

Volunteering

My participation in the Chad's South Africa volunteering project made for an unbelievable summer of learning and experience. From helping in the Sifunda Kunye computer lab in Good Shepherd Primary School holiday workshops, to running year nine subject choice interviews in Nombulelo Secondary school in Josa township, and then going on to teach so many maths lessons in St Matthews High Schools, I had an amazing time. I had the opportunity to meet with Rhodes university students and scholars, and to learn about apartheid, and to then witness, first hand, its ongoing legacy. Likewise, living in Keiskammahoek, a rural scattering of houses and smallholdings, around 50km from the nearest town, sans internet, surrounded by wandering goats and cattle made for a serious culture shock, and gave us a true taste of South African life.

Volunteering often poses the ethical risk of being construed as “voluntourism,” and this is something we were all very conscious about. Especially in the context of South Africa's history, to be perceived as arrogant, white, privileged students, jetting across continents, imbued with the rosy optimism that we could suddenly rid the schools of all their problems was something none of us wanted, and we all began the trip very much aware of our limited capacity for enacting change.

However, despite this, we were likewise aware of the, although seemingly small, actions we could take that would help. Being around Xhosa children, as native English speakers (seeing as our attempts at learning Xhosa were extremely limited), meant that students had to interact in the language that South African law requires academic exams to be written in. This is despite the fact English is not their native tongue, and they are surrounded by likewise Xhosa speaking teachers, and most likely brought up in Xhosa speaking families, which can often mean even the brightest children struggle when it comes to examinations and they have to articulate themselves in their second language.

Similarly, for many children it is likely their first opportunity to meet someone from England or even Europe, and anecdotes of university life can really inspire students to go on to seek further education.

Similarly, our presence aided in helping with the incredibly high student to teacher ratios – classes of up to sixty students are the norm, and thus individual attention is not come by often. By supporting in lessons, more individual attention can be given for those who require further explanation, and we were also able to run after school classes, for further teaching, or revision of past papers. I spent my afternoons revising exam questions with year twelve (or matric) students, soon to take their matriculation exams.

Going in to the trip, it is useful to know what you want to gain from it. A lot of what we were involved in required our own initiative, otherwise, it is incredibly easy to sit on the side-lines and receive little to do. Think about what your strengths are. Maths and English are extremely valued – as one of the few students to have studied A level maths and further maths, I found myself with a lot of classes to teach! However, if - as we did when in the township schools, where Rhodes student teachers were also present – there is not a need for support in lessons, after school activities are of huge value. Providing extra tutoring, or clubs and sports can be of massive benefit. This applies too to St Matthews, where girls will otherwise be in their hostels, with little to do in the middle of nowhere.

Afterschool clubs can also be rewarding if you do not want to teach classes alone, and are merely supporting during the day. How much you do is completely up to you – I began by just supporting in class, but felt I wanted to be more involved and after speaking to heads of departments was able to take classes on my own, as this was something I was comfortable with. A great deal of the trip is about personal reward. For all that you are contributing what you can, this is, as already mentioned, limited, and thus, a lot of what you are involved in is for your own experience. Teaching and working in the schools can be extremely rewarding if you take the initiative to get involved – you must be prepared to ask what you can do, or if you can be involved in certain things. It is extremely valuable in terms of confidence, and leadership, and really putting into perspective how fortunate we have been in our education.

Likewise, you get to experience so much more outside of the school day. Our weekends involved beach trips to Boknes, trips to Hogsback mountains, zip-wiring, and so much more. The week off in the middle of the trip is also an incredible opportunity. We road tripped the Garden Route to Cape Town, and spent a week visiting vineyards, climbing Table Mountain, visiting Kirstenbosch gardens and exploring Cape town. Overall, the trip is an opportunity like no other. You get an amazing feeling of gratification, and it is extremely rewarding – an experience like no other.