

Improving education for children with hearing loss in southern Malawi

Meera Rajasooriar provides a summary of of Sound Seekers' recent project to improve education as well as hearing and ear care provision in Malawi

About Sound Seekers

Sound Seekers (The Commonwealth Society for the Deaf) is a small UK registered international charity dedicated to helping children and adults with hearing loss in Africa to realise their rights by enabling access to healthcare and education. We work in five countries in Africa (Cameroon, The Gambia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Zambia) and partner with local hospitals, schools and communities to establish hearing health services, improve the quality of education and to raise awareness of hearing loss.

The need for improving education services in Malawi

Worldwide, there are roughly 466 million people living with disabling hearing loss, two-thirds of whom live in developing countries where less than 3% of people who need a hearing aid are thought to have one. 49 million people live with hearing loss in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1.9% of whom are children compared with only 0.5% children with disabling hearing loss in high-income countries.

Children with disabilities are one of the most excluded groups in Malawi, despite the current focus on inclusive education in Malawi. A child with a disability such as hearing loss faces barriers and discrimination in everyday life. Lack of awareness and support means children with hearing loss cannot realise their right to education and are often socially excluded, and have fewer educational and vocational opportunities, which our work seeks to address.

Improving audiology and education in Malawi

Sound Seekers established comprehensive audiology services in Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital (QECH) in Blantyre, Malawi in 2016, led by two of the first Malawian Audiologists trained by Sound Seekers. The project also delivered mobile ear and hearing care outreach services to



Teachers Training Manual on deaf awareness developed for teachers in Malawi

rural and remote areas in Southern Malawi. Over the past two years we have worked to address the urgent need to improve educational services for children with hearing loss in Southern Malawi, complementing the audiology services established at QECH.

With funding from UK Aid from the British Government and Jersey Overseas Aid, this project trained 90 Itinerant Special Needs (ISN) Teachers across the Southern Region of Malawi in deaf awareness, the use of hearing aids and how to identify and meet the needs of a child with hearing loss in a mainstream classroom.

The 90 ISN teachers were trained by our Volunteer QToD, Caroline Clarke, in May-June 2018 and provided with a unique training manual specially designed by Sound Seekers to help them to train mainstream teachers. The ISN

teachers went on to train mainstream teachers across 171 schools (47% of primary schools across the 15 districts in Southern Malawi) in deaf awareness.

This project also conducted monthly outreach visits for hearing screening to 55 mainstream primary schools in Southern Malawi, where 2,987 children were screened for hearing loss, 206 (7%) of whom were identified with hearing loss and duly supported.

The Volunteer QToD returned six months later in February 2019 to review the ISN teachers' progress and focus on practical issues identified in teaching children with hearing loss, help with problem-solving and learning from shared experiences.



Caroline, QToD, delivering training to ISN teachers in Liwonde, Malawi



Training participants with their certificates in Blantyre, Malawi

This took the form of three refresher training workshops delivered to the ISN teachers. As a culmination of this project, a final workshop was convened with involvement of the Divisional Special Needs Coordinator and representatives from the Ministry of Education and the Audiology Team from QECH to share learning and experience from the project and to advocate for better support for children with hearing loss and for further training and development of ISN teachers in Malawi.

“My teacher always faces me when he is teaching and every time I have an exercise in class he comes to check my progress and help me wherever I am struggling”, explained Agness Jasten of Kholombizo School in Neno district after her teacher received training. *“That motivates me a lot”* she added.

Challenges and achievements

The need for this project came from the gaps in the training curriculum of special needs teachers. While the teachers were trained broadly on disability with some information on different impairments, the training lacked adequate focus on hearing loss to enable the teachers effectively to address the specific needs of children with hearing loss in mainstream classrooms. Despite the positive response from this project, introducing a new topic into the teacher-training curriculum in Malawi brought many challenges. It was vital to work closely with the education authorities to ensure the content of the training complemented the current curriculum and the teaching manual was adapted to the local context in order to have the most impact on the lives of children with hearing loss in school.

Before the training took place, our Volunteer QToD met with the schools, local Education authorities and the Ministry of Education to ensure the full buy-in and support of the key stakeholders in this project. This included involving the Divisional Education Authorities in the Southern Region as well as the Special Needs Unit at the Ministry of Education to validate and approve the training content before the training workshops.

The timing of this project was vital in gaining traction in changing the national curriculum. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) was very supportive of this project as it is well aligned with the Government’s Strategy for Inclusive Education. Since completion of the project, the MoEST plans to meet with the Principal of the Teacher Training College in Malawi to discuss how they could make the content of the manual a part of the syllabus for the Special Needs teachers’ programme going forward. This is an incredible achievement for Sound Seekers and a huge step forward to ensure no child with hearing loss in Malawi is left behind in school.

Volunteer with Sound Seekers

Caroline Clarke, former Volunteer QToD for Sound Seekers, has said:

“My decision to volunteer in Malawi has been a rewarding experience, one that has exceeded my expectations immensely. I have worked as a ToD for over ten years and never have I felt more satisfied in my role than when I worked with Sound Seekers on the education project in Malawi”.

The lessons learned from this project in Malawi will help shape future education projects in Malawi and the other countries where we work.

If you are interested in taking on a challenge and volunteering to improve the lives of children with hearing loss in Africa, please email us at help@sound-seekers.org.uk or call 0203 559 6673 to find out more.

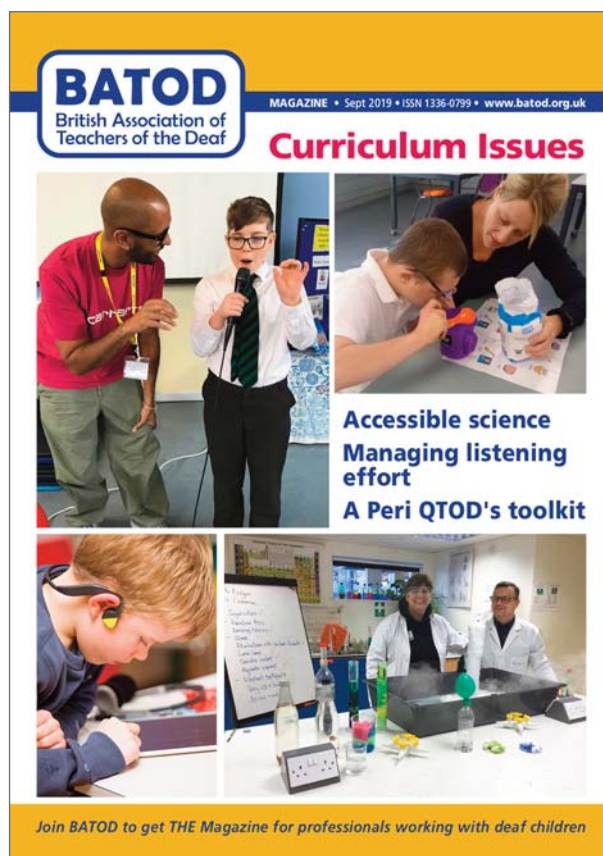


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BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the September 2019 issue.



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BATOD
British Association of
Teachers of the Deaf

MAGAZINE • Sept 2019 • ISSN 1336-0799 • www.batod.org.uk

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