

# Fezeka Senior Secondary School, Gugulethu, Cape Town, South Africa

## Report on Volunteer Teaching

**A.S. Trythall.**

### ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to thank Education without Borders (EwB), Vancouver, Canada and Fezeka Senior Secondary School (Fezeka) for making the experience of volunteer teaching possible. Special thanks go to their three representatives in South Africa (Ernie Bulgin, Roger Trythall and Ted Weber). I would also like to thank the staff and the pupils at Fezeka for their cooperation and their warm hospitality. Special thanks go to Mrs Matte (Maths teacher) for finding so much time to make sure that this experience was productive and enjoyable. Lastly I would like to thank Mr. Sojola (headmaster) who organised this with the management committee of the school.



Mr Sojola, Cecil Hershler, Nasius Magada

## ***Background***

The association with the school started several years ago when Cecil and Ruth Hershler set up Education without Borders (EwB). The mandate of EwB is to “foster educational opportunities and provide educational facilities to disadvantaged communities.”

Here are some important facts/observations about the school itself.

- Fezeka is Xhosa for “making dreams become reality”
- Fezeka is the only black high school in the area offering classes in English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Sotho and Tswana. This wide selection of languages may pose problems in respect of coherence of teaching.
- There are currently up to 1700 students between the 2 institutions.
- There is a distinct lack of text books available to the learners
- About two thirds of the learners come from single parent households
- Many of the learners arrive at school without adequate nutrition consequently affecting concentration levels in class.
- The average class size appears to be about 45 per teacher.

## ***Introduction***

I have been working as a maths tutor for grade 11 and 12, since early August until mid October 2006. My job was to give individual tutoring to higher-grade learners and help them prepare for their final exams at the end of the year. My initial time was spent helping a higher-grade final year student prepare for his finals in October 2006. Subsequently I took some classes with higher-grade learners from grade 11. This enabled me able to experience first hand some of the problems faced by learners, teachers and the school as a whole. In this report I will outline my main objectives, highlight some observations which could be influential in improving the schools general efficiency and also give some idea of the school to any future volunteer teacher, who wishes to embark on the same experience.



Ms Matte and I with a group of learners from Grade 11

### **Objectives**

- To assist learners with their work and to promote a better understanding of maths. There are considerable high demands on the teachers as classes are filled to capacity. Classes consist of higher grade and standard grade pupils. Teachers have insufficient time necessary to help students on a more one to one basis which I believe is critical for success. Secondly, higher-grade learners were being compromised with the huge demand from lower grade learners.
- To talk to teachers and understand some of the specific problems that they encounter from day to day.
- Finally to write this report and highlight some of the problems that the school faces and make some recommendations that I believe could in some way advance the school in producing more learners who could progress to tertiary education.

## ***Methodology***

- My duties involved helping a final year student with his higher grade maths. Towards the end of my time I was tutoring a class of Grade 11 higher grades.
- I would speak to teachers daily during break time about their daily activities and try to understand their problems which they experience.



The staff room

## ***Observations***

1. **“Re teaching”** Whilst tutoring the Grade 11’s some of the students showed serious gaps in their knowledge. This is something that was confirmed to me by the teachers. From one year to the next, the students do not seem to have kept the knowledge from the previous grade. As a result teachers would spend time on material that should have been covered previously and understood by the learner.
2. **“Higher vs. Standard Grade”** This year, out of 12 learners who started the year in higher grade maths only one will sit the higher grade final exam. Not only is this a staggering rate of attrition it is a serious problem, given the country’s desire to have more students graduating in the sciences. Universities in South Africa unfortunately do not consider students who do not have higher grade maths and science. Thus every

year, students graduate from Fezeka with limited opportunities to pursue tertiary education.



Taking a class of Grade 11 maths

3. **“General Organisation”**- Whilst some problems of the school lie beyond the control of the teachers such as malnutrition, learner motivation could be increased through more teacher inspiration and leadership. Other issues I discovered which should be addressed include:
  - I was horrified on one particular day; classes were left unattended because teachers were absent; approximately 6 to 8 which is about 10% of teachers. This is not fair to the learners and to fellow teachers who have to pick up extra classes and in some cases have then to supervise multiple classes simultaneously. This seems habitual and can occur at least twice in a month. It can affect up to 250 learners at a time, who find themselves out of class.
  - The school functions effectively from day to day. However there are some areas which could be addressed that could create a big impact on improving the overall efficiency and leadership throughout the school (See Recommendations below).
4. **“Student authority”**- I attended St Stithian’s (Johannesburg) and Merchiston Castle School (Edinburgh). These schools have a general prefect system. There is a Learners Representative Council (LRC) at Fezeka which links students and teachers and acts as

a communication medium. Giving learners responsibility within the school needs to be taken further such as setting up a school newsletter. Establishing some sort of *Prefect System* would help a great deal in the school. Another idea could be the concept of *Classroom Assistant*. Their main function could be to provide assistance to teachers in some of the basic areas of discipline, reading and writing aids.

5. **“Lack of Good Role Models”**- Learners do not have “good” role models. To many of the learners their role models are not successful people in the wider world (like Sibusiso Vilane, who was the first black African to reach the summit of Mt Everest twice and who addressed the teachers and learners last year) but “rich” members of gangs and people within the community who drive around in “nice” cars. The problem is that the students go home at 14:00 hours and from then until the next morning at 9:00 hours they are in contact with gang members and generally people who don’t see the value of a good education or a hard day’s work.



Sibusiso Vilane who scaled Mt Everest twice from North and South side. He was the first black African to do so.

6. **“Disruption in Class”** – This is an issue, which was brought to my attention by some of the teachers. There are obviously learners in the classrooms that continuously

disrupt the learning process for others. This needs to be dealt with. There seems to be no firm and effective disciplinary system in place to deter and stop this.

7. **“Sport facilities”** – There is a sports field belonging to the school that lies unused. Learners, wishing to play any type of games, use the school quadrangle. This is severely disruptive of classes, creating discipline and related problems for teachers. Participating in sport is part of education to develop not only physical health but to develop teamwork etc. Consideration should be given to developing the sports ground.

### ***Recommendations***

Every problem cries out for solutions. Whilst I may not be able to provide all the answers here are some suggestions:

*Introducing a Prefect System:* This would instil a sense of pride in the school among the learners. Managed correctly, only the best students would be made prefects and this could be something to aspire to. It could also help with the “good role models” problem. When I was at school, the prefects were voted for by the students. The candidates were evaluated by the teachers and the appropriate prefects chosen. Additionally, if Fezeka were to have a *head girl and head boy* with authority and privileges, the impact could be large if introduced correctly.

*Higher vs. Standard Grade:* Bright students do not get their due attention, challenges etc because higher and standard grade are in the same classes. I understand this has a lot to do with logistics such as lack of teacher time and textbooks. A solution to this could be forthcoming if perhaps the school was specifically geared to higher-grade learning. I do accept that this is a wholesale change and would be unfair to learners who could not cope with the rigours of higher-grade learning. This is a problem inherent in the system, quite beyond the control of Fezeka. All I can realistically suggest is that more students be encouraged to take higher grade as an option and be given the necessary tutoring. This is an area; future volunteer teachers could focus their efforts.

*Institutionalize Volunteer Tutoring/Teaching:* We held a discussion with Mr. Sojola, Mrs Matte and Mr. Magade to review the report. There was strong support by all for institutionalizing volunteer tutoring/teaching. Such a scheme would help to address such matters as teacher overload. Learners would have individual access to support that could significantly increase the chances those who wish to study at the higher grades. This in turn would offer more learners the opportunity for tertiary education.

### ***Some Final Thoughts***

My experience at Fezeka has been positive and productive. I felt that my presence could pave the way for future volunteer teachers. I do feel that it would be more productive if it was better organised in the way of a set program as opposed to the ad hoc implementation that was employed with my experience. But there again, my experience

has been a vanguard and the school would need to adopt the idea of volunteer teaching as “a way of life”.



Individual Tutoring

I think the matter of safety should always be kept in mind. Gugulethu although not dangerous should not be taken lightly,

On a more personal note this experience has been a real eye opener for me. To see and meet children, who have limited privileges and in many instances living below the bread line to be so motivated and cheerful about coming to school, has been refreshing. The teachers should be commended on the time, effort and passion that they put into their job.

I would highly recommend this experience to any volunteers in the future.