

Laidlaw Programme Leadership in Action (LIA) Reflection

Scholar

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Title of LIA Project:	Teaching Assistance and Wellbeing Workshops at Assalam Community Foundation, Zanzibar

Introduction

My Leadership In action took place at Asalaam Community Foundation in Zanzibar, Africa. During my placement I worked closely with the school within the foundation as teacher assistant role focusing primarily on year 5-7 students in mathematics and science. Alongside my teaching role I also facilitated wellbeing workshops weekly throughout my placement time. Working with students at this transitional stage of early adolescence highlighted the importance of balancing academic assistance with emotional and social support.

The main aim of my placement was to not only support students with their schoolwork but to also create a safe and open space for discussions around confidence, personal growth and the challenges of growing up. Close collaboration with students, teachers, fellow volunteers, and members of the wider community allowed me to contribute to a shared commitment toward the students' overall development. This new experience required me to undergo challenges regarding empathy, adaptability and self-development I was not aware I needed.

Initial weeks

The first 2 weeks of my placement provided to be more challenging than I expected. Upon arrival I experienced an immediate sense of homesickness. My entire surroundings were completely different to what I know, and it initially struck me. Aspects of everyday life felt unfamiliar such as the food I was eating, the language that was spoken across campus and even the structure of the day. As the placement was coordinated through a Turkish organisation, the cultural environment differed from what I had initially expected, which added another layer of adjustment.

During this initial period, the school had not yet officially opened, which meant my role focused primarily on administrative tasks within the foundation. I assisted with tasks in international outreach. I was not anticipating such tasks as I had communicated with the foundation that I wanted to work with the schools so initially I was not satisfied. However, as time progressed it led me to build a connection with the volunteer supervisor Yussuf that I wouldn't have been able to build otherwise. He taught me some of the language and what to generally expect from the Zanzibar

lifestyle. While this work was valuable, it also required patience, as I was eager to engage directly with students but instead had to adapt to a less familiar, office-based role.

The presence of Fatima, another Laidlaw Scholar was vital in helping me navigate through this transition. We supported each other through moments of uncertainty, and it made the adjustment process more manageable. I began starting to feel like less of a visitor and more of an active member of the community.

As the 2 weeks progressed, language and cultural barriers became increasingly significant. Many students spoke Swahili at home, and their English fluency varied significantly, making communication challenging at times. I often found myself rephrasing instructions multiple times, which could feel frustrating, not because of the students, but because I questioned the effectiveness of my contribution. Over time, however, I began to adapt by learning simple local words and phrases, which helped build rapport and reduced my sense of being an outsider.

Religious practices also rose challenges regardless of practicing the same faith. Although I am Muslim, I do not wear hijab, while the female students wore it as part of their uniform. Their questions, asked out of genuine curiosity, reminded me that I was entering their cultural space and needed to approach my role with humility, respect, and openness. These early challenges played a significant role in shaping my understanding of adaptive leadership and the importance of cultural sensitivity.

Teaching Maths & English

Once the school officially opened and I had settled into the routine. Each day began early, with waking at 7:00 a.m. to have breakfast alongside the students before heading into the classroom. The experience of having breakfast with the kids helped me pose less as a stranger to them and more as a friend. This helped build familiarity and trust, making the learning environment feel more collaborative rather than hierarchical. I primarily supported Mathematics and Science lessons, and it was within these classes that I felt I could make the most meaningful contribution.

Initially, explaining mathematical concepts to students whose first language was not English proved challenging. Concepts that I might normally explain quickly required careful rephrasing and the use of simpler language. Over time, I began to identify key words and phrases that students responded to more easily, which significantly improved communication and understanding. This adjustment highlighted the importance of flexibility and patience in leadership, particularly in educational settings where language can be a barrier.

I learned that effective teaching extends beyond delivering content. It relies heavily on the relationships formed within the classroom and the trust students place in their educators. Creating an environment where students felt comfortable admitting when they did not understand was essential. By consistently offering encouragement and individual support, particularly to students who were visibly struggling, I was able to witness tangible progress.

One moment that stood out involved a student who initially expressed frustration and a belief that mathematics was “impossible.” Through regular one-on-one support and

reassurance, she gradually gained confidence and was eventually able to complete an entire worksheet independently. Later, she performed strongly on a test, demonstrating not only academic improvement but increased self-belief. Experiences such as this reinforced my appreciation for teaching and reaffirmed my motivation to engage in this aspect of volunteering.

To further encourage interest in Science, I shared photographs of myself working in university laboratory settings, which sparked curiosity and engagement among the students. Connecting their classroom learning to real-world applications helped make abstract concepts feel more attainable and inspired discussions about future aspirations. This approach emphasised the role of leadership in motivating others through relatability and example.

Wellbeing Workshops

Outside of formal lessons, I became aware that students had limited opportunities to engage in structured conversations about wellbeing. Topics such as puberty, emotional regulation, confidence, friendships, and social dynamics were largely unaddressed, despite being particularly relevant for students aged 12–14. Recognising this gap, I proposed and developed a series of wellbeing workshops aimed at providing students with a safe and supportive space to explore these topics.

To ensure the workshops were appropriate and effective, I consulted with teachers and fellow volunteers to gain insight into the students' needs and cultural context. I then designed session plans that balanced age-appropriate activities with honest and open discussion. Leadership during this process involved delegation based on individual strengths; some volunteers were more comfortable facilitating discussions, while others contributed by designing interactive activities and materials.

This initiative required me to practise leading without formal authority. As I did not hold an official leadership position, participation depended entirely on collaboration and shared motivation. I learned that in order to lead effectively in this context, I needed to communicate the value of the workshops clearly and foster a sense of collective ownership among the volunteers.

The outcome of the workshops exceeded my expectations. Students were highly engaged, asked thoughtful questions, and demonstrated a willingness to open up about personal experiences and concerns. Their level of participation highlighted the importance of creating spaces where young people feel heard and supported. This experience reinforced my understanding of leadership as influence rather than control, and emphasised the impact of empathy, initiative, and trust in community-based leadership.

Feedback

Early on one teacher gave me feedback early. She said my explanations were clear, but a lot of students weren't understanding them because of the language barrier. At first, I felt a bit deflated as I had prepared so much.

Therefore, I changed things:

- Shorter sentences
- More visuals
- More examples
- More checking in
- Learned some basic Swahili

Everything improved after that. Students were more involved, more confident, and more responsive. It taught me how important cultural intelligence really is, not as a buzzword, but as a real skill.

The students

The relationships I built with the students were the most meaningful part of my placement. They were curious, energetic, and quick to express their personalities. While some students were confident and eager to engage from the outset, others were more reserved and required time and consistency before feeling comfortable around me. Navigating these differences taught me the importance of patience and genuine presence when building trust with young people.

Before the official teaching term began, an exclusive summer school was held for Grade 7 students. This programme focused on reinforcing learning ahead of final exams, while also incorporating extracurricular activities such as swimming, stitching, and storytelling. During the storytelling sessions, I shared traditional and personal stories from my own cultural background, which helped spark curiosity and interest in who I was beyond my role as a volunteer. This proved to be an effective way to build rapport, as students began approaching me with new questions each day and engaging more openly in conversation.

Once the teaching term began, I made a conscious effort to connect with students across different year levels. To break down initial barriers, I would arrive early before lessons and play games such as Simon Says and hide-and-seek with the students. I was aware that many of them were hesitant to open to an outsider who would only be present for a limited time; however, by consistently engaging with them through play, humour, shared jokes, music, and informal conversations, those barriers gradually diminished. I also attended school performances and plays, sitting among the audience and watching students perform, which further demonstrated my interest in their lives beyond the classroom.

Spending time with the students across different school settings allowed our relationships to develop naturally. Whether through laughter, listening to their stories, or simply being present, these interactions strengthened mutual trust and connection. On my final day, I wrote personalised letters to the students I had worked with most closely, hoping to express how much I valued them and their effort throughout the placement.

One moment that remains particularly significant involved one of the quieter students. After reading her letter, she became visibly emotional, hugged me tightly, and said, *“You’re not just a volunteer. You’re my friend.”* This interaction encapsulated the impact of the relationships I had built and reinforced my understanding that

leadership, particularly when working with young people, is rooted in authenticity, care, and human connection.

Cultural learning

My time in Zanzibar provided meaningful cultural learning that extended far beyond formal aspects of my placement. Cultural values were expressed in everyday life, with music, shared meals, and community interactions forming a central part of daily routines. I observed a strong emphasis on collective support, where generosity and hospitality were offered freely, even in circumstances where material resources were limited. These experiences challenged my understanding of community and highlighted the importance of relationships over individualism.

I also developed a deeper awareness of how faith and identity are expressed differently across cultural contexts. Although I share the same religion as many members of the community, I encountered practices, expectations, and interpretations that differed from my own experiences. This reinforced the idea that shared identity does not equate to shared experience. Engaging with these differences encouraged me to reflect on my own assumptions and approach interactions with greater cultural humility.

Through these experiences, I gained a more nuanced understanding of cultural sensitivity and empathy. Rather than viewing culture as something to observe from a distance, I learned to engage with it actively and respectfully. This cultural learning strengthened my ability to lead in diverse environments by increasing my awareness, adaptability, and respect for perspectives different from my own.

Leadership Growth

Throughout the placement, I grew in ways I did not expect:

- Adapting to a new environment
- Motivating people without being “in charge”
- Building genuine relationships
- Handling emotional moments
- Making quick decisions
- Learning from mistakes instead of shutting down

My SMART Goals

I set five goals at the start:

1. Lead two wellbeing workshops: ended up running several.
2. Build meaningful connections: achieved.
3. Adapt my teaching style: improved massively.
4. Work well with volunteers: we planned and delivered as a team.
5. Leave something sustainable: I left resources for teachers to keep using.

Impact

Students

- More confident in class
- More engaged
- Safe space for wellbeing conversations
- Stronger connection with teachers and volunteers

Foundation

- New workshop materials
- More attention on wellbeing
- Stronger collaboration

Personal

- More confident
- Less shy
- Better with cultural differences
- More aware of my privilege
- Genuinely considering teaching as a career

Conclusion

This Leadership-in-Action placement was a transformative experience that reshaped my understanding of leadership, community engagement, and my own capabilities. Through academic support, wellbeing workshops, and the relationships I built with students, I learned that effective leadership is grounded in empathy, adaptability, and genuine connection rather than authority or position. Navigating cultural and language barriers challenged me to listen more carefully, reflect on my assumptions, and lead with humility.

Teaching emerged as a particularly significant aspect of this experience. Supporting students in Mathematics and Science, witnessing their confidence grow, and creating spaces where learning felt accessible and encouraging reinforced the impact educators can have beyond academic outcomes. These moments prompted me to reflect deeply on the role of education in shaping confidence, opportunity, and future aspirations. As a result, teaching is now something I actively consider as part of my future, not only as a profession but as a means of creating meaningful and lasting impact.

Overall, this placement strengthened my commitment to service-oriented leadership and broadened my perspective on how small, consistent actions can foster trust, growth, and change. The lessons I gained in Zanzibar will continue to inform how I engage with others, approach leadership opportunities, and shape my future path.

Project Leader

Please comment on your scholar's LIA period, what you consider to be your scholar's strengths and which leadership attributes (please refer to the leadership attributes below) you feel your scholar has demonstrated and is particularly skilled in. You could also identify areas which the scholar can develop further.

Signature of Scholar ZA Date: 23/12/2026

Signature of Project Leader _____ Date: ____/____/____

Leadership Attributes

Able to lead without authority

Able to convey purpose and build coalitions

Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy

Honestly assess own knowledge/leadership style/preferences

Knows own limitations and acts accordingly

Learns continually

Speaks and writes clearly and confidently

Able to listen with understanding

Uses digital connectivity

Makes effective decisions in complex environments

Seeks out and fosters innovation and creativity

Strong intellectual ability

Turns ideas into action

Builds relationships and networks

Works collaboratively and across boundaries

Uses emotional intelligence to achieve this

Capitalises on the power of diversity

Able to navigate new and foreign situations

Uses this to build relationships and networks

Has energy and impact

Makes things happen

Able to analyse data and interpret results

Able to work and think independently

Prioritises activities and manages own time