

Creating Connection

An International Partnership Between SD61 and Thanda Community School in South Africa

by
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While I received the Teacher Exchange and Mobility grant from British Columbia International Education in November 2019, this trip was a year in the making. The adventure was born out of a desire to deepen the partnership between SD61 in Victoria and Thanda Community School in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa. This is a relationship that began in 2016 and has involved continual and evolving student and staff collaboration, and the development of intercultural skills. To put this experience in context, Thanda is a community-based school and education organization in rural KwaZulu-Natal South Africa that provides dynamic teacher training to more than 30 educators. Thanda delivers innovative programming, inspired by the new BC curriculum Core Competencies, to more than 800 Zulu learners. Their mission is to empower people to create positive change – change in individuals, change in their communities and eventually changes that will impact the world.

This teacher exchange trip was to be a two-week intensive professional development and cultural exchange, with the intent upon return to share these experiences with BC teachers, students and administrators. I believe that intercultural engagement opportunities for BC students at an elementary school

age will, in turn, lead to higher levels of interest in global engagement and travel as students move into middle school, high school, and beyond. My mission was also to lay the groundwork to create future exchange opportunities that I envision occurring annually during Spring Break for BC and South African teachers. This exchange provided the opportunity to strengthen and deepen strong relationships in a part of the world that is not traditionally a source of student, school or teacher connections for BC school Districts.

Deepening our Understanding of Others Through First Understanding More About Ourselves

Before I was to depart for South Africa, I worked with classes in grades 2/3, 4/5 and 7 at three different schools in SD61 in Victoria. We used art and storytelling to gather and share students' experience of their own sense of place as well as identifying resilience strategies. Students recorded meaningful questions for the Thanda students, to learn more about the South African students' daily lives.

One class focused on an inquiry into the history of Indian Residential Schools and reconciliation. They drew parallels to the South African Apartheid system and recovery.

All classes participated in lessons on South Africa, and the sharing of Thanda student videos. Each class at the three different schools in SD 61 created student books to share with Thanda students:

Something Unique About Where I Live - Celebrating our Sense of Place

Animal Teachings: Social Emotional Wellness

There was also the creation of two class videos which included introductions, a sharing of their sense of place and inquiry through authentic questions. In collaboration with Thanda's Arts and Education administrator, Kris Fowles, I gathered books and resources to support interconnection, empathy, resilience, and sharing our sense of place: Vancouver

Through Exploring and Sharing our Sense of Place

Island, Victoria and the Salish Sea. The intent was to share these resources and student work with Thanda students and educators, and then teach similar lessons with the Thanda students with materials to bring back and share in SD 61.

Best Laid Plans ...

My two weeks in South Africa were to center on the

themes of belonging, interconnection, resilience and empowerment. This was grounded in the First Peoples Principles of Learning, with a focus on understanding and sharing our own sense of place. Students were also connected through developing their own social emotional awareness and social responsibility. My plan had been to visit several classes at Thanda in South Africa in order to teach and share the books, art and letters brought from students at the three different schools in SD 61.

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I was also scheduled to participate firsthand in the curriculum delivered by Thanda teachers. I planned to participate in professional development led by Thanda administrators and educators, with the aim of supporting the BC Curriculum Core Competencies. Reciprocally, I would lead professional development for the Thanda educators. Experiences were framed within art, storytelling and hands-on learning in an effort to promote healing, self-awareness, understanding of alternative perspectives, interconnectedness, belonging and social responsibility.

From South Africa to Self-Quarantine

Instead, after a year of planning, collaboration and heartfelt student contributions, I woke up on my first morning in rural South Africa to the news headline of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau warning international travelers to 'Get home while they can', foreshadowing

unprecedented border closures with 'nothing being off the table.' I left for the trip on March 12, 2020 just before the domino effects of travel advisories and restrictions. By the end of my second evening in South Africa, I had managed to book a return flight to Canada, leaving the following afternoon. It would be a race against time on the way back to Canada – beating border closures by hours in some locations – followed by a withdrawal to self-quarantine for two weeks once landing in Canada.

I was left in South Africa with about 48 hours on the ground that was spent connecting with Thanda's Arts and Education administrator, Kris Fowles. While there, we received notice that all schools across South Africa were closing due to COVID-19. In an incredibly surreal way, as the pandemic news rapidly continued to unfold around us, I was able to spend several hours over two days sharing all the SD 61

Sarah Elford with Kris Fowles



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student class books and resources. We were able to talk through my lesson plans and the materials I had brought, so that Kris could share them with her staff. Kris walked me through the work at Thanda and the idiosyncrasies of living in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She shared more about Thanda's 'Journey to Healing' professional development, as well as lesson plans for me to take back to Canada. Together we

brainstormed how we could continue the journey in the face of a global pandemic. We explored how we could pursue connection and hope in an uncertain and rapidly shifting global climate, where access to soap, clean water, medical supplies and food have come to overshadow everything in life as we know it. The loss of this experience for Thanda and SD61 students is echoed in the collective global grief we are all feeling at this time. Sadly, broken connections are often a way of life for the students Thanda serves.

Looking Ahead

When in-class school resumes in Victoria and South Africa, optimistic next steps for this project include the sharing of lessons, student books and resources with Thanda staff and students, and Thanda students making similar books and videos from their perspective, to share with connected classes in SD 61. For SD 61 students, I plan to share a Thanda-recommended storybook / art project.

I am currently connecting digitally with SD 61 students to gather their perspective on what 'Belonging' feels like. This will be shared with Thanda students to help them to understand what this word means in English. Together, we are exploring an evolving project idea where students connect through their shared experience of being in self-isolation during the pandemic. However, without knowing when life will be 'normal' again – or what our new 'normal' will be – it is difficult to predict how everything will actually unfold.

Together we brainstormed how we could continue the journey in the face of a global pandemic

I have been in contact several times with Kris Fowles at Thanda since I returned to Canada, and we remain

committed to collaborating. This experience certainly met the goal of deepening the partnership between SD61 and Thanda Community School in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa, albeit in a way that we didn't imagine when we set out on this adventure. The videos and student books from SD61 where students share their sense of place almost seem like a frozen time capsule of life before the pandemic.

I am grateful for this opportunity, however brief. In light of our rapidly changing world, it feels luxurious that such an important experience transpired, and with no way of predicting when the global pandemic will afford such an opportunity again.



Kris Fowles, Thanda's Arts and Education administrator

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