Tutoring Somali Bantu Refugees

Service Learning Paper by Peter Higgins, October 22, 2007

My greatest personal growth while working on a community service project occurred with a worldwide service organization located in Beaverton, Oregon, tutoring Somali Bantu Refugees from February, 2006 until June, 2007. Our group worked with many different associations to help the Somali Bantu, including the Beaverton Firgrove Elementary School, Americorp, and Fircrest apartment complex. The Somali Bantu children were tutored every Wednesday night at their apartment complex recreation center. For awhile, their young mothers (who spoke no English) worked with one of the young mothers in our group members to learn the alphabet along with their preschoolers. Mostly, though, we tutored only the school aged children.

The weekly Wednesday night study groups varied in size. The number of Somali parents and children, Hispanic children and Caucasian children who attended varied from five to thirty, of whom about twenty sought tutoring help. The number of our organization's volunteers tutoring them varied in size from four to twelve.

This service project involved many different cultures and religions, both with recipients and those offering assistance. The Somali Bantu were Muslim, and were also the poorest Africans, who had been an oppressed minority before escaping from their own country just barely with their lives and not much else. Members of our group who offered the tutoring were mostly Hindu, Asian Indians. (Our international service organization has roots in India). Most of the adult members work as highly paid computer professionals. Needless to say, our Wednesday night group was very eclectic economically, ethnically and religiously.

There were often cultural differences between the Somali Bantu, the Asian Indians and me, resulting in our learning a great deal from each other. The advantages of working with the Asian Indians in helping the Somali Bantu far outweighed the disadvantages.

In the beginning, working with the Africans and Indians sometimes challenged me. Both groups had a relaxed concept of time, and we never knew how many volunteers or people wanting to be tutored might show up on any Wednesday night. The Somali Bantu were the most challenging because they had no concept of time or a calendar before arriving to America. On Wednesday night, we often walked through the apartment complex reminding them to go to the recreation center if they wanted help with their homework.

We also had a difficult time getting the Asian Indians to show up on time. The first start time that we agreed upon was 5:45 PM, but the Indians arrived at 6:00 PM. So we agreed to change the start time to 6:00 PM, and the Indians arrived at 6:15 PM (Indians often tease each other about making sure they arrive at a specific time instead of on "Indian Standard Time," but they are faithfully punctual to the minute on occasions where timing is critically important). I soon realized that the Somali Bantu and the Asian Indians were going to arrive when they wanted, and I quit trying to control it. My wife, Jeanne, and I arrived at the recreation center at 5:45 PM, and I read to groups of children that were there. As the Indian volunteers arrived, I assigned to each of them a student that needed help with homework. The disadvantages of working with the two groups were small, but the advantages of working with the two groups were tremendous.

Advantages of Working with Both Groups

An example of such an advantage was the immediate connection between the Somali Bantu and the Asian Indians, based on the similarity of experiences between the two groups. Members of both groups were either immigrants or the first generation born in America, and both were adapting to the culture. Also, members of both groups learned, (or were learning), English as a second language or English as a foreign language. And finally, the Asian Indians

were closer in skin color to the Somali Bantu, than were most of the other people who were helping them.

This close connection between the Somali Bantu and Asian Indians from the beginning was obvious. Jeanne and I were the first people to arrive on Wednesday nights. The Somali Bantu children would see us getting out of our car, and ask, "Where are the Indians? Are the Indians coming?" The connection between the Somali Bantu and the volunteers grew stronger, so by November 2006, we were the only volunteer organization that was still tutoring the Somali Bantu.

The most important lesson that I learned working with the Somali Bantu was actually connecting with them. When we first began working with them, the focus was bonding with them, not completing homework; in the beginning it was challenging. We had power struggles with the children over watching TV in the recreation center. They knew that they were not allowed to watch TV on the Wednesday study nights, but they would turn the TV set on anyway. I would walk up, explain that they could not watch TV, turn it off and unplug it. This was our ritual for the first month.

At our first homework study session, we had thirty screaming Somali Bantu children running around the recreation center. We had no control, and just looked at one another. Then we established relationships with the Somali Bantu, read to the children outside who did not have homework, and tutored students in the recreation center who did have homework. This strategy worked well.

We connected to the Somali Bantu refugees by learning as much as we could about their struggles adjusting to life in America. For example, I read, "Teachers learn as they teach Somalis" (Hsuan, 2006), "After 3 years, Somalis struggle to adjust to USA" (Hampson, 2006),

"Coming to America," (Jaynes 2004), and "Our Toughest Challenge Yet" (Cummings, 2003). In June, I spoke with a Fircrest Elementary schoolteacher on how to help her Somali Bantu students during the summer of 2006. We also posted pictures of the Somali Bantu children from the study group, and links where the Somali Bantu adults could get news or listen to music from their home country on http://www.saiuthiru.org/somalia/somali_photos.htm.

All these efforts resulted in a strong connection between the Somali Bantu and us. Eventually, five to ten students showed up weekly to the study group during the summer. One volunteer did science experiments with the older students, while I read to as many children as possible.

Somali Sense of Community

I also learned from the Somalis about their sense of community. I will never forget the first day that I came to work with the Somali Bantu children. They were playing basketball outside the recreation center with one basketball. Twenty children were standing in a long, orderly line. One child would shoot the basketball, the ball would be retrieved, passed to the child next in line, and then he or she would shoot it. They played basketball this way for months.

I learned more about their sense of community when I broke up a fight. At the end of the tutoring session, we would do the Hokey-Pokey, and I would give them horsy back rides. One night I was giving a small Somali Bantu girl a horsy back ride, when an older Somali Bantu boy grabbed her leg while she was on my back. She spit in his face. As soon as the ride was over, they got into a fight.

I broke up the fight, and explained to the little girl that spitting was not an appropriate behavior. I also explained to the older boy that even though spitting was not an appropriate behavior, he was older and wiser, and needed to learn to refrain from hitting this little girl.

While I spoke to them, I noticed that ten Somali Bantu children soon surrounded me, and I did not know what to do. I wanted to talk to the two children who were fighting, but I did not want to embarrass them in front of their peers. I continued the conversation and said, "We are a non-violent group. While you are here, there is no spitting, hitting or kicking." After I said that, the surrounding group, which had been watching the conversation, began repeating over and over "There is no spitting, hitting or kicking."

The little girl, who spit in the older boy's face, then bit my butt with all of her teeth. Needless to say I was surprised. I quickly turned around, looked at her smiling, cute face, and said, "No biting." At this time, one of the Somali Bantu children said that I was wasting my time talking to the little girl because she did not understand a word of English. At the same time, the surrounding group repeated, "There is no spitting, hitting, kicking or biting." After this experience, I truly realized how important the sense of community was for the Somali Bantu.

The last example of the Somali Bantu's sense of community was when a new Americorp children's program coordinator became responsible for the children's program at the apartment complex. We had been working with the Somali Bantu for over six months and had established an excellent rapport with them. The previous Americorp coordinator allowed us to work with anyone who showed up to the recreation center, if they had homework or not. We would often read to those students who did not have homework and provide English language assistance to the mothers, so the age of the person that we helped would range from toddlers to adults. The new Americorp coordinator made a serious mistake by changing this.

It was in September, 2006 and my wife and I were out of town visiting her family. On her first night, the new Americorp director allowed only elementary, middle school or high

school students with homework in the recreation center. She did not allow the preschool children to join their siblings.

According to volunteers, the preschool children sat outside the locked, recreation center door and wailed. The Asian Indians tutors often avoid conflict, so they followed the instructions of the new director. Finally, after the preschool children cried for forty-five minutes, an older, Indian woman, who worked with preschool children for many years, walked up to the new coordinator and firmly said that she was letting the preschool children into the recreation hall now. The new coordinator had not understood the Somali Bantu's sense of community. In December, we had a meeting with the Somali Bantu women, and they said that they were extremely offended by the actions of the new coordinator on that September night. They also said that if it was not for our established relationship with them, they would not have come back to the homework club.

The biggest cultural misunderstanding between the tutors and the Somali Bantu was around dogs. A young Indian man brought his well-behaved, small dachshund on a leash to show the Somali Bantu children. Big mistake! I was outside reading to the preschool children, and I heard screaming and crying coming from inside the recreation center. I ran into the recreation center to see what was wrong because I thought that someone was hurt. When I entered, I saw the Indian man holding his dog in his arms, and all of the Somali Bantu children were standing on top of the tables screaming and crying. They were horrified of the small dog. One of the Caucasian children who lived at the apartment complex explained that the Muslim, Somali Bantu children believed that if they touched the dog, they would have to take seven showers and put on clean clothes.

In hindsight, I would have brought in someone from S.P.C.A. and a Mai-Mai translator to help the children overcome their fear of dogs. The S.P.C.A. representative could explain to the children through the translator how to act around a dog, and the Somali Bantu parents could explain to their children how to handle the situation according to Muslim customs if they touched a dog.

Our Project Accomplishment

Everyone involved in the Somali Bantu Tutoring project grew and learned, especially the children. In June, 2007, Lidia Krivoy from the Beaverton School District's "Welcome Center" spoke at our ED 570 School & Society class on Diverse Learners and Addressing Learners' Individual Needs. During her lecture, she specifically mentioned how much the Somali Bantu children at Fircrest apartment complex grew both socially and academically because of the work volunteers had accomplished with them.

We tutored two students as fourth graders. When they became fifth graders, they said they were too old to be helped with their homework. However, they still showed up every Wednesday night to help the Somali Bantu students with their homework. I was so happy to see young children wanting to perform community service.

The tutors also grew as well. The Asian Indian children from our organization developed socially at a very fast rate. They matured, developed their self-confidence and became empowered. Our Beaverton group had become involved with the Somali Bantu initially because four teenagers in the organization had decided to start tutoring the Somali Bantus as their community service project. The self-assurance of the Asian Indian children increased as adults volunteered to help them with the project they inspired.

I enjoyed watching the Indian children develop socially. In the beginning they were very shy, and would often talk to each other in the corner of the recreation center instead of approaching the Somali children. I would walk up with a student who needed tutoring, and ask them to help them with their homework. Bashfully, they would. After two months, the students would walk up to a student and start tutoring them without being asked. One Indian teenager enjoyed tutoring so much she gave up her Wednesday dance lessons to help the Somali Bantu. I was inspired to be in the presence of children who wanted to spend their free time helping others.

On a personal note, tutoring the Somali Bantu refugees changed my life. Serving others and making the world a better place have always been important personal goals for me. For years, I had often thought about becoming a schoolteacher. This volunteer experience prompted the necessary action leading to my becoming a schoolteacher. For the first time in my life, my professional and personal goals are aligned.

Works Cited

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