

Sierra Leone – the teaching challenge

As a frequent visitor to St Joseph's School for the Hearing-Impaired Catherine Healey is in a good position to shed some light on deaf education in Sierra Leone



The population of Sierra Leone is just below six million, and 43% of the people are under 15 years of age. It is estimated that 68% of primary school age children are in school, although in the rural areas this figure is lower, around 50%.

Deafness in the country is often post-lingual, with malaria, measles, rubella and meningitis the most likely causes. It is estimated that one in 1,000 people is deaf in Sierra Leone, so at a conservative estimate there are at least 2,500 deaf school children. There are only two schools for the deaf, one in Freetown for day scholars, and one in Makeni, St Joseph's School for the Hearing-Impaired, which has both boarding and day pupils.

St Joseph's was started with eight pupils in 1979 by a Peace Corps volunteer, Tom Bristow, and at the same time Sister Mary Sweeney left for Dublin to train as a Teacher of the Deaf. During the civil war the school was closed (from 1998), and then occupied by various forces. After that it was a shell and had to be rebuilt, reopening in 2002. Today there are over 250 pupils and trainees aged 3–24 years (less than 10% of the total hearing-impaired (HI) population), 29 teachers and 30 carers, who look after the 93 boarders. Sister Mary is still here, directing operations.

The challenge of funding

Before the war St Joseph's was funded by Cordaid, but it has had to find new donors in the last two years and even now future funding remains uncertain. Zoe, a volunteer funds manager from the UK, working for a local wage, has helped the school enormously. Just recently there was a visit from a delegation of Irish MPs, who were entertained by the pupils and who hopefully went back to lobby their government for aid.

ToD education

In 2005 two education specialists from the UK set up a teacher training programme and all teachers were required to complete a Certificate in Special Education (Hearing-Impaired) within two years of starting work at the school. In 2006 five teachers embarked on a Diploma in Special Education course, and two were later awarded BEd degrees. In 2009 the head, Umu Turay, completed a Master's in Special Education in the UK, and the following year four teachers gained their ToD Diploma. This year two more teachers, with additional training as audiological technicians, will qualify as ToDs.



Currently the ToD training programme is being reorganised into a part-time in-service course and will be accredited by the University of Makeni.



The challenge for HI educators

In African schools the teaching style is formal. Classes are usually large, and there is a shortage of trained and qualified teachers. Lessons often comprise copying from the board and learning by rote.

Deaf children require a different teaching approach and small classes. They have first to learn how to communicate before they can follow lessons and this challenges traditional teaching methods. This puts a strain on the meagre resources.

The UK education experts mentioned earlier were also active in the school from 2005, mainly focusing on mathematics and language teaching. In addition, the audiologist Monica Tomlin set up an audiology suite with assessment and diagnostic and hearing aid provision. Each child now has one hearing aid, with plans to provide more in time. Monica and Ruth McAree set up the diploma course and Ruth provided language teaching expertise in reading and speech and phonics.

I came to Makeni in early 2011 for two weeks to help develop a deeper understanding of the pragmatics of the Maternal Reflective Method of language work. My approach is to demonstrate how to communicate with the children more informally, and we often get surprisingly quick results, which motivates teachers to try the technique. I have now made four trips, each longer than the last! The teachers are very receptive and work hard while I am there, with workshops every day after school. I hope to continue with this and with developing the new diploma course.

The teachers are challenged

Working in a developing country has its own challenges and rewards. There are frequent outbreaks of typhoid and malaria and even cholera, which result in staff and pupil absences, another feature of a relatively poor economy. Several teachers in school have recently lost close relatives – a child, a sister, a mother. There are still pupils in the school who have suffered because of the war, as child soldiers or losing their family members. Many teachers in Makeni lost everything in the war and have had to rebuild their lives.

Large numbers of teachers are under-qualified, and some even struggle with basic literacy themselves. Staff at St Joseph's are given lots of extra help and encouragement from the overseas trainers. They are paid to work longer hours than their mainstream colleagues, but they are regarded as better qualified as a result.

The curriculum challenge

The curriculum for deaf pupils can be compared to special education in the UK 40 years ago. The usual vocational skills courses – tailoring, carpentry, catering, textiles and handicrafts – offer routes to work, and on my last visit there was an excellent training course set up and run by experts from Milton Margai, a college that specialises in training disabled pupils. The products of this work were very professional.



Some students are able to do the same public exams as mainstream pupils. Sister Mary is proud of the fact that most of St Joseph's pupils who do sit the exams do better than their hearing peers, although this is also an indictment of the poverty of the overall Sierra Leonian education system. There was an integration programme for able deaf pupils, but despite being accompanied by a teacher from St Joseph's, pupils were seen to be struggling, so it was decided to set up a junior secondary school within the school campus instead. The first exams will be next summer.

In African schools children are expected to help in preparing food, keeping the campus clean, and so on, and the children all have allotted jobs. In the photograph above, pounding the cassava is very much a male preserve, and the small boys enjoy being allowed to join in and learn from the older ones, although everyone helps in preparing the vegetables.

I have worked in African schools now for over 20 years and I am always humbled by the politeness and gentleness of the children, who are grateful for their education and take nothing for granted. For me, it is a privilege.

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