

Please, Miss, a monkey ate my homework!

Becky describes her initial impressions as a teacher at an international school in Tanzania, and how she set about developing her students' global awareness.

I was living in the Bahamas when I was offered a position at an international school in Arusha, Tanzania, and although I was very excited about the position and the prospect of living in Africa, I did have qualms. The Bahamas is a lot less developed than many people expect and I was sure that I could cope with power cuts and poor mobile phone signal so I began planning for a new life even closer to the Equator.

Preconceptions, and the reality

Of course I visited the school website, read every word, and then emailed the outgoing geography teacher to try and get inside information, but as my preparations propelled me towards my very own 'Out of Africa' experience some ridiculous questions crossed my mind which challenged my own preconceptions. 'Do they eat cake in Tanzania?' is one question I actually allowed myself to articulate, though only to my Mum ... but I really wanted to know!

Since arriving on this vast and varied continent I have not been disappointed by my experiences – screeching to a halt on a busy road as a goat absent-mindedly ambles through the traffic, and sharing a 'dala dala' (local bus) with live chickens – though presumably they weren't alive for long after their journey ended! Yes, many women do carry everything on their heads, no matter how big or how heavy; but no, not every Tanzanian speaks only Swahili, keeps a goat and has to trek to the well to fetch water every day. And although many Maasai still follow the traditional way of life, they can also be found coaching the girls' football team at a local school (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The coach of one of the girls' football teams.
Photo: Becky Gray.



Figure 2: The 'dala dalas' (local buses) are often adorned with graphics from the driver's favourite team (Tanzanians are huge fans of the English Premier League) and this one is my team too!
Photo: Becky Gray.

I had imagined a city imbued with dust and disorganization, but what I found in Arusha was perfect order: it's just that it wasn't the type of order I would have understood had I not spent time in the Bahamas. An unpaved verge between the road and the drainage ditch is for an additional lane of traffic. This is skilfully negotiated by the 'dala dala' drivers, who incidentally are football mad and often adorn their vehicles with signs supporting their favourite team – much to my delight when I find myself driving behind a Liverpool FC bus (Figure 2). The drainage ditches serve another function, in that the litter is swept into them and burnt.

One highlight when exploring the city was encountering a man who was walking into town with his prize bull, presumably for something more significant than an afternoon stroll, although this was not obvious from his leisurely approach to the whole activity.

The school environment

On the school campus we have a troop of vervet monkeys. They are very adventurous and it is certainly not a good idea to leave the windows open if there is any fruit or vegetables in sight: butternut squash, oranges, apples, carrots – you name it, they want it! They are regularly to be seen after lunch in the primary playground's Wendy house, snacking on the abandoned leftovers of a packed lunch.

The intake of international schools is often dominated by the expat community, this school is majority Tanzanian: an opportunity to learn about the local area from the local people. My students are from relatively wealthy families, and are privileged to attend an international

school; however I found significant gaps in their knowledge of their own country, let alone the wider world. They visit Nairobi for the shops and services they cannot get in Arusha, but had no idea that Nairobi is surrounded by the largest slum in Africa. Nor did they know that only three years previously there had been a severe famine across much of East Africa that killed about 30,000 people and blighted the lives of a further 10,000,000, many of them refugees from the Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. Many students were unaware that they live in the shadow of a dormant volcano – any future eruption would certainly impact significantly on their education! (Figure 3).

Stereotypes abounded: everyone in London must know the Queen and One Direction; everyone in the United Arab Emirates buys gold bars from vending machines in the mall; the Chinese are responsible for roads the world over, because they are largely responsible for the improvements that have been made to the Tanzanian road network during recent years.

Introducing the enquiry approach

Questioning to consolidate learning and extend understanding is not a common strategy in Tanzanian schools, which of course is something to be encouraged in the geography classroom. It has taken me fourteen weeks to begin to construct a new teacher-student relationship based on trust and a mutual thirst for knowledge. These young people are keen to share what they know, but breaking down their misconceptions and replacing them with a questioning approach is something that will take far longer than two hours a week in a geography classroom. We have recently joined the worldwide association of Round Square Schools (www.roundsquare.org) and I certainly feel that their ideals of internationalism, environmentalism and service will support these students in becoming more rounded and open-minded global citizens.

Addressing the misconceptions

Gradually we are working together to develop their understanding of the world. A Model United Nations (www.una.org.uk/globe) simulation with year 8 about population issues was a great success; and I was privileged, with a group of students, to attend a ceremony at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to mark the 20 years that have passed since the 1994 genocide. Many of my students were unaware of the Rwandan genocide, or the role of their own country in bringing those involved to justice. I am hoping to be able to take some students on a visit to Rwanda to gain a better understanding of past events so their knowledge can influence their future choices.

Currently I am trying to rewrite the humanities curriculum for years 7 to 9. Although the school follows the Cambridge syllabus I will



Figure 3: The school is located at the base of Mount Meru, a dormant volcano that experienced a Mount St Helens-style eruption 8000 years ago, and a small eruption in 1910. **Photo:** Becky Gray.



Figure 4: Active learning with play-dough. **Photo:** Becky Gray.

certainly be considering the IB Middle Years Programme to introduce a greater element of global awareness. The learning domains of communication, cosmology, civilization, culture and community certainly provide food for thought when constructing a new style of learning for these students (Figure 4) and I hope to have the opportunity to share this with you in the future.

Postscript

Yes, they do eat cake in Tanzania... though I tend to now spend a lot more time baking to enjoy the creature comforts of a lemon and poppy seed muffin (and I had to bring poppy seeds from the UK!)

I have not (yet) had the 'monkey ate my homework' excuse; it is far more likely that the excuse will be that the power went off – and as I too spend a lot of time in darkness, it is hard to suggest that this is anything less than the truth. The monkeys do, however, regularly steal students' lunches! | **TG**

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