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Intercultural Communication Through Music Education
Jinja, Uganda

This past summer, I travelled to Jinja, Uganda to embark upon a research project exploring music as the universal language, particularly at the primary school level. The project was spurred by my own interest in the arts and concern for the future of arts education in America due to impending cuts. Uganda emerged as an interesting parallel because it, too, places an enormous amount of emphasis on standardized tests. This leads to a utility-based approach to education as educators are forced to teach only what will be tested because those tests are disproportionately valuable. I entered Uganda intending to explore the economic justification of arts in situations like the aforementioned, but I have come away from the project with some newfound, fascinating take-aways.

While I did find similarities between the U.S. and Uganda in terms of primary school music education and its impending deterioration that supported my initial hypothesis, I quickly recognized that the stakes are much higher in Uganda due to cultural implications. Uganda is a land full of unique cultures, backboneed by the music and dance of each tribe. These cultural practices have traditionally been passed on by oral transmission, which is now less prevalent because lifestyles are changing as adults go to work and many children go to boarding school. It would then fall on teachers to provide musical training for children. However, due to a complex set of issues (including poor teacher training, lack of resources, and emphasis on the almighty test), most children pass through school without learning any music or dance. The result is a generation that is at risk of losing its cultural center, void of any knowledge of its tradition. Augment the issue by increasing globalization of media - children prefer Western artists to African ones - and we can see a dire problem. Thus, advocacy for music education becomes a conversation on the grounds of cultural preservation and national identity rather than simply qualitative benefits for the classroom.

All of this I discovered through an adventurous few weeks of interviews and teaching. I learned an immense about myself, mostly about my ability to rise up to challenges. Unanticipated snags in plans happened daily, and I had to push myself out of my comfort zone to accomplish my research goals. I learned that I am brave enough to enter an unknown situation and then find a way to get in contact with the right people and make progress on a project. I was also surprised to be so interested in the anthropological facet of the research, prompting me to be more open to future areas of research. Ultimately, it was an exhilarating intellectual process as I explored the culture of Uganda and developed relationships with the locals. I treasure most the simple interactions with my students. Being in the classroom everyday connected me to a slew of dedicated Ugandan teachers and students who were quick to smile and slow to complain. They cared about me and my work, and I was dedicated to making a difference in their lives. This mutual respect, bridging people of entirely disparate cultures, was the highlight of my experience.

I advise peers considering a similar experience to not be afraid to take a leap outside of their comfort zones. It is when you are challenged that you must be creative, expand your limits, and grow as a student. It is an invaluable part of the undergraduate experience, and I recommend it to everyone at Notre Dame. I sincerely appreciate CUSE for supporting my project.