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In the spring of 2007, Oprah Winfrey opened the Oprah Winfrey Leadership academy; a $40 million girls’ school in South Africa. OWLA has grades 7-12, and the school would eventually serve 450 girls. Winfrey invested in such a school in hopes of creating a safe place for young girls where they can become leaders in the world. Winfrey sparked a lot of controversy, as people were questioning her judgement and decision making, as many thought spending so much money for so few girls when so many were in need was appalling. Given the levels of poverty in South Africa and the current school systems in place, it is evident that Winfrey’s investment is actually quite misguided.

57 percent of South Africans live below the poverty line. As of 1994, 27 percent of South Africa’s schools had no running water, 43 percent had no electricity, 80 percent had no libraries, and 78 percent had no computers (Report of Public Hearing). Given these statistics, it seems flawed to spend $40 million on a single school that serves a mere 450 girls. It’s nothing short of a misallocation of Winfrey’s resources. There are millions of impoverished kids living in South Africa that could benefit from even a minor upgrade from their current school situations. OWLA has a gym, beauty salon, yoga studio, garden classrooms and an amphitheater. Critics contest that since these girls came from nothing, they expect nothing more at school, which is a rather egregious take. However, the critics make sense as these girls don’t need a beauty salon or yoga studio in their school. Give them running water and a safe space to become powerful women, but don’t just spend money on the school for the sake of spending. There is no justification for giving 450 girls in South Africa such a luxurious school when thousands of girls are overlooked and remain in danger in their situations. $40 million could improve schools all across South Africa, or at least more than a single institution. In many developing countries, a single school could cost anywhere from $15,000-$30,000 to build (Build a School, Caswell). Given, those schools provide the bare minimum, but say Winfrey sets out to build schools across South Africa for around $100,000 per school. That’s 400 schools that can be equipped with more than enough infrastructure. Take that same number of 450 kids, and now Winfrey has created a suitable school system for 180,000 underprivileged kids. That still leaves hundreds of thousands of kids without schooling, but an initiative like that would likely get much more support globally. When Winfrey first set out to build this school, it was initially a public-private partnership with the province’s school system, but they dropped out amidst criticism that the school was far too luxurious and elite for a country like South Africa (Samuels). “Service systems build on people’s deficiencies; communities on their capacities,” (McKnight 38). This quote is especially applicable to the OWLA. Winfrey built it on the inadequacies of a community, as that is the basis for servanthood. If Winfrey relied more on the community to support and used their input to build that institution, it would have been a bigger success. As on outsider, Winfrey can see the obvious problems of society in South Africa, thus she fulfilled her mission, but didn’t appeal to the vision of the impoverished community of South Africa.

In South African communities, families tend to be very involved in one another’s lives, as they generally are family oriented. Winfrey’s school infringes on the existing family dynamic, and even hinders that dynamic. Once a girl comes to OWLA, and has all these luxuries at her fingertips, how is she supposed to readjust to her previous lifestyle? Only 63% of South African homes have a flushable toilet, 36% of people say they feel safe walking at night in South Africa, and only 67% of people are satisfied with their water quality (South Africa Life Index). How are teenage girls going to attend ultimately a luxury resort high school, and then return to their villages and homes without batting an eye? It seems unjust and unfair to the girls to shower them with amenities for five years and then have many of them return to their depleted lifestyles. Not only that, but OWLA has incredibly strict visitation policies. Each girl is allowed one visit per month, and the visit must be approved at least two weeks in advance (Prins). How is that an ethical policy? Family is very important to a child’s development, and a lot of growth is had during teenage years, so why would you limit the girls from seeing their parents? One mother complained that she had to wait thirty minutes at a security gate and could only visit her child for two hours. Administration claims this policy is to ensure safety and also create a cultivated school environment. To be completely honest, that policy taken out of context seems like a prison’s visitation policy. OWLA ultimately sounds like an orphanage that is taking girls away from their families and trying to get them to disconnect from their poor lifestyles. Winfrey’s decision making in this aspect seems like she does not truly understand the family dynamic in South Africa and seems like her own vision, as opposed to the community’s aspirations for a learning environment.

OWLA does have several positive aspects and a stellar argument could be formed to testify that it was indeed an inspired investment. In 1996, 33 percent of rapes reported by female students had been committed by their teachers (Jewkes, Levin, Mbananga, Bradshaw). OWLA provides a safe space for female students in which they don’t have to worry about rape or sexual harassment by their teachers. Winfrey hired 500 South African girls to paint murals and create murals all throughout the campus, so that students could better identify with their culture and celebrate their heritage (Building a Dream). The institution, although only serving 450 girls at a time, does provide exceptional opportunities for all those young women, and instead of having to worry about violence, AIDS or teen pregnancy, these girls can focus on becoming future leaders of South Africa. By investing so much money into a school, Winfrey is trying her best to pave the way for black girls in Africa to change the world. Winfrey has even inspired Madonna to open a similar school in Malawi. Many people question Winfrey and her intentions, but at the end of the day, Winfrey invested her own money into what she thought was the most impactful way to the country of South Africa. People are going to disagree with her, but this school achieved what she wanted. She wanted to go overboard for the girls that she felt have the potential to make a difference in the world. It is merely that despite all the positives, the school still is a misguided investment as the impact seems minute in the grand scheme of an entire country suffering from economic problems. And ironically enough, a dorm matron was charged with 13 counts of assault in 2007 and sentenced to time in prison, and in 2009, four girls were expelled for harassment (Applegarth et al).

Oprah Winfrey’s Leadership Academy is not a waste of money or time. It’s not a selfish project. It is simply that building a $40 million institution to serve 450 girls when roughly 10 million children in South Africa live in poverty seems like a misuse of such an extensive investment. $40 million invested to all South African schools wouldn’t be large enough to serve the entire country, but it could help hundreds of thousands of kids, and the impact would certainly be much greater.

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