



Links between schools in the UK and Africa

Part two of the report for the Mary Grace Wilkins Travelling Scholarship by **Jo Saunders** on her trip to St. Joseph's School in Makeni, comparing Sierra Leone and UK in relation to hearing-impaired students

Through my visit to St. Joseph's School for the Hearing Impaired in Sierra Leone, the preparations before and the follow up afterwards, I was able to consider the educational benefits of such a link to both the African and the British students.

What I did before my visit

- During English lessons within my college I introduced the idea of different provision of education and audiological equipment in different countries. We looked at the website for St. Joseph's School and a YouTube fundraising video, in order to get an understanding of what life might be like for children there.
- Students at my college wrote introductory letters about themselves which were taken out to Sierra Leone from the UK by a Teacher of the Deaf who regularly visits the school.
- At their college council meeting the students decided to raise Red Nose Day money specifically for St Joseph's. Fundraising activities were undertaken.
- I made further contacts with the school and Teacher of the Deaf from England, who had just visited and brought back letters from the students, to find out if there was specific equipment that could be purchased and donated to St Joseph's with this money, but the school preferred to have the money in cash.
- Having spoken to the teacher who had recently returned to the UK from St Joseph's, I was able to prepare myself before I went. I acquired an iPad onto which I loaded videos and photos. UK students took photos of their college and I was able to video a handful of students and deaf staff talking about themselves and their deaf education. Amongst other things my students made a video of themselves explaining how they had collected money for St. Joseph's. The video included an explanation of the wall display we had made.
- I set up a blog that I would be able to write during the visit, so that students in the UK could follow my journey www.JogoAfrica.wordpress.com

What I did during the visit

- I visited the school during the UK Easter holidays offering my services as a

volunteer for three days in any capacity that could be useful with the students or teachers at St. Joseph's. I was prepared to talk about life in the UK.

- I took with me money that had been raised by my students for Red Nose Day and gave it directly to the school. I also took a box of stationery, as much as I could carry in my suitcase, donated by my school. The box included whiteboard pens, biros, pencils, pencil sharpeners, blue tack, rubbers, rulers and post-it notes. I had heard that the school had got small whiteboards recently, so I assumed that the pens would run out quickly in the African heat and took some more.
- I took return letters from my students written to the African students, some of them addressed directly to named students, others from students introducing themselves for the first time. The St Joseph's students wrote replies during my visit, which I carried back to the UK with me.
- During my visit I took photos and also made short videos of St Joseph's students talking about themselves. Although their spoken language may not be accessible to UK students, I assumed that UK students would be interested in seeing the African students talking about themselves just as they had done.



- I explained all my intentions to the directors of the school and checked that they were happy for me to take photos of the school and pupils.
- I was able to visit a variety of classes, mostly teaching English language. I met with groups of students informally and talked to some of the older students about their lives. I talked with the teachers and showed them my photos and videos too, as they were also keen to understand about life in the UK for deaf children.
- I communicated with spoken English but added BSL signs to support understanding. Although BSL is different from African sign language, the children were interested to see another signed language and wanted to learn new signs.
- I discussed with the director which teacher I could talk to about continuing the link between the schools and met with one particular teacher who would be the link teacher in the future. We talked about our own realistic expectations and hopes for the link and we discussed practical ways of continuing the relationship. We agreed to avoid emails between students. It requires the use of a printer, ink and paper. However the postal system is also not a strong option as it is slow and not always successful. We agreed that we would try to transport the letters, at least initially with visitors between the school and UK.



What are the benefits of the link to the students at St. Joseph's?

When I first made contact with St. Joseph's my aim was to investigate whether the students in a poorer country would benefit educationally from links with a similar deaf school abroad. My visit and the personal discussions during my visit and the follow up since my visit have answered the question for me. The students at St. Joseph's are highly motivated to understand what life is like for other deaf children and with this curiosity comes their interest to learn and expand their understanding. The benefits to them, whilst not measurable in figures, can be seen in their motivation to take part in all the activities involved in the link. Students at St. Joseph's took their letters away to write responses in their free time. Some of them did not have letters to respond to but wrote anyway, without being encouraged to do so, bringing the letters to show and asking for corrections so that they could write it out again.

I was surprised by how interested the Sierra Leone teachers were. Like the students, they were keen to

learn about life elsewhere for deaf children, as most of them have not travelled abroad. Most of them have no experience of deafness other than with the children they teach.

I know that St. Joseph's wants to continue activities in this partnership and I will encourage my students to do so too. Since my return, students in both countries have exchanged letters on the topic of food, explaining their favourite foods, ingredients and how to make traditional dishes. Both groups have drawn pictures and used English to explain.

The relatively small amount of financial support that was raised for St. Joseph's is tiny compared to the interest and motivation that resulted from the students' awareness that there are other deaf children in the world and that they want to communicate with them.

Below is a list of the activities and ideas that both my college and the African school found beneficial, that could be used by Teachers of the Deaf to gain ideas when planning their own links with schools in other countries. Whilst I realise I am not the only teacher to make links with a school in a poor country, a list of ideas that have worked in this partnership could be useful to other teachers aiming to create their own links.

Ideas to help Teachers of the Deaf setting up a link with a school in a developing country

- Try to get a named person at the school to take responsibility for the link and exchange of information.
- Make a note of letters when you get them, so that you can keep check on who is writing to whom. The students at St. Joseph's sometimes write the name of the person within the bulk of the letter or don't write it at all. It also makes things easier to follow up if you have quite a few students.
- Be aware that if students contact their penfriends individually, eg. through email, no one is overseeing

what is being said. Students could receive letters with inappropriate requests.

- After initial introductory letters, give students a list of topics that might be useful to focus on for the content of their letters so that they avoid repetition. eg food, school/college courses, family, jobs, deafness, climate, the place they live.
- Make a wall display and add to it as letters are received to maintain the profile and interest in the exchange of letters. Photocopy some of the letters for the display.
- Use the link with the school to show differences: types of school, funding issues, the use of hearing aids, communication methods etc. Investigate through websites, blogs, video, photos and letters.
- Investigate the technology at the foreign school before you make decisions about how to link. The school may have computers and printers but without a supply of printer ink or paper they will not print out anything you send them. An internet connection at the school may also be intermittent so do not assume the school is not responding to letters.



- Fundraise for the school but ask the school what they need rather than presenting them with something that you assume will be useful.
- Agree at the start what your intentions are and don't make promises that will be impossible to follow through.

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