

## Special Feature

# Volunteer Teaching in a Township School

After graduating in July, I spent eight weeks as a volunteer teaching assistant in a township school in the Mpumalanga province of North Eastern South Africa. The township, which borders the Kruger National Park, is home to more than sixty thousand people.

At 7.30am on a Monday morning, my placement partner and I entered the barbed wire fenced Benjamin Primary School, passing the small hut on the right hand side, which housed the three aunties who, using camping gas stoves, provided the only meal that many of the 1095 children would eat all day.



The older boys were sent down the lane to fill a plastic dustbin from the communal tap and carry it back to school. This same tap provided containers of water for cooking and to fill metal baths in which the boys hand-scrubbed their football kits. While the lack of water did not concern me too much, it did make tasks like washing up laborious.

The school 'library'

consists of about 80 books, and sports equipment is non-existent. The school hopes for sponsorship to clear the soccer pitch of stones and eventually get goal posts.

### Stunning Views but No Resources

Our arrival caused quite a stir, children hung out of windows vying for our attention, running up to within a metre of us, turning and running away apparently scared. Over 80% of these children are orphans, the rest are predominantly children of unemployed parents. They live in huts on the hillside surrounding the school with stunning views, but lacking basic amenities like running water or electricity. As the first white people that they had seen, we were a constant source of fascination, particularly for the younger children. All state schools are seriously under resourced. They were proud to show us the school's two flushing toilets, but there were few days during our stay that there was sufficient water to flush them.

### Where a Biro is to be Treasured

In the classroom, children rub the innards of their Biro between their hands in a desperate attempt to draw out the last remaining drops of ink; copying from the board is slow as pupils share pens. Pens, pencils and paper are all in short supply and other items of stationery non-existent. The children, 55 to 80 in a class, sit on plastic chairs at wooden desks, often sharing seats; classrooms are far too small. This made teaching challenging but the children were hugely engaging. Their ability to live positively amid such difficulty was incredible, and I have been well and truly caught by the magic of Africa, the beautiful scenery and the charming people.

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**Leisha Braithwaite**