

LAYERS OF LEARNING

How a South African school offers American students the opportunity for layers of learning

You can make a difference! That is the take-home message of the inspiring film, “Under Four Trees.” It models global engagement and also poses two questions:

- How, through service learning, can educators help kids help others?
- How, through the film’s example, can kids see the hope of sustainable change?

The film presents teachers with many opportunities to layer learning. Kids will learn about South Africa and the Nkomo School, service learning, partnerships, and sustainable change. In other words, they will gain knowledge, practice important skills, develop empathy, and feel empowered to initiate change.

Here is a plan for using the film to optimize those layers of learning.

SHOW THE FILM BUT FIRST.....

This short 30-minute film stands on its own, but it is far more meaningful with the benefit of thoughtful preparation, additional resources, and hands-on follow-up.

PREPARATION

Kids need context and a working vocabulary as well. Additional resources help fill out the picture.

CONTEXT

South Africa

South Africa is a country on the southern tip of Africa. It is known for its beautiful landscapes and complicated history. Today South Africa is an emerging democracy, shaped by two forces—colonialism and apartheid. From the 17th century on, the Dutch and British ruled and exploited its many resources. From 1948 until 1994, an independent South Africa imposed apartheid on the people—the legal separation of races by “color,” even more restrictive than American segregation. South Africa struggles with the legacies of both colonialism and apartheid. Many persistent social and economic problems can be seen in the film—poverty, high rates of illiteracy, limited educational opportunities, unemployment, and health issues like HIV / AIDS.

Nkomo School

Nkomo Primary School is a rural school on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The area faces many social and economic problems. The school started in 1998 with 60 children sitting on the ground and one visionary teacher, Mrs. Zikhali. Today the school educates more than 900 learners (students). There are 26 educators (teachers) and a support staff of eleven (cooks, assistants, security guard, cleaner). Many students have unique needs, having been orphaned by the scourge of HIV / AIDS. The school now has 19 classrooms with other facilities to serve the student population.

WORDS TO KNOW

South Africa

country

Africa

continent

apartheid

Nelson Mandela

colonialism

HIV / AIDS

rural

reflection

learner

educator

RESOURCES

The right book at the right time for the right kids. That is the goal of this resource list that introduces kids to South Africa and its neighbors.

See bibliography: **SOUTH AFRICA—CONTEXT ON A CONTINENT.**

FOLLOW-UP

The film's impact will be amplified if kids can reflect on what they have learned.

A few quick ideas. There are many more! Ask students to:

- write on a post-it one word to describe what the movie is about and post on the bulletin board
- write a word on a post-it that describes your feelings while watching the film and post on the bulletin board
- pose questions to ask a learner at the Nkomo School or Mrs. Zikhali and the other educators
Both factual and open-ended questions can be modeled and encouraged.
- write a longer reflection—in poetry or prose—about how the film makes you feel

THEN THINK ABOUT SERVICE LEARNING

What is service learning? Service-learning is a progressive educational approach that advances curriculum goals through active work designed to meet societal needs.

A SCHOOL IN SAN FRANCISCO

Global engagement. That's the purpose and by-product of one project at a San Francisco elementary school since 2006. Students in grades 4 & 5 participate in a Read-a-Thon to benefit the Nkomo School. A letter of explanation goes home to parents. Students sign up sponsors. Students read, read, read. Students collect earned Read-a-Thon money that is then sent to the Nkomo School. Thus, the Nkomo School can meet pressing needs for such items as solar study lights and uniforms. Along the way, San Francisco kids work on math, reading, and social skills!

YOUR SCHOOL

Your school may already engage in service learning. Or the time might not be right due to other demands. In either case, it is possible to get kids thinking about community problems and solutions, especially after viewing "Under Four Trees." What could be more inspirational than seeing how Mrs. Zikhali has changed so many lives?

With time constraints in mind, here is just one approach. Ask kids either as a class, in small groups, or as individuals to a) think about their community problems and b) choose one problem and then propose ways to solve it. Class brainstorming generates ideas. Then ask kids to write up a proposal. As an authentic piece of writing, the proposal calls on many language arts and thinking skills.

Implementation of the proposal might not be possible, but creative thinking is. Ask kids to think about why a particular problem was chosen by the class, a group, or individually. Such reflection lets them go deeper and understand purpose and passion.

WORDS TO KNOW

service learning
global engagement
local engagement
purpose
passion

hope
service learning
problem
solution
proposal

RESOURCES

The right book at the right time for the right child. That is the goal of this resource list that introduces kids to service learning. See bibliography: **SUSTAINABLE CHANGE THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING AND PARTNERSHIPS.**

AND WHAT ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration and reciprocity are hallmarks of strong partnerships.

PEN PALS

Some elementary school students in San Francisco do more than learn about South Africa, the Nkomo School, and service learning. They also engage in a partnership of sorts, exchanging pen pal letters with their counterparts at the Nkomo School. They then find out about each other. The idea is to foster reciprocity—an equal exchange with mutual benefit.

TEACHER EXCHANGE

A service learning project might sometimes seem one-sided—U.S. students offering help to others with a sense of satisfaction their validation. A teacher exchange serves as an example of how to more fully share information and ideas. Jabulani, a former student of the Nkomo School had the opportunity to become a teacher, and he was subsequently chosen to participate in the [Teach With Africa Educator Exchange Program](#), whereby teachers from South Africa come to a participating school in the United States to learn and also to teach about South Africa. It is a reciprocal relationship with learning and teaching on two-sides, and thus, a true partnership that adds yet another layer to learning.
