



A fair chance for deaf children

As part of our occasional series of articles with an international theme, **Jemma Hogwood** highlights the education of deaf children in Rwanda



Good quality education is a key element of a child's development and something all children should have access to. While in the UK we rarely need to advocate a child's right to education, in other countries it is not always achieved, particularly if you are a deaf child.

Fair Children Youth Foundation (FCYF) is a nationally recognised charity based in the Northern Province of Rwanda, an area that has suffered excessively from the consequences of civil war, genocide and disease. The organisation was created in 2003 by Elie Nduwayesu in an attempt to rebuild lives and restore human rights through a number of community-based projects. The school for deaf children is a central part of FCYF, set up when Elie realised that many deaf children in the community were being stigmatised and discriminated against and were unable to access education and achieve their full potential. He believes that high quality education will enable children to become the leaders of tomorrow, building a strong Rwanda. The Rwandan Government is keen to promote quality education for those with special educational needs but is aware that their needs are often overlooked and teachers lack the necessary support in terms of skills and resources.

FCYF aims to provide deaf children with an education in a school where their abilities are understood, they feel safe and where they are free from abuse and discrimination. During the time I spent in Rwanda supporting the work of FCYF, I was particularly struck by the caring ethos at the school, which is an essential element since many of the children have been rejected or isolated within their community and have struggled to find opportunities to learn. I was encouraged by the

high standard of teaching despite a severe lack of resources and was amazed to hear about a plan to integrate some of the students into the high achieving mainstream primary school (which is also run by FCYF). As I have observed the challenges of integration in the school system in the UK, I was surprised but delighted that FCYF was prepared to advocate this in Rwanda.

The school

The school is one of four deaf schools in Rwanda. The School Director Louis Ngabonziza has a wealth of experience, having worked with deaf children for 15 years, and has been hugely influential in the success of the school. The need for schools for deaf children is indicated by the rapid growth in the numbers of students. FCYF established the deaf school three years ago, initially with ten children, and it now caters for 62 children aged between five and 21 years old. Inundated with enquiries, the school has recently had an extra classroom built so that the older children can move up





to the next class. However, funds are very limited and at present there are no plans to employ an additional teacher.

The children are offered the opportunity to develop skills which allow them to communicate both with their friends at school and with society as a whole. The highly skilled staff teach English, mathematics, science and social studies (all in English), as well as Kinyarwanda, French and Sign Language. The children are all able to express themselves in Rwandan Sign Language (the Rwanda National Union of the Deaf published the Rwandan Sign Language Dictionary in 2009). The children are also taught to lip-read and those that are able are heavily encouraged to practise using their voice so that they have the best opportunity to communicate with other people in their community. The children are given the chance to play sport and have learnt to dance traditional Rwandan dances. The school is the proud owner of a large African drum and it is brought out on all occasions, along with bells that are tied around the children's ankles. Learning about children's rights is a central part of the education programme; the children are made aware of the things they should have access to and can stand up for themselves in achieving these.

In addition to the traditional curriculum, all children learn vocational skills in the afternoon, including woodcarving, basket making, tailoring and electrical and plumbing skills. This is an essential part of the curriculum, providing the children with additional skills. It is particularly important for some of the older children

who have missed out on a lot of their formal education and will benefit greatly from having vocational skills to help them earn a living when they leave school.

Plans for integration

Ambitiously, FCYF has begun to embark on a project to integrate a number of deaf children into the mainstream primary school run by FCYF. Supported by Kat Collis, an FCYF volunteer from the UK, the aim is to create stronger links between the two schools in an attempt to combat stigma. Children from the primary school visited those at the deaf school and showed real interest not only in their disability but their abilities too. A 'taster' day was then organised, with six children from the deaf school spending the day at the primary school and attending lessons. Later a joint sports afternoon was arranged. The boys instantly set up a game of football; any differences were forgotten and the deaf school came out on top winning 2-0! There is surely no better way to earn respect from your peers! The girls, however, took a bit longer to warm to each other but slowly the urge to communicate overtook the fear and shyness and the teenage girls from the primary school were eager to try and learn their names in sign language.

Six deaf children have now been identified by their teachers to attend the mainstream primary school. This has taken a lot of advocacy on behalf of the children, as many of the mainstream teachers had neither met nor taught a deaf child before. It was not unusual to hear comments or questions such as 'How do you teach them if they cannot hear?', 'You mean they have knowledge?', 'How can they write?' There is a long way to go but slowly the children are proving themselves to their peers and their teachers. During the first week a great wave of surprise rushed around the class when one deaf child put up her hand in class and got the question right. Teachers and children alike were shocked that a deaf child of 15 was able to add two simple numbers together. Their understanding of the deaf children's abilities is so misinformed.

Sadly, expenses for the primary school are far greater than the deaf school so it is unlikely that this project will have the potential to expand next year. With very few deaf children having parents who can afford school fees, uniforms and school resources, FCYF has to subsidise their places at the school. FCYF is desperately looking for sponsors to support a deaf child through mainstream education to give them a better chance for their future. If you have any ideas, can provide opportunities for skill sharing or would like to support the deaf school financially or with resources please contact FCYF through its website www.fairchildrenwanda.org or email me at jemmahogwood@yahoo.co.uk.

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