school does not know about an AIDS-infected child's status. Only the parents know... and sometimes only the mother.

There was a long silence after we left the clinic. We were distraught and there were really no words to express how we felt. Barbara Laughton explained that South Africa has not yet got AIDS under control. Many villages have mass burial plots and graveyards are spreading over the hills very quickly.

During three weeks in South Africa, the contrasts of being with people in absolute poverty and 10 minutes later being in the most beautiful scenery, with wealth all around, was a continual amazement.



South Africa has progressed rapidly since Mandela brought the nation together but there are so many challenges to be overcome and such a long way to go. Schools are meeting the challenge but are still very traditional and many innovations are needed to move the system forward.

Tanzanian culture shock

After prosperous Cape Town and the well-equipped private schools I had visited, arriving in Tanzania at the end of a two-day journey came as a huge culture shock. First impressions are of extreme isolation. We flew first to Dar Es Salaam the capital of Tanzania, then on to Zanzibar in a six-seat plane... quite scary. From Zanzibar we flew to Arusha... very hot and very challenging.

Arusha sits in northern Tanzania, just below the Equator in a band known as the Savannah Tropics. There are two rainy seasons during which huge amounts of rain fall in short bursts. Drought follows; water often runs out; humidity sits at 70% and there is a year round temperature



range of 20°C to 30°C, with incredibly intense sunlight.

We spent 10 days in Sinon on the outskirts of Arusha. The principal of Sinon Secondary School, an Edmund Rice school, picked us up at the airport. The township is only 5 km from the city, but the dusty and bumpy road made it a 30-minute journey. In rainy times the road becomes so muddy it is almost impassable.

We pass donkeys and locals walking into town, some Masai as well. We pass through Unga, a slum area where 300,000 people live; it's a shock to see the conditions and it's not a safe place to wander alone. The shock of poverty is almost too hard to comprehend... and bear. In quiet times, when you have time to think, tears well up.

We were accommodated at the Volunteer House. This is set among African homes, mostly mud huts. By Arusha standards it is luxurious. There is a concrete floor, doors and windows that lock, nets for the beds because malaria is rife but no running water or electricity.

The house belongs to Edmund Rice. The man responsible for the school is Frank O'Shea, a Christian Brother from Australia. His vision and leadership is awe-inspiring, as is the story of his life.

Frank established Sinon Secondary School in 1998. The school now has over 1,000 students and academic results are excellent. There are up to 60 students in a class but behavior is never an issue; students see education as their way out of poverty.

Of the students, 900 are boarders,



with 700 staying at school on weekends. Coming as they do from distant parts of the country, boarding is their only option. The boarding houses are rustic and have been built over the years to accommodate the growing student population.

The school takes a green approach to being self-sufficient. The cows not only provide milk but their dung makes biogas to fuel the cooking; student toilets do the same job. Sawdust from the woodwork classes, where all of the school furniture is made, also provides fuel for the fires. Vegetable gardens are used for classes, to provide food for the students and to earn income from selling the surplus. Plantations of avocados, mangoes, coffee and bananas contribute to self-sufficiency.

Though nearby Unga is risky, we felt very safe in Sinon as the locals were very welcoming and explained if we ever felt in danger to yell and they would come with rocks, belts and knives to protect us from intruders.

We soon understood the real meaning of recycling, learning to use the same water several times. As we walked 2 km up a dirt track to get water the locals would call out, "Poh lay, poh lay" which means "Sorry for your work". They must have wondered what mzungu (white people) were doing carrying water. When I wondered how we were going to manage this living experience for 10 days, my 13-year-old daughter reminded me "home is wherever we are together".

Meeting the village children was

Students see education as their way out of poverty



an amazing experience. They were happy, friendly and giving. They wore the same clothes everyday, thin and barely held together, but they were so joyous. We gave them pencils and they were genuinely thankful. Naively, we had assumed they would have paper, which of course they didn't, so we had to tear pages from a book before the pencils could be used.

We saw first hand the African saying "it takes a whole village to raise a child". While travelling on a hot and crowded della della (bus) – 26 people in an 11-seater – children were passed through the windows wherever there was a space. Without a word, they were cared for by the passengers and fed if needed. I had the honour of nursing a child on the della della into town one afternoon. She looked at my white face and laughed all the way. Once you make friends with a local you became part of the family.

We came back to the village late one evening to find the local shop shut. We only had a single pineapple to eat so we went to bed hungry. It was a sharp reminder that many in the village would have been hungrier than we were that night.

Up the road from Sinon Secondary School there's a small primary run by Mama Angela. Compared to Sinon, this school is very, very poor. Children have to share pencils – one between four or five. But Mama Angela doesn't let lack of resources stop her from providing care and education. She is a warm, happy and positive lady.

Australians contribute

Frank O'Shea is seen as something of a saint in this community. He has created real opportunities for the people. He has also influenced other ventures by Australians in this part of the world. In fact, it's surprising how many Australians have contributed by donating money, providing services, working as builders and volunteering.

Food Water Shelter <http://www.foodwatershelter.org.au/> was established after five Australian women worked as volunteers at the Sinon Secondary School. It is a not-for-profit Australian, non-denominational, non-governmental organisation that builds and manages eco-friendly children's villages in developing countries, providing education,



Clockwise: A Tanzanian streetscape; Ian Wren; Australian Christian Brother Frank O'Shea; Tanzanian locals

social and health facilities for vulnerable women and children.

KeshoLeo <http://www.foodwatershelter.org.au/sponsorships.aspx> (which means tomorrow today in Swahili) is the organisation's first children's village in Tanzania and is home to 80 children. KeshoLeo recently won an Australian Institute of Architects environmentally friendly award.

A trip to the School of St Jude's <http://www.schoolofstjude.co.tz> in Arusha provided another example of vision, passion and unrelenting action. Gemma Sisia, a country girl from NSW, has built the school from the ground up. The school educates the brightest of the poorest children and grows a year level each year. St Jude's is funded by Rotary.

Gemma Sisia has had remarkable success, to the extent that 3,000 children apply for a place each year. The school has been running for

eight years and there are now eight year levels. Every child at the school has a sponsor and volunteers are relied on to assist with teaching and administration.

At the end of six weeks, we were sad to be leaving these amazing people. We had gained an understanding that no matter the hardship, human spirit prevails and that happiness certainly is not about material goods.

My views also about education changed; we take for granted our easy access to education in Australia... this is such a privilege.

African wisdom and the proverb "I am because we are and we are because I am" also taught me what it means to educate for a global world. This means that my potential, my dignity and my future is enhanced because I belong to a community and the community's dignity, potential and future is enhanced because I am part of it. We need to make sure we never lose our sense of community in schools or the worth of the individual.

Ian Wren is principal of Bacchus Marsh Primary School in Victoria. His school was featured on the cover of Education Today Term 4 2010 issue.