



Links created between deaf students in two schools in very different countries

Following a trip to St. Joseph's School in Makeni, Jo Saunders compares the experience of hearing-impaired students in Sierra Leone with that of her own students back in England



Jo Saunders was awarded a Mary Grace Wilkins Travel Scholarship to carry out some work in Sierra Leone at a school for the deaf. Her report is in two parts. This is part one, part two will appear in the January Magazine.

As a Teacher of the Deaf at a specialist college for deaf students I work with students with a range of hearing losses, and physical and other additional needs. Although the students come from different areas of the UK and have a diverse ethnic mix they are all supported through the health and educational provision available in the UK. Most of the students have little understanding of what it might be like for deaf children in other parts of the world, where education or equipment are not always available. I set up a direct link with a school in Africa in order to broaden my students' horizons and give them an understanding of things such as this.

The link was between my students at Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education in Devon and St Joseph's School for Hearing Impaired Children in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Whilst it seemed clear to me that classroom activities to broaden awareness would

benefit the students at my college, I was not sure whether students at the school in Sierra Leone would also benefit from a link such as this. Apart from receiving money from our students for their school, how would the students in Sierra Leone benefit?

At around this time my students were raising money for Red Nose Day and they agreed that they would like to donate their money to this specific school in Africa, so that they could see exactly where their money would be used. I decided that I would visit St. Joseph's in the Easter holidays and would hand over this money myself.

Background and information about the two schools involved

a) St. Joseph's School for the Hearing Impaired
St. Joseph's School for the Hearing Impaired is a specialist school for deaf children in Makeni, Sierra Leone's third city. There are around 230 children from nursery age up to about 23. Although students would normally graduate at 18 some arrive late or don't have the language required to move up to the next stage of education and therefore may stay back a year or two.

The civil war, which ended in 2002, also affected education and it is only now that education is becoming more stable again.

As closely as possible the school sets out to follow the national curriculum and aims to enter children for national examinations. The class groups are based on ability rather than age. Most students are educated within the convent building but some follow vocational courses elsewhere and a few are included within the local mainstream high school. The school has its own workshops including equipment for sewing, woodworking and cookery and it owns land on which it has a farm. It has recently acquired a contract with a local supermarket to supply eggs from the farm.



The school has its own audiology room and a UK audiologist has trained staff to make ear moulds, check hearing aids, establish hearing levels and set up and distribute hearing aids. Most students have a profound or severe loss, many deafened by illness or events in early childhood. All children have one hearing aid and a few receive two, due to finances. Recently some hearing aids have gone missing, with the assumption that they have been acquired in order to sell on. The school follows the Maternal Reflective Method and students are encouraged to learn to lipread and develop the use of their voice rather than use sign language in order to be integrated into society and therefore be economically independent.

The school is in need of funds. The director, Sister Mary Sweeney would like to retire and had wanted to set up systems for the school to be run without her input but things are not currently ready for this. Additionally the funding problems mean that the school is in constant need of money. The Sierra Leone government does not fund special schools, so whilst in theory the teachers' salaries are paid by the government (though in practice some have not been paid for five years) the running costs of the school are not met. The school is involved in fundraising but it is a constant hand to mouth battle to gain enough funds to continue to operate and the school's future is not secure.

b) Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education

Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education (ERADE) is a specialist school and college for deaf students aged 5-25 years of age. (It starts at nursery age and continues until funding is no longer available, with the oldest students being around 23.) There are currently 103 students on roll.

The school follows the national curriculum for most of the children, with some secondary school pupils sitting GCSEs in some subjects. Vocational courses are taught in-house at post 16, whilst other students are supported to access courses at local mainstream further education colleges.

The National Curriculum is followed in the school, with the addition of 'deaf studies' courses and further teaching in BSL. The students follow a range of qualifications including GCSEs. In college a broad curriculum is tailored to meet individual student needs and aspirations. Courses are taught both on site and in partnership with mainstream colleges. Students progress on to work, higher education and supported living.

The school and college aim to be sign bilingual environments. The majority of students are learning English as their second language and find it challenging. Most students have profound hearing losses, with a few having moderate losses. The majority of students have additional needs. Amongst the additional needs the school and college cater for are: autism, cerebral palsy, learning difficulties, mental health and behavioural issues. The additional needs of the students have changed over the past few years as funding restrictions have meant that local authorities are keen to include deaf students within mainstream schools with additional support, rather than the more expensive option of sending them out of the county.

Similarities and differences between the schools

- The fees for a student at ERADE are paid by the student's local authority or EFA (Education Funding Agency). St. Joseph's, like most secondary schools in Sierra Leone, has school fees which need to be paid by the family, either in money or services to the school.

ERADE is an independent specialist school and college, with students from different local authorities throughout the country. Students at St. Joseph's mostly come from the local area, with some also living too far for daily travel. There are two schools for hearing impaired children in Sierra Leone. The other is in Freetown but that has not had the outside support that St. Joseph's has benefited from, in terms of training and educational equipment from contacts abroad.

- Both schools are residential for deaf children from the start of education and continue until past the normal



school/college leaving age, as long as funding allows. About a third of the St. Joseph's children board, with more than two thirds of ERADE children boarding. The facilities at St. Joseph's, though basic by UK standards, are likely to be more comfortable than they would be if living at home with their families.

- St. Joseph's school supports an oral approach, whereas children at ERADE are mostly BSL users with a few being oral or using a combination of BSL and spoken language.
- Both St. Joseph's and ERADE offer vocational courses to older students but St. Joseph's trains the students to work in five specific areas appropriate for deaf children to find work in Sierra Leone (weaving, sewing, carpentry, farming, cooking). ERADE offers possibilities for work experience placements in many different areas related to the courses the students are studying.
- Students at St. Joseph's have hearing losses caused by childhood illnesses (some of which would be avoided in the UK through use of medicine or vaccination) or events in their early childhood (such as events related to the war). Some of the ERADE students' deafness is also related to prelingual or prenatal illnesses, whilst other students have genetic deafness within their family.
- Both St. Joseph's and ERADE students have peer

groups of other deaf students at school that might not be available to them in their home area and this creates friendships and encourages acceptance, confidence and understanding about their deafness.

- At St. Joseph's, children are required to play a part in the running of the school with chores such as cleaning, washing clothes, preparing food. At ERADE older and more independent students are also required to be responsible for these things.
- The students at St. Joseph's are learning English, as all schools in Sierra Leone teach English as the formal language of the country, though Krio is the most widely spoken African language. At ERADE most of the students are also learning English as a second language. In general the level of English of the St. Joseph's children is higher than the level of those at ERADE. This may be due to the English students' additional needs (73% have additional recorded learning difficulties), whilst for other students it may be linked to levels of deafness or delay in first language acquisition.

Jo Saunders is a Teacher of the Deaf at Exeter Royal Academy For Deaf Education. She works with students at different levels and has experience of working with students in higher education and with international students.

BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the November 2013 issue.

© BATOD 2013

