

THE

CULTURALLY

RESPONSIVE

CLASSROOM

WITHOUT BORDERS

**Service Learning and the
Importance of Relationship Building**

BY NADIA INDRA JOHNSON

In March 2011, 25 students and five faculty members from Providence Day School (North Carolina) embarked on a 10-day study tour of Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa. In addition to learning about the tumultuous history of the country, we (I was part of the group) planned to spend an afternoon at Red Hill Preschool for a day of service and interaction.

As our charter bus wound around the mountains and we took in the breathtaking scenery, it was easy to forget that we were going to an impoverished, informal settlement. However, as we pulled up to the entrance of Red Hill, we were confronted with an unsettling contradiction. Nestled in the beautiful red hills of Cape Town sat a hodgepodge of shanties and other temporary structures dispersed throughout three camps that spanned the hillside. In the center of the middle camp sat Red Hill Preschool. The sign indicated it was a school, but despite the brightly colored paint, I immediately recognized the structures as shipping containers similar to those that dominated the Port of Miami, which I passed daily on my way to work and school for several years.

The students spilled out of the containers excited to greet us, running across dirt littered with shards of broken glass. Throughout the day, we taught crafts and read books, but the students were more interested in trying on our sunglasses, seeing themselves in the photos we took, and



teaching us how to dance. When not interacting with the preschool students, we picked up the broken glass from the perimeter of the school and playground, filling several bags. At the end of the day, we left the smiling children, grateful for the time we spent with them, wishing we had more time, and wondering what impact we had on the students of Red Hill.

After we returned to our residence and finished eating dinner, my colleague Ryan Welsh posed a question to the students that echoed my own conflicted feelings about our time at

Red Hill. Thirty members of our group traveled to South Africa at a cost of roughly \$5,000 a person. Collectively, we spent close to \$150,000. He implored the group: "Why are we here? Why is it important that we came here? For the money we spent to come here, we could have built them a new school, so why is it important that we came?"

As a child in Trinidad, West Indies, I remember lighting my maternal grand-

mother's house with kerosene lamps in the absence of electricity. Because there was no indoor plumbing, we used a latrine (outhouse) or a posy (chamber pot) late at night, and we bathed outside in a rudimentary structure made of galvanized tin adorned with a PVC pipe that stood in for a shower. We washed our clothes on a scrub board and hung them under the house to dry. I know firsthand that there is no shame in being poor and that people who live in poverty-stricken Third World countries have the same dreams, desires, and aspirations as

those who live in First World countries surrounded by privilege. They just have less opportunity.

I understood very well the paradox of pulling up to an impoverished community to do service in a luxurious tour bus with our iPhones, Ray-Bans, and designer clothes — voyeurs of the poverty and hardship experienced by the residents of Red Hill. The reality is that I was conflicted about the time we would spend at Red Hill and townships in South Africa long before we stepped foot on the plane back in Charlotte, North Carolina. As someone who has spent much of her life in the Third World and who also holds a Ph.D. in cultural studies, I was painfully aware of how people of privilege travel to Third World countries with good intentions but often unknowingly engage in what Robert Lupton, founder of FCS Urban Ministries, has termed “toxic charity” — making those they seek to help feel inadequate, demonstrating a lack of regard for cultural difference, engendering a culture of dependency rather than one of

empowerment, and treating those they are helping in a paternalistic or inequitable manner. My fear was that during our time at Red Hill, my colleagues and students would only see poverty instead of seeing the individuals — that although we were armed with good intentions, we might unknowingly engage in toxic charity.

In March 2013, I returned to South Africa with another group of faculty and students. It was important for me to establish and foster a relationship with Red Hill Preschool that was based on equity and mutual respect, so I was absolutely ecstatic when I learned that African Impact, the educational-based tour company

that organized and facilitated our relationship with the township, had hired a director who would serve as a liaison between the Red Hill community and volunteers who sought to serve the community. Her role would be to ensure that the desires of the residents of the Red Hill township were not superseded by the wants of the volunteers and that the volunteers interacted with the residents in a manner that recognized their rich culture and, most important, their humanity.

While the interaction was limited to a day on our previous trip, this time



we would spend three days at Red Hill. The director informed me that the classes were focusing on hygiene, nutrition, and gardening and asked if we could create lessons and activities that revolved around those themes. As I collaborated with colleagues to design the lessons and activities, I immediately recognized that while the lessons and activities were engaging and interesting, they very much reflected American cultural, educational, and economic realities. I knew that if we were truly committed to fostering a sustainable relationship with Red Hill, we had to demonstrate an understanding and respect for its culture and way of life. To that end, I began to research South African —

specifically Xhosa (the majority ethnicity in Red Hill) — language, diets, and culture. As a result, I changed the items on the nutritional bingo from corn, steak, potatoes, and green beans to pap, mealie, kudu, chakalaka, and samp and beans. For the sustainable gardening lesson, I researched what local vegetables grew during the fall and would be ready to harvest before winter. I then asked the director to purchase seeds that we could plant with the students so they could later harvest the vegetables to help combat nutritional challenges. In addition, upon arriving, we greeted the community in their native tongue.

I knew that these gestures would go a long way in a show of good faith and reciprocity, but I underestimated the impact that it would have on the members of the Red Hill community.

On our last day, I went to say good-bye to the principal, who also served as the teacher for students five to six years in age. When I told her I would be back next March, she gave me a puzzled look and

said, “Aren’t you South African?” I was not surprised by this question. Every time I travel to South Africa, I am regularly confused for a local person of color based on my appearance. I assumed this was why she was questioning whether or not I was South African. She continued incredulously, “Didn’t you create the curriculum that was used? How could you know what we eat, our language, our culture if you are not South African?”

I told her that I researched South African and Xhosa culture while I was creating the curriculum. She immediately embraced me, an emotional act that was not the norm for the Xhosa culture based on my personal experience, particularly not for this woman.

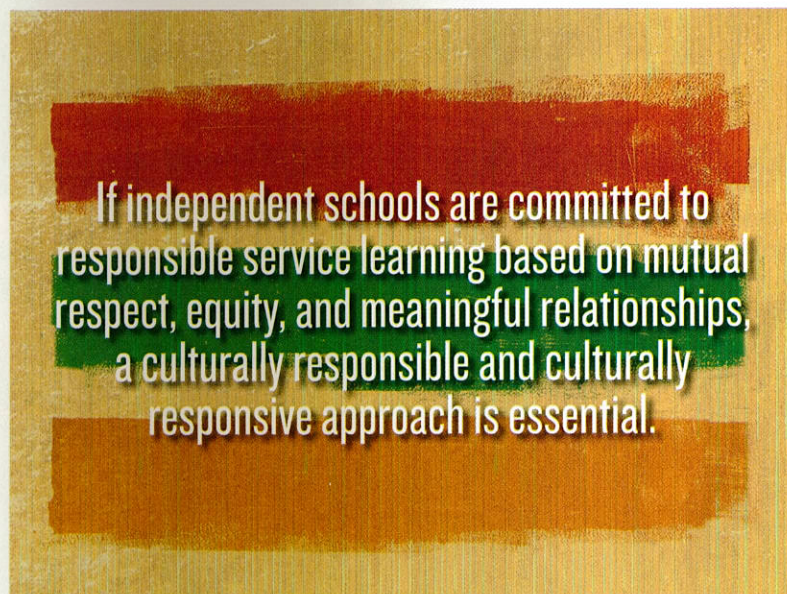
As she embraced me, she said, “We have volunteers come here all the time, from America, from England. No one has ever taken the time to learn about our people and our culture until now.” I left her wiping tears from her eyes.

My interaction with the principal had a profound impact on me. It reaffirmed what I already knew. If independent schools are committed to responsible service learning based on mutual respect, equity, and meaningful relationships, a culturally responsible and culturally responsive approach is essential. Furthermore, as an educator and a lifelong learner, I believe that some of the most important learning that takes place actually takes place outside of the classroom. Immediately upon returning to the United States, I began to explore how Providence Day School could continue to not only grow our relationship with Red Hill but also extend the concept of the culturally responsive classroom beyond the four walls of our classrooms to the informal settlements of Red Hill and beyond, greatly enhancing experiential service learning.

Put simply, the concept of the culturally responsive classroom premises that in culturally diverse classrooms, students need to be able to see themselves reflected in their curriculum and be able to make relevant connections to the material being taught. In this vein, the culturally responsive classroom rejects the notion of color blindness or any other form of cultural blindness, including religious, ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic. It acknowledges the corpus of research that indicates that culturally based blind spots in the classroom actually impede the academic and social success of cultur-

ally diverse students. The culturally responsive classroom thus encourages teachers to learn about their students on a personal level, to transform their classrooms into learning communities in which every student’s personal experience has value, and to create a curriculum that reflects the diversity of our local, regional, national, and global communities.

However, one of the most important tenets of the culturally responsive classroom is also the most overlooked — that teachers and administrators must explore and acknowledge their



own cultural identities and understand the consequences of those identities. Put differently, educators must recognize the ways in which they bring their own cultural biases into the classroom as well as how their cultural identities may be perceived by their colleagues and students. My time spent with students and faculty in South Africa, and Red Hill specifically, laid plain the didactic relationship among toxic charity, the culturally responsive classroom, and service learning.

In preparation for the March 2014 trip to Red Hill, I focused on how the culturally responsive classroom could be extended to the work we previously did in Red

Hill. I began working with colleagues to create a course that would complement the trip, focusing on apartheid in South Africa as a case study to explore the concepts of human rights, social justice, and reconciliation. This was important because if we were to engage a culturally responsive approach to our service learning in Red Hill, students and faculty needed to understand the seminal history that led to the genesis of the informal settlement as well as its continued unrecognized status.

The Red Hill settlement was actually created to maintain productivity on privately owned farmland that was impacted by curfews and pass laws (nonwhite residents were required to carry passes to travel out of their townships) that were essential to enforcing the apartheid system in South Africa. The owner of the land invited his workers to live on the land to avoid these restrictions, and he continues to allow them to reside on the land today. However, Red Hill has continued to grow as an informal settlement, housing displaced Africans and refugees. The chal-

lenges of this poverty-stricken settlement are further compounded by its informal status.

In addition to learning the history of Red Hill, the preparation for our service learning employed a cultural studies approach — an interdisciplinary interrogation of culture and society that emphasizes how markers of identity such as race, religion, gender, and class inform social relations. We read excerpts from Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* and Gita Mehta’s *Karma Cola* to understand how we oftentimes unknowingly bring our cultural biases and misunderstandings with us when we travel and to prompt us to consider how we might be perceived by the residents of Red Hill. We also discussed

the impetus for parameters established by the Red Hill community, such as limited photography, modest dress attire for females, no iPhones, and the importance of respecting these guidelines. While it may have taken us a moment to wrap our heads around these culturally responsive parameters, the parameters have not hindered our relationship with or our experience at Red Hill. In fact, they have only strengthened it by laying a foundation built on mutual respect and equity.

Year after year, our students return from Red Hill with a stronger commitment to the development and success of Red Hill Preschool. They created a student-led organization, Students for South Africa (SFSA), whose primary focus is to raise funds for development projects at Red Hill Preschool, such as purchasing and installing two sinks to help improve hygiene; installing irrigation for a garden to supply vegetables, which are often scarce; partnering with Flik Dining to finance a nutrition pro-

gram that ensures that the students at Red Hill Preschool receive two meals a day as well as snacks that include much-needed protein, fruits, and vegetables; sending school supplies annually; and increasing the Providence Day community's awareness of the challenges at Red Hill. SFSA has also established a one-, three-, and five-year plan that will include establishing a summer trip in which students will spend two to three weeks at Red Hill servicing the community; bringing Red Hill educators, who are also residents of the settlement, to Providence Day School to receive professional development training; and starting a building fund to build a new preschool for the Red Hill community.

So why did we spend \$150,000 to travel to Red Hill Preschool in Cape Town, South Africa, instead of building them a school? In a word — relationship. We wanted to foster a sustainable

and mutually beneficial relationship between Providence Day School and Red Hill Preschool. To write a check and build a school would have relegated the students and faculty of Red Hill Preschool to obscurity and poverty. It would have reduced them to dependency rather than empower them by partnering together to forge a sustainable future for the children of Red Hill in which they define their own destiny. The students at Providence Day School now have a renewed understanding of what it means to be a global citizen. They have gained the benefit of real-world application of 21st-century learning skills acquired in class, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation to address the challenges faced by the Red Hill community. The benefit to both communities has been and will continue to be priceless.

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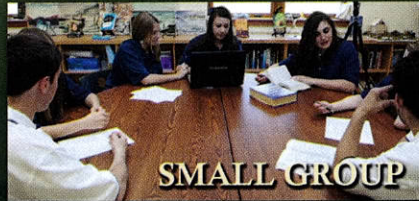
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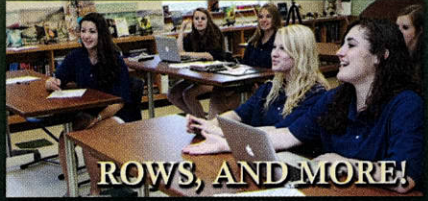
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