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Spring 2014

### Susan Merrill Clinical Assistant Professor, Occupational Therapy travels to South Africa

Susan Merrill

*University of New Hampshire - Main Campus*

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## Susan Merrill

### Clinical Assistant Professor, Occupational Therapy - South Africa



map of South Africa

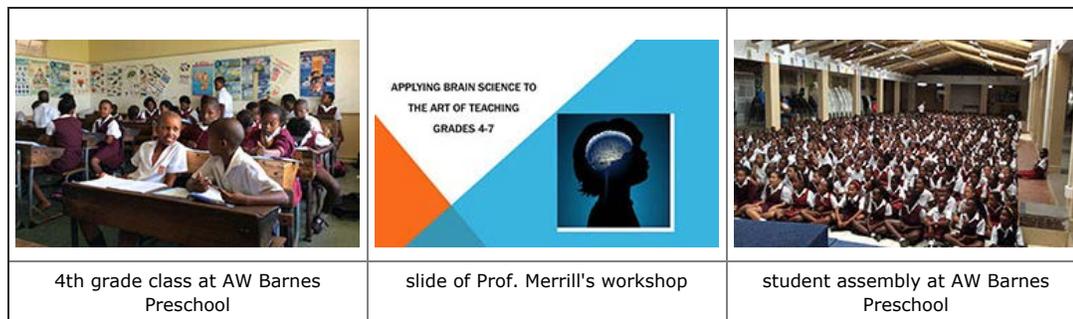
I appreciate the support of a Center for International Education travel grant that helped me return to East London, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa in February 2014. This was my fourth trip to South Africa since 2011. All four trips have been in conjunction with South Africa Partners, a Boston-based NGO celebrating its 15<sup>th</sup> year of supporting collaborative health and education initiatives in South Africa. <http://www.sapartners.org/>

The Eastern Cape of South Africa is the second poorest province, per capita GDP. This is Mandela's homeland and pride about what has been accomplished in the 20 years since Apartheid ended runs deep; as does frustration about how much more there is to accomplish. I feel privileged to play a small part in helping educators from disadvantaged schools in East London develop alternative understandings of teaching/learning and working with children who have learning differences.

My experiences in South Africa thus far have helped me realize that establishing collaborative relationships is a gradual process; that Americans who come thinking they have "answers" are doomed to fail; and that listening almost always comes before talking. The purpose of my trip this time was to continue collaborations I have been nurturing and to lay some ground work for new collaborations. I have found that my background as an occupational therapist is valued in East London, especially in preschool and school settings.

#### Ongoing Collaboration

- *AW Barnes Primary School* – I gave two new workshops for teachers that focused on using our understanding of the brain to guide pedagogy. The first two days I was at the school I observed in classrooms and took some video footage of children, which I then used as discussion points during the workshops. The teachers enjoyed this aspect and we had lively discussions. I also participated in Parents' Night at the AW Barnes Preschool, giving a short talk on the importance of sensory experiences for young children.



- *Masibumbane Early Childhood Education Project* – Last summer I provided the occupational therapy perspective in a needs-assessment of 7 different day care centers. These centers are going to be part of a network to improve the quality of each center so that they all meet the South African national standards for preschools. This trip I went with a group of people from South Africa Partners to further observe the centers. This will be an ongoing role when I return in summer 2014. <http://www.masibumbanedevelopment.org.za/>

#### New Collaborations

- *The Hope Preparatory School* – I met teachers from this school last summer and was invited to the school while I was there this trip. The school is for children who are HIV positive or who have been affected by AIDS (parents and other family members, for example). They have never had an occupational therapist visit their school so I observed classrooms and we talked about what I might offer them on my next trip and how I might connect them with therapists in East London who might be able to volunteer some time with the idea that, in the longer run, there might be an occupational therapist who would consult with them on a part-time basis. <http://www.thembafoundation.org/about.cfm>
- *Informal Networking* – I met with an occupational therapist and a community activist and talked about potential collaborations in schools, rehabilitation centers, and informal settlements.
- *University of Fort Hare* – UFH is, historically, one of the most important universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. It was from UFH that an educated, black elite was established, with attendees/graduates including C. Hani, N. Mandela, ZK Matthews, G. Mbeki, R. Mugabe, R. Sobikwe, O. Tambo, D. Tutu just to name a few of the important political and social leaders who attended this esteemed university. Like many institutions in South Africa, UFH has fallen on hard times and is working to reinvent itself. I attended an informal meeting between UFH Education faculty and South Africa Partners/Masibumbane people. I was able to make solid connections with the Head of the Education Faculty, Dr. Moyo, which will, I hope, lead to further collaborations in research and teaching. <http://www.ufh.ac.za/faculties/edu/>



This was a lot to accomplish in 7 days and I came back with lots to think about and build on for future trips to South Africa. I did get one walk on Nahoon Beach where I put my feet in the Indian Ocean and found a couple of pieces of sea glass for my ongoing collection. South Africa is an amazing country and I look forward to going back this summer. My hope is that next year I will be able to take graduate-level occupational therapy students with me to participate in some of these ongoing and new collaborations and research projects that I hope to start in summer 2014.



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