



Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title: Virtual Information Project (V.I.P.) **Name:** Danielle Lynn Merdin
Other Team Members: Terri Wellner
Program: Boston Program
Trip Dates: 11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001 **Location Visited:** Kenya
Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 02

Project Summary: We are co-teachers who work at an inclusive school in a fourth grade classroom in the city of Boston. We are passionate about finding opportunities to bring the material to life in a way that it is real and tangible for our students. We have found that if our students do not have the background or experiential knowledge required to tackle an abstract concept, it is our job to do what we can to help build this knowledge. One of our largest Science units is a comparative study of tropical and temperate ecosystems. We wanted to bring to life the sight, sounds, and feel of equatorial Africa to the classroom. This was our original inspiration as a teaching team for traveling to Kenya and participating in a “Kenya Educational Tour”, as well as establishing a virtual classroom with a “partner” Kenyan school.

We could have never anticipated what awaited us at our new partner school – Kilimani Primary. A banner stretched across the entrance of the headmaster’s office reading:

“Disability is not inability. Give me a chance to prove it!”

We were unaware that we had landed ourselves in an inclusive school until we sat down with the headmaster and lead teacher and they shared the vision statement of the school:

“To be a leading provider of integration and inclusive learning. To provide pupils with knowledge and skills that will make all children independent and more resourceful.”

As we began to dialogue with the lead teacher and headmaster, we found ourselves speaking “the same language”.

During our time in Nairobi, we observed classrooms and teachers and learned from this school that includes typical learners, the visually impaired, and deaf/blind students. We took back many videos and photographs showing best Kenyan inclusive practices to share with our school community.

Throughout our 7 days on the “Kenya Educational Tour” safari, we collected 68 pages of notes, took 2,094 photographs, and collected over 2 hours of video clips to use in our classroom! We met many new friends from around the world and had great opportunities to network and rally support for our project. We had extremely knowledgeable and supportive Maasai guides and were deeply honored when we were given Maasai names by some of the warriors from the local village – Terri was given the name Mwalimu Naserian (Teacher who blesses the children) and Danielle was given the name Mwalimu Naramat (Teacher who cares for the children).

Career Impact: The FFT fellowship transformed not only us, but the Kilimani Primary School in Nairobi as well. Through FFT funding, we provided a laptop, digital video and photo cameras, and installed WiFi at Kilimani, which formally had no computer or internet access. We sent one teacher from the school through a six-week IT course. We hired an IT consultant to support the school in the V.I.P. exchange for one year. And, we sent 50 fourth grade students on a full-day Ecology Excursion to experience their tropical ecosystem outside of the city limits.

We were personally inspired by the quality of and dedication to inclusive education at Kilimani. We learned new best practices for inclusion of visually impaired and deaf students and formed a bond with the teachers and administration.

While on safari, we collected stories, photos, notes, videos, and artifacts that have already transformed our classroom and our lessons. If you were to walk into our classroom today, you would feel as if you are stepping into a scene from National Geographic.

We have also created and presented on multiple occasions a mini-documentary of our V.I.P. partnership, which has inspired action by our school community!

Classroom/Community Impact: Through the V.I.P. partnership, our students are a resource for the Kenyan students at Kilimani

Primary School to understand our temperate climate and ecosystem and the Kilimani students are a resource for our students to understand the tropical climate and ecosystem through email penpals and virtual field trips by way of digital video and photographs.

V.I.P also incorporates a major Social Studies theme of study at the fourth grade level – diversity and exploration of different cultures, languages, and people groups. V.I.P. has also established a cultural exchange with our “partner classroom” and also shown that “inclusion is global”.

The the V.I.P. inclusive global partnership has sparked an interest school-wide. Teachers, therapists, specialists, administrators, parents, and our community partners are enthusiastically involved (see “Works in Progress” below).

Open Response: Our virtual exchange is already starting to go beyond the classroom and student-to-student correspondence:

Book Drive – We are hosting a book drive for Kilimani with the goal of building a library.

Book Club– Since we are seeking to build a library and promote literacy at Kilimani through the Book Drive, we are promoting literacy at our school as well. We are starting Book Clubs for our teachers and creating digital differentiated books for our students which will springboard discussion around best inclusive practices.

Newspaper Column - We are initiating an international parent-to-parent column in our school's newspaper, which will feature a monthly narrative from parents/families called “Disability is Not Inability”. The goal is to build interest and solidarity and connections within our school community and with our partner school.

Technology –In order to initiate wider school participation, parents are raising money to make more computers available to Kilimani's whole school community to enhance the virtual exchange. Online videos and opportunities for online discussion will bridge the ocean and continent between us.

Quote: "If a picture is worth a thousand words, a Fund for Teachers fellowship is worth a lifetime of memories!"

Photos:



In front of "Disability is Not Inability" banner at Kilimani headmaster's office



With Kilimani administrators and visually impaired student



A handshake and tree planting ceremony to seal the V.I.P. partnership



Danielle with "Mwalimu" Nancy surrounded by new tech equipment



Mt. Kilimanjaro on a clear day



Helpful Maasai guides on nature walk in Maasai Mara



Terri greeting women at Maasai village in Amboseli



Danielle participating in Maasai spear throwing contest