Developing Cultural Competencies in the Conflict Zone:
Two Teachers With One Mission

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study explores global competencies developed by two teachers, one near the end of her career and another at the beginning, as they found themselves drawn to volunteer in one of the most notorious favelas in Latin America. Both teachers were motivated by the drive to seek new perspectives about teaching and poverty and both would come home from the experience with greater personal humility. Yet, the personal impact of the experience was not sufficient for either. Thus, two teachers joined forces and took collaborative action to transform a voluntourism company into a non-profit educational organization. Engaging in a process of inquiry helped them to translate their ideas into responsible actions, thereby helping—in their own small way—to fill the need for quality educational services in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Two stories became one mission to provide children greater access to a head start in school and a future filled with opportunities.

GLOBAL COMPETENCIES

Three global competencies are explored:

Values and Attitudes:
- ◦ Valuing multiple perspectives.
- ◦ Cultivate and use empathy.

Behaviors:
- ◦ Translate ideas, concerns, and findings into appropriate individual or collaborative action.

Skills:
- ◦ Seek out and apply different perspectives to problem solving and decision-making.

CASE BACKGROUND

Angela's Story

For the past 23 years, I've mostly taught in inner-city schools - by choice. One might say I have always been drawn to challenges. When I first began teaching in the inner cities of United States schools, I was unprepared. Despite having already attained National Board Certification, my first year at an inner-city school in the "Deep South" felt like a failure. I had failed to acquire the knowledge and skills to teach students whose background and culture were unfamiliar. My high school was one of the lowest performing schools in a low performing district. Over ninety percent of my students were African-American and eligible for free breakfast and lunch. Most lived in government subsidized housing "projects" with names such as "Orange Grove," yet there were no trees, just weeds and concrete. Over the years, the community had succumbed to urban blight--abandoned houses adjacent to the school provided shelter to addicts, retail stores were boarded up, and many were left to rot. There were street signs missing and streets even the locals would not drive down, day or night. Fights were common, apathy was ever present, and teachers expressed that every day felt like going into battle.

My earlier teaching experience had been in a gifted "academy" type school. "Best Practice" was easy there. That classroom was patterned after the Nancy Atwell model; every English teacher in the 1990's dreamed of the workshop-style classroom. But I found it hard to replicate when I accepted the challenge to teach in an inner-city school. Ironically, I had to balance the community stakeholders' expectations of "best practice" with the "best practice" ideologies I proselytized and implemented

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