

Our visit to the Makukhanye primary school in Jeffreys Bay



During our Christmas holidays, we had the opportunity to visit the Makukhanye school.

Wessel, the school caretaker, met us in town and escorted us to the school. He deemed it safer for us to join him to drive to school, as it is not a good place to get lost or stranded. As he does a lot of community support work, he is well known in the area and he would not get in trouble.

We arrived in front of the school, where 2 sets of gates were opened for us to drive through. There we were met by 2 dangerous dogs on chains, a goat and some cows. One of the neighbours of the school had been asked to keep an eye out; and to keep the school property safe he had left his dogs and cattle on the school premises. He joined us for the tour, to make sure we were not bothered by the dogs.

The neighbour started by explaining, that one of the pedestrian gates had been stolen. People steal it to sell scrap metal, but with the presence of the dogs, nothing more had happened.

Some of the buildings looked nice, they had recently been painted with moneys donated by our school. They had attempted to find trades people to carry out the painting, but in the end decided they would paint the buildings themselves, with a group of volunteers. The roofs of the buildings had not been attended to. As South Africa is experiencing its worst draught since recording began, water is extremely limited, and is not to be used to clean roofs. So these cannot be painted until they can be washed.

He took us round the school premises and explained about the running of the school. Currently the school has officially got space for around 600 children, but over 1000 attend. They have chairs for about 300 children, so most of them have to sit on the floor. St Faiths has made another donation, and I believe about 300 more chairs have been ordered and should be ready for the children when they start again after their summer holidays.

We came across some half built buildings. These are supposed to be the toilet blocks for the children. The government had instructed the building of these, but the contractors disappeared over night leaving it in a mess. The school is currently tied up in litigation with the government

to get this sorted, and are currently in the third year of these litigations. Nothing can be done, as if the school touches any of the buildings or materials, the contractors will no longer be responsible. So the building works and accompanying rubble currently form part of the children's playground, not cordoned off at all.

Wessel pointed at some lamp posts next to the school. He explained to us that the grounds between these lamp posts, are supposed to be the school's sports fields. However, currently there are a large number of illegal squatter houses sitting on those grounds. The government is working on finding alternative space for these people to be moved to. Until they do, they cannot move these people, as they have no alternative.

He continued to explain to us that the kitchen of the school was about 2 by 3 meters, contained 2 pits and provided food for all these 1000 kids. Government provides funds to the school for food, but they had not received these funds for the last 3 months.

He said that the current principal of the school is fantastic. He is a very strict man, very well respected, and is working hard to make it a better place for the children. He had noticed some children were not attending school on Mondays and Fridays, so they decided to follow them home and see what was going on. They found that a number of children were left to their own devices in the weekend, and some of them did not have any access to food during that time. So they identified 35 children in this situation, and arranged for volunteers to cook for these children on Saturdays, and provided them with a packed lunch for the Sunday. It seemed that for a number of children, getting food is the main reason of attending school, as it is there only access to food.

In terms of the schooling, he said that their main challenge is language. The teaching happens in English and most teachers are also fluent in Afrikaans (which we can understand as it derives from Dutch) but some children come from far away and only speak their local language. They have now got teachers coming in to support these children, so they can follow what goes on in the class room.

Despite all these challenges, and without even a music teacher, Wessel was very proud to tell us that the school choir came third in South Africa for singing.

That was the end of our tour. We all felt very humbled by this experience. It was hard to see what some children have to suffer, it was fantastic to see how dedicated some people are to help and give up their own time to make the world a little bit better. It made us more determined to support the school as what we do really makes a big difference. It made us thankful for what we have and the comfortable and safe place our children have to learn and develop without any worries.

