



August, 2008

We drove along the red clay road, dust flying everywhere. We were looking for the local school. As usual, the driving in ZA on dirt roads seems faster than normal, so as we were flying down the road in the Toyota pickup, we almost missed the building. As the dust settled I saw there was a sign, but it was too weathered and worn to see it clearly. The building didn't look like most schools I had seen. It was constructed of lumber and the usual bricks found in the area, covered with a corrugated tin roof. My first thought was that we were stopping at a farm for directions, but there was a boy walking outside, and instead of the normal coveralls or warm up suits, he had on a wool uniform. It was, after all, winter in South Africa's Northern Limpopo Province.

Pete, our pH, went up to the school and talked to them in Afrikaans. The Principal, Doris, came out to meet us and talked for a bit while the students were gathering to see what we brought. She teaches as well as handling the administration, along with 2 other teachers.

This school was called the Mpepule School. The name means 'one who carries the children on their back' or something similar. The principal, Doris, explained that the farmer/landowner did not have children of his own, but was always asking for help for the local children. He donated a piece of his farm to expressly be used for a school. He also helped build the school and supplies it with some of the crops from his farm. There are not many schools in rural ZA and although it is a good thing to have a school in walkable distance from their home, it is not possible for most students. In addition to the distance between schools, the local economy plays a part. It becomes a catch 22; to afford school, which is paid by the individual family, usually both parents must work; if they didn't work they could not afford the school. The parent's jobs are not usually close to home, so they leave very early in the morning and return late at night. There is no public transportation, so walking, riding a bicycle or hitching a ride is the normal means to work. No one would be there to make sure the children got up to get to school in the morning or to give them dinner at night, so many students board at the school during the week as well.

The Mpepule School was fairly well-to-do; they had 3 classrooms, outhouses and a building for cooking the meals. There was a tetherball pole in the front part of the school, and several soccer balls strewn about, but none of the swing sets or the adjacent playground you would normally see at a U.S. school. One of the classrooms was used for the 4 and 5

year olds, one for the middle grades and one for the older students. This school had



students from kindergarten to grade 7. At night, two of the classrooms were turned into dormitories; one for girls and one for the boys. Each boarding student had a blanket and sometimes a pillow to make their bed on the floor. The third classroom served as the principal's office and teacher's dormitory at night. One classroom had a few desks, but mostly there were only chairs,

and by my count probably not enough for everyone in the class. There were books on the back wall and a few maps - all seemingly very old and worn. There was a television and a few VHS tapes. Pieces of Masonite served as chalkboards in most classrooms.

All the students came out for a picture - they had done this before. They seemed pleased that we had brought things for them, but as I looked at some of their bare feet and layers of inadequate clothing for the cold, I wished we had brought more important things like blankets and books. Pete must have been startled at the austere surroundings, too, because he pledged a dozen chickens or so when his father's farm started their new flocks.

I did not want to "inspect" everywhere - it was not only impolite, but heartbreaking, too. I just couldn't do it. We left after the requisite pictures and handshaking. I continue to marvel at the marvelous spirit and perseverance the children have to learn even in these conditions. Most school children in the United States cannot speak another language, much less at least three languages, Sunai (sic), the local language, Afrikaans and some English. They all continued to smile and wave as we drove away and they were enveloped again in the ever present red dust.

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