

This summer, I volunteered at Star Top Community School in Lusaka, Zambia. Alongside three other Laidlaw Scholars, I taught classes, led activities, and stayed on-site with a host family. I instructed 1st-grade literacy, 5th-grade English and social studies, 5th and 6th-grade storytelling, and yoga for all ages. Over the course of my six weeks at the school, I learned a lot about leadership: how to collaborate, sharpen my personal strengths, leverage personal time, and embrace ambiguity.

Strengthening My Collaboration Skills

Living With a Host Family

Collaboration came easy to my coworkers and I, partly because we stayed in the same house. During meals and mall trips, we held personal discussions that brought us together. We developed a sense of friendship, and eventually family, that resulted in trust.

Because we trusted each other, the other Scholars and I felt comfortable sharing our challenges, weaknesses, and questions. This trust came especially helpful when the final Laidlaw Scholar arrived. During one of our first conversations, he shared that he was struggling to connect with one of the fifth-grade students. Having known the student, and her difficulty trusting new teachers, I was able to offer advice. With a bit of help and admirable patience, my coworker connected with the student, allowing him to offer her the support she needed.

While we often troubleshooted challenges, my coworkers and I also knew that we could share our successes. Successes were viewed as both for the individual and the group, as we shared the same mission and chose to learn from one another. I particularly remember when one of my coworkers succeeded in encouraging a behaviorally challenged student. Because of her success, I realised I needed to commit to more consistent positive reinforcement strategies. That shift helped me better connect with and support my students.

While conversations offered support at home, shared norms cultivated trust in the classroom. Most importantly, my fellow Scholars and I expected each other to fill in necessary roles when possible. For example, if one of us had a free period, we would help whoever was in the first grade classroom. Our shared expectation helped reduce student-teacher ratios, ease teacher burden, and improve our relationships with the children.

In a future job, I might not be able to live with my coworkers, but I will seek to organize social time with them. Even just a few meaningful conversations over lunch can help develop trust. And when coworkers trust each other, they can collaborate in an impactful way.

Learning About Attitude

I learned a lot about attitude from one of my fellow Laidlaw Scholars, Grace. As a third-year medicine student, she knew a thing or two about staying positive in demanding situations. Leading by example, she pushed me to exude positivity even when I felt tired or discouraged. Regardless of her energy level, Grace would often do silly gestures, tell engaging stories, or simply listen to others in an enthusiastic way. Experiencing her energy in-person allowed me to replicate it in the classroom. After noticing how much her exciting music classes engaged students, I created small singing chants to motivate my first-graders. These chants brought energy and smiles into the classroom. I am entirely grateful for Grace's guidance: the consistency she inspired in me has helped strengthen my leadership abilities.

Sharpening Personal Strengths

During my leadership training, I examined my top five CliftonStrengths: relator, individualization, communication, connectedness, and developer. My leadership-in-action experience allowed me to hone these skills and explore their use.

Relator and Individualization

Being a strong relator helped me to create a sense of family with my host parents/supervisors, fellow Scholars, and other coworkers. I often combine this strength with my propensity to individualize, as I approach relationship-building in a personalized way. I offered unique support (humor, a listening ear, or advice) depending on the person and how they felt in a given moment. When my host family and coworkers knew that I cared about them, they knew they could trust me. And as I mentioned earlier, trust goes a long way when it comes to collaboration.

I cultivated trust-based relationships with my students as well. Trust enabled me to set higher expectations without losing connection, and students began to care about my standards. My supervisors want their students to do their best, and my connection with students proved vital to achieving this mission.

When discussing behavior with a first-grader, I combined my relator and individualization strengths to cultivate trust and set achievable expectations. That day, Kayden had badly misbehaved, so I sat with him during the first few minutes of lunch. Kayden had been struggling with behavior for the whole week, so I wanted to address it, but I needed to do so delicately. Prioritizing close connections, I knew I needed to maintain our trust-based relationship as his teacher. To keep our connection, and to make sure my approach was worthwhile, I allowed Kayden to lead the discussion. Since he wouldn't answer my questions verbally, I had him circle reasons why he was upset. After some silent back-and-forth, he shared that he was upset at himself for

misbehaving. In response, I had him promise that he would do his best to behave better in his future classes. The next day, he came excited to work.

Connectedness

After conversing with my fellow Laidlaw Scholars, we recognized common similarities in children across cultures. I began to reflect on my elementary school experiences, recalling memories of both fun and mistakes. This trip to the past helped me empathize with my students and feel less annoyed when they disrupted class. Patience came easier when I was addressing behavior. I more consistently sang or joked with my students as a first warning. Empathy drove me to lower my initial sternness, which opened more space for me to connect with my students. Student connection then me to bring individualized approaches, confidence, and joy into the classroom. This support was especially necessary for students who had a difficult home environment, highlighting the importance of empathy and patience in teaching.

Developer

As a developer, I felt committed to pushing my students from the start. But I needed to draw from my other skills to manifest student progress. Individualization and communication became key, especially as I began to create my own grammar material.

In my 5th grade English class, my tendency to individualize others helped me identify my students' levels. So rather than lumping my students all together, I created a normal track and an advanced track. During each class period, I taught both tracks simultaneously, bouncing from correction to instruction. Even though multitasking was difficult, I remained committed when it made sense. As a developer, I kept a keen eye on signs of student improvement, which helped me stay motivated during classes.

Communication and Individualization

During English classes, the same explanation did not work for everyone. But I couldn't let this challenge stand in my way. I sought alternative explanations online, and I tailored them based on what I knew about students' interactions. Then, I delivered the explanations in ways that engaged students: presenting scenarios, holding mock conversations, and asking questions. Making sure that explanations aligned with my students' understanding and way of life was integral to realizing academic progress.

Leveraging Personal Time

During our leadership training, we discussed the importance of stillness. Time outside of assigned work can provide clarity and promote curiosity. During my experience in Zambia, this knowledge not only helped me reset, it allowed me to learn from others.

As an extrovert, stillness doesn't require solitude. Sometimes stillness simply means being present with others. Grace, my fellow Scholar, encouraged me to take breaks from my evening work more often to connect with my host family. Spending time with my family was ultimately productive in itself. I enhanced my ability to relate with others, and I learned a lot about teaching.

One day, I spent hours after school playing with the four-year-old girl in our host family. We sang, danced, and imagined a variety of scenarios. Spending time with the girl reinvigorated the explorative energy I needed as a teacher. After our day of playing, I brought more physical movement, suspense, and humor into the classroom, reeling students in. By spending personal time with my host family, I was able to enhance my approach to teaching.

Embracing Ambiguity

Coming to Lusaka without official teacher training, there were many things I had to explore and learn. By focusing on collaboration and skills development, I was able to confidently navigate areas in which I initially felt uncomfortable, enabling me to grow as a teacher and a team leader.

Adapting to a large first-grade class was probably the most difficult experience I had. I initially committed to teaching older students, but I willingly accepted younger classes amidst staffing challenges. To diffuse the difficulty of teaching so many students, I took a collaborative, detail-oriented approach. As you have seen, the support of my supervisors and fellow Scholars took me far. I also took my own initiative, tracking student progress and scanning teacher blogs. I could then bring new knowledge into future conversations with my peers and supervisors, providing help in return.

Leadership in Action

Over my six weeks, I have learned that a good leader keeps an open mind, seeks meaningful connection, and supports others in group discussion. In the midst of uncertainty, leaders can rely on the communities they have helped to construct, rather than acting out of fear or stress. I have become a stronger leader by collaborating with my supervisors, fellow Laidlaw Scholars, and other coworkers. I continue to support them in return, helping to run a fundraising campaign for the school. I hope that the committed partnerships of the Laidlaw Scholars Program can continue to bring meaningful change in our future.