

Visiting the Shea O'Connor Combined School in South Africa

An account of our trip to our partner school in 2011.

Mr Egan, Mr Ridley and Mrs Kilkenny-Browne left Bournemouth on Thursday 20 October knowing we had a long journey – but as the M3 turned out to be closed it was slightly longer! With many bags stuffed with donations and about 24 hours to go (from St Peter's School to our lodgings) Mr Egan's experience of Basingstoke got us to Heathrow only a few minutes late and ready for travel. On board the BA night flight, none of us got much sleep but we were prepared and well-motivated for our trip to the KwaZulu part of South Africa, about 2 hours' north-west of Durban.

We met our local contact, Reggie Purbrick, in Durban and quickly sussed that we were going to be in very good hands. We loaded his massive 4X4 and sped off for a quick glimpse of Durban, the busiest port in Eastern Africa, with potted histories here and there and a good sense that Reggie was very tough and very capable despite being nearly 70. We took in the outskirts of the city and got used to the semi-tropical nature of the area and how things were done on the roads (nothing too scary but we got the sense that safety was relative and that we were better off in our large car than those 6 workers squashed into their little hatchback or the road maintenance crew who sat in the back of the pickup.

So that set the pace for our visit; an awful lot to take in and no time to really soak up the phenomenal awesomeness of South Africa. We toured Michaelhouse school (modelled on the quintessential public school and over 100 years old) and zipped round Asithuthuke, a school serving the Mandela (low-cost housing) township it nestles in. We bumped into a man Reggie knew and he said that he was "getting along fine" being a cook, however Reggie was not pleased that he was hanging round with other young men who were drinking in the day and that he could do better than earn around £250 per month. I got the impression the man was in danger of succumbing to the difficulties of forever pushing yourself to achieve and that it must take an extraordinary effort to break out of a low-cost, low-expectancy lifestyle. We got the impression that our school, the Shea O'Connor Combined School (SOCCS) could have been like this without the successful leadership and teaching staff it has. Incidentally, SOCCS is so-named after the Catholic priest who helped the school for many years until he was murdered in a burglary about ten years ago.

We saw many Shembi churches in the predominantly Zulu region. This is where ancestor and spirit worship, with a living deity, is the religious custom. White stones in a large circle denote a Shembi church and it is faintly spooky to see. Also in Zulu culture, round huts are for meetings and for elders such as grandmothers and grandfathers to meet younger family / tribe members - males enter to the right, females to the left and males are first in and out. It was important to us to see and discuss as much as possible as if we are to advise on leading a school we need to understand as much as possible first. We also visited Tugula Ferry, a town situated on a plain where many local factions are fighting still. The HIV/Aids clinic we had come to visit, called Philanjalo, had about 12 patients - much work here is done as an out-patients service and the number of patients is no indication of the enormous HIV/Aids problem that ballooned from nowhere in the 1990s. We listened to a lovely song sung by the patients and we gave our gifts of nightwear, which were specifically requested by the clinic. We also saw one lady of about 21 who had to be transferred about an hour later to the nearby Church of Scotland hospital and it was not clear if she survived. We discussed the statistic that 53% women in the area are HIV+ at pregnancy and this is important because clinicians can't test a person without their authority. As people are reluctant to know their status, testing women who about to give birth is the only reliable statistic. Since HIV can only be passed to the child during the birth, when both mother and child might be bleeding / have open wounds, testing is much more likely to be done at this time.

We experienced 39C on our tours of Fugitives Drift and the Isandlwhana battle ground (watch Zulu – the one with Michael Caine!). We saw the crossing points of the fleeing Melville & Coghill and where the colours were lost. We also visited their graves. The great Zulu victory of Isandlwhana is marked by National Monument status, is protected and has many tour parties visiting the museum and is similar to Rourke's Drift.

We visited Bruntville, one of the main catchment areas for SOCCS and where a pair of students died in a house fire. It is a township and there are a few 'uplift' projects such as solar water (domestic) heating for the demented shacks and investment in the local primary schools, notably by Clifton Preparatory, the private school close to SOCCS. We were there on Sunday and a lot of boys and girls were out, strutting their stuff and showing off. We met Ndlovu, a local boy who goes to SOCCS and he spoke perfect English and was in grade 11 (16-17). He seemed pretty sharp and switched on – we were impressed! Other kids in this township go to Bruntville primary, which is seen as very much second-best compared to SOCCS.

We visited Clifton Preparatory school, a private school with 162 pupils on roll, 60 borders (day pupils often live in local, holiday-type homes at Gowrie Farm (and these often live permanently in Johannesburg). We met Brendan Brady, the headteacher (who was about 6' 6", like many South Africans we met!) and Jane Forbes his assistant. We talked about SOCCS and their work in local schools and it was revealed that Dieter, their maintenance manager did the electrical installations in the container that was donated by Grindrod to SOCCS. It was this sort of incorporation that we had no idea of before our visit and it makes understanding the area and our involvement much easier to pick apart.

We visited Michaelhouse school again, one of the largest and oldest private (and all-boys) schools in South Africa (and one that is relatively on the doorstep of SOCCS). Reggie has strong ties with this school as his sons went there and he is a regular supporter of the school. We learnt that Ashithotuke was built by Michaelhouse but given back to local governance in 1994. The view of Michaelhouse Rector (headteacher) Guy Pearson was that pupils are now voting with their feet and choosing SOCCS over Asithothuke. He also said that the 'stubborn' female head at Asithothuke makes it harder, with teachers using their unions to simplify their work (but this makes things ultimately more expensive as things take longer to accomplish). This also has an impact on Michaelhouse's outreach programmes in arts and sports but the staff at Ashithotuke can't get the time as their unions are so heavily involved and this has led to a degenerated feeling between staff and management. At Michealhouse there are 60 teachers and 555 boarders and interestingly the school offers to pay for 75% of boarding costs to other schools if a teacher has a daughter that needs schooling. This contributes to an annual cost of 3.5m rand for teaching staff's children (there are 12 Rand to the Pound).

Following this we worked in SOCCS on Wednesday, watching the sports festival with admiration. The school's Sports Leaders worked with determination and brought an organised and well thought-out programme to over 400 participants and spectators and the weather even leant a hand so the chilly mist lifted and strong sunshine lit the day. Bruntfield school competed along with SOCCS and there was a heady atmosphere of excitement and impatience but the Leaders were organised and teams spent nearly 5 hours playing indigenous games, soccer, rugby, volleyball, netball and tug o' war. It was clear that this was an unusual event – the very first festival was a few months ago – as the children were in high spirits but the day stayed resolutely positive, with impromptu dancing and singing from the crowds especially during the First teams' soccer match that rounded off the day. If we were honest, it was a way of organising that we found frustrating but TIA, as Reggie says (This Is Africa) and time is seemingly less important – so who really minds if the day started an hour late because no-one had marked out the pitches?! What we know is that the school and Leaders had a great day and that the pupils and staff now have the equipment and skills to deliver their new sports curriculum in a professional way. The British Council should be happy – we are happy – with their progress and the way that the International Inspiration Programme has completed its objectives.

SOCCS, led by Mrs Kilkenny-Browne, had trained 29 Sports Leaders and this was a central part of our partnership. The leaders were chosen as they were particularly resourceful and hard-working, however they had to work especially hard in the sports festival and we rounded off the day by reviewing what had happened and what could have been completed better. We concluded that the leaders had high expectations of the students and that more could have been organised before the day had begun.

We also met Brett, the farmer who owns land next to SOCCS (he is pictured, with Reggie Purbrick). Brett was typical of many South Africans we met as he was straight-forward, warm-hearted and about two and a half meters tall! It was due to his generosity that SOCCS has a playing field as he donated the land and we are all pleased to say that TCTA, an engineering company that is building an enormous dam about 3Km from the school, has levelled the field and is currently grassing the field. It was quite affirming to meet Brett and all the other people in the area who are committed to help to improve young people's lives.

We left South Africa exhausted and if my feelings were anything to go by, cautiously optimistic that we had achieved much more than we had set out to. We had hoped to build leadership in the school and we challenged the teachers more than they had reckoned; we wanted them to be professional through and through and to their unending credit, this is something that many of them will endeavour to do in the greatest traditions of a school. We now know just how supremely hard Protus Sokhela the headteacher, works and that because he sometimes works for 16 hours in the day then his students and staff are better motivated and supported. We had hoped to create a support network with local private schools and in fact we found that this network already existed and that the addition of St Peter's School has allowed this network to grow and to provide a dimension of support that very few schools have. Through meeting the leadership of Michaelhouse and Clifton Prep school we know that we have a strong commitment to the continued prosperity of SOCCS and we now know how much this means to a worthy and truly impressive school in another country that appreciates our care and hard work. There is no doubt that we will continue to talk via Skype, continue to email and to share successes and that the staff and students of both schools will benefit from this.

Mr M Ridley