

# Collaborative working – East Africa

A summary from **Teresa Quail** on her visit to Rwanda and Uganda

The Mary Grace Wilkins travel scholarship helped support my travel costs on a self-funded trip to Rwanda and Uganda in late February 2019, with Deaf Reach (DR) UK (a 100% voluntary charity group). The travel itinerary was intense but allowed for opportunities to meet and learn from many inspirational people who devote their lives to making a difference for and with deaf children, young people and their families. These interactions not only widened my networks in developing world countries but enabled me to reflect on how UK deaf educationalists could help develop relationships directly with a wider range of professional peers.

## Initial impact

In Rwanda's Nyabihu School for the Deaf, one key project was to support Isobel Blakeley (ex-VSO and retired UK QToD) in advance of the future October training activity and the other was, as an Educational Audiologist, to support and monitor the 30 hearing aids recently introduced in their school. Bad weather in Istanbul meant I arrived in Rwanda, but my bag with the audiology items arrived a few days later. Nevertheless, in the last remaining afternoon I was able to train 1:1 one teacher and four students in the basics of hearing aid maintenance so they could cascade their learning among their peers. The experience was not too dissimilar to my UK experiences; one student had 'dead' batteries in their reportedly working aids; one was fully enjoying and appreciating the benefits and all loved 'teaching' the accompanying teacher how to maintain their aids.

Whilst writing this article (a stipulation of the scholarship is the submission of an article), I have learnt that the donation I made upon my return to the UK enabled the audiologist from the Rwandan hospital to visit the school. He conducted assessments on six new children, retested all the aided children, checked the functionality of their current aids, re-tubed moulds – tubing being normally cemented in and arranged the replacements of damaged moulds.

This is an exciting development. Knowing the children's aids are working will support the training with the school that we (a group of seven, which includes a speech and language therapist), can target during our visit in October.

Another positive development is the November training session, the first session to be delivered by the Headteacher, Elie, for parents on how to help maintain positive use within the home and community during the school holidays.

## Impact: sharing the seldom heard voices of Rwanda parents, in the UK

Isobel and I had an opportunity to interview four Kinyarwanda speaking parents during our visit with Elie's translation support. The group consisted of three mothers and one father of four, current and past pupils, aged 10 to 23, one of whom was a day student. The interview was very powerful, and the parents consented to its use, to promote the stories of deaf children in Rwanda. Elie, remotely from Rwanda, and I, authored a poster entitled *the Worldwide parental aspirations and fears echoed from Rwanda*, which I presented at the University of Manchester – 100 years of deaf education conference.

Knoors, Brons, Marschark (2019) state there is a dearth of research about the education of deaf children and the effects of such education in developing countries and from my research, Rwanda was not an exception. In this particular small-scale scoping exercise, each parent had expressed their aspirations which stemmed from the positive impact of their children accessing education. They shared examples which reflected a change from deficit model of what their child could not do, to a positive model of how: family engagement, parental confidence, child's social/emotional well-being, friendships, independence and



two-way communication have all developed.

The positive parental role to develop their child's well-being, reflected the views of respondents in Rwanda's 2018 study on violence against children and young people with disabilities in institutional settings. Each parent interviewed expressed concerns about their communication skills and subsequent ability to understand and protect their child from abuse. There was a desire in their discussions to reduce the likely discrimination in employment opportunities through nurturing their child to aim high academically and to be positive role models. I feel it is worthwhile to note that we were conscious not to project that we have the perfect system in place in the UK. The parents were told, and were surprised to learn, that some deaf children and their parents still face aspects of these challenges and fears in the UK too.

These hearing parents, from a deprived area in Rwanda, presented a pragmatic and empowered parental approach. They have a desire to continue to develop their skills to better support and protect their children. They already advocate strongly within their society for inclusion, respect and equality.

This desire I also witnessed with parents and guardians in Uganda. Isaac trained as a teacher of deaf children following the birth of his deaf son. Although our interaction with him was brief, his passion made a lasting



impact. This, I also experienced with Noeleen, a carer with physical disabilities, who has established an unofficial care home for abandoned children. In a very rural area in North Uganda, a parent in a remote village had established a detergent making business to better the life of his children following access to a scheme provided by Sign Health Uganda through the True Colors fund.

**Subsequent impact: Reflections on the idea of 'no child left behind'**

The level of poverty is high in both countries, but the children are often rich in the exposure to an education their teachers are trying to provide to them. During the visit, I reflected many times about some of the ethical quandaries within this work. It is vital the home country staff own their situation, are respected for the differences – no matter how small the steps – that they are making and respected for their skills. Whilst trying not to impose Western world ideals and practices, is there a responsibility to identify what can be done so the children and families have opportunities to make true informed decisions and the professionals have the access to share the information with the children and families?

Many of the schools of the deaf and resource provisions have a diverse deafness profile, yet many operate a sign only communication system with the children. This presents challenges in relation to how professionals in the setting can maintain and preserve any hearing and speech ability for those children who deafened as a result of malaria etc. whilst upskilling them with the communication method used in the school settings. How can financially deprived settings achieve total communication approaches?

Some of the settings had blind children in the groups. The default signed communication for the deaf focused activities that we witnessed but isolated the children with vision impairments. For me, this questioned the philosophy of 'no child left behind' and conflicted with my core





human approach that regardless of the status of deaf educationalists, should we all be inclusive in any situation?

However, one beautiful example of no one left behind was the impressive set-up of the whole refugee camp in Northern Uganda where efforts are made to welcome all children into the schools. Until recently it was the largest camp in the world. 250,000 people are supported to establish their traditional home building in the area, the schools are attempting to welcome any young child into education as exposure to some education is better than none.

Another fantastic example we learnt about was occurring in Northern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). A meeting was set-up by a colleague, remotely from the Netherlands when he learnt his contact and our party were all in the same area in North Uganda. The contact, Ismael, has established excellent work in DRC with his school for the deaf and as an audiologist he has his own ear mould clinic on site. His passion for the inclusion of deafblind children you have read in this magazine through his own article. The meeting with Ismael was ideal timing as Deaf Reach were just embarking on a possible project in Rwanda and Congo and Ismael is a perfect experienced professional colleague to have as a professional contact.

### **Impact: Reflections as a visiting Westerner**

It would not be naïve to speculate that children with disabilities are often isolated in their families and communities and that marginalisation within education is likely to have led to further isolation in the community. On a few occasions I witnessed interactions by adults with deaf children that questioned if the interventions were causing or could cause the children to be isolated through jealousy from their equally deprived hearing peers. Also, what experiences do the children, and families, within some communities in either country have after we 'Westerners' leave?

There is of course value and impact resulting from our physical presence in such areas but what more can we do remotely that helps upskill the teachers and community. There will always be a need for developed world input in many developing countries as David Couch wonderfully summarised for me, referencing the book 'Prisoners of Geography'. However, with some areas in the developing world accessing better internet than some areas in the UK, I left East Africa wondering could something else be done to empower, develop and support our professional peers?

### **Impact: Learning from our peers**

Well, one idea involved BATOD, a professional body which offers a "community" of dialogue and information. I submitted a proposal in March to the Steering Group suggesting BATOD consider a special overseas BATOD membership for our professional colleagues from who we can learn so much whilst opening access to a platform of other experiences, contacts, ideas, resources and research. I am proud to announce that at the time of writing this article the BATOD Steering Group had met in September and have agreed the proposal. Further details can be found on the page opposite.

Also, following our visit, in May, organised by Isobel and funders, Omar, Head Teacher of Umatara school Rwanda, enjoyed a professional visit to England and Scotland. We reached out to our BATOD Scotland colleagues for suggested settings for Omar to visit in Scotland. This led to Rachel O'Neill's involvement and now ToDs in training at the university of Edinburgh may learn about the wider, worldwide issues of deaf education from her interviews with Omar. These videos can be accessed online.

So, to conclude, accessing the Mary Grace Wilkins travel scholarship, supported much of the travels cost helping make the trip more financially viable, important for someone on a part-time wage. This project started me on my journey in project work in developing countries. More importantly it supported access to an opportunity that has led to an array of positive events and opportunities to unfold for many individuals across the world.



*Teresa Quail is a Trustee and Audiology Lead for DeafReach UK.*

### **References**

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