

# Teaching deaf children and young people in Sierra Leone

From first-hand accounts and school visits, [Patricia Gbetuwa](#), [Siddie Kanu](#), [Mustapha Kargbo](#) and [Romaine Ketekou](#) have pieced together a history of deaf education in Sierra Leone



**A** British woman, Ruth Luke, was Headmistress of Buxton Girls' School, Freetown, in the 1960s. Teachers gave her weekly reports of each pupil's development. Ruth noticed that a few children were always bottom of the class. She took a special interest in these pupils and tried to find out why they were not making progress. She discovered that they were deaf and she immediately wanted to help them.

Ruth discussed the problem with the late Lati Hyde-Forster, Principal of the Annie Walsh Memorial School, and both women were anxious to find ways to support these children. They decided to send out a questionnaire to find out how many deaf pupils were in other schools. Through the replies they located at least 60 children who were deaf.

Ruth took the findings to the Chief Education Officer, William Conton. The decision was made to invite interested people to meet at Cathedral House and this became the venue for all subsequent meetings. Those present included Dr Bai Johnson, Chief Medical Officer, Reverend Dr Shudike, Chief Social Welfare Officer and Emmi Pratt, a teacher at the Methodist Girls' High School. It was decided to form the Sierra Leone Society for the Deaf, with its main aim to provide specialised education for deaf pupils. Justice Forster was elected president and Ruth Luke secretary. Ruth wrote to Lady Templar, President of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Deaf, to inform her of the inauguration of the Society for the Deaf. A request was made for funds to train a teacher who would start the first school for deaf pupils in Sierra Leone. Lady Templar's reply was favourable; the Commonwealth Society would sponsor a teacher to go to England for training. At the next meeting members were asked to find a suitable candidate and Eleanor Renner Lisk, a teacher at Buxton Primary School, was awarded the Commonwealth Society Scholarship.

After successfully completing her studies, Eleanor opened the first school for deaf children with six pupils. Classes were held in the basement of Regent Road Baptist School, after the normal school closed, from 2.30pm to 5.30pm on weekdays. Gradually numbers increased and the Ministry of Lands and Survey donated land on Wilkinson Road where the present school now stands. The Society for the Deaf organised a fundraising event to raise money to build the school. The women's Coroma Society, whose members included wives of senior civil servants as well as the President's wife, was especially active in fundraising.

## The current status of Freetown School for the Deaf

The present roll of the Sierra Leone Society School for the Deaf is 130 pupils and 12 teachers. Some have teachers' certificates, others have received technical training, but there are no trained Teachers of the Deaf. The school follows the Ministry of Education's National Curriculum, delivered through sign language and finger spelling. No pupils have hearing aids. Pupils enter the school without hearing assessment and no audiograms are available.

Some pupils continue to mainstream secondary education after completing the National Primary School Examination but many tend to drop out because class sizes are large, and over-stretched secondary teachers have no time to help pupils with special needs.

## The future of the Freetown School

The school hopes that the Government will allow it to develop its own secondary department and will support the training of teachers in special education. Funds are also needed for the daily running of the school and to pay teachers' salaries as the main sponsor, the Christian Children's Fund, has folded.

## The founding of St Joseph's School for the Deaf, Makeni

The Freetown School had no boarding facilities and parents outside the city were unable to gain access to specialised education for their deaf children. In 1977, Terre des Hommes, a Dutch non-governmental organisation, identified 400 children with disabilities, including eight children who were deaf, in the Makeni area. Sister Mary Sweeney, principal of a Catholic



primary school, contacted Mother Mary Nicholas in Cabra, Ireland, to seek advice about how to support these deaf children. Mother Mary arranged for an Irish organisation, Friends of the Deaf, to give a scholarship to train a Teacher of the Deaf, preferably a Sister. The Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny felt that this was a call from God to serve the most needy, and Sister Mary Sweeney, already experienced in working with disabled children, was chosen. During her training Tom Bristow, a Peace Corps volunteer, assisted by George Nii Quartey from Ghana, began working with the eight deaf children. The Cluny Sisters decided to convert the boarding quarters of St Joseph's Convent into a school for the deaf. In 1982 the school was approved by the Ministry of Education and now accommodates 215 pupils from all parts of Sierra Leone. Over the years teachers have trained in Dublin, Sint Michielsgestel in the Netherlands, and at Birmingham University. Recently, special education courses that focus on deafness, at certificate, diploma and degree levels have been validated by the Fatima Institute which is now incorporated into the University of Makeni.

#### **The war years: based on an interview with Andrew Dumbuya, Deputy Headteacher**

Andrew arrived as a teacher at St Joseph's School for the Deaf in 1986. He expected to be appointed to a local primary school and was taken aback when he was sent to a school for deaf children. He knew nothing about deafness and how to teach and handle his pupils was a big challenge. Now, 24 years later, as one of the first teachers at St Joseph's to achieve a BEd degree in special education, hearing impairment, through the University of Makeni, Andrew says that he is still learning.

The Sierra Leone war began in 1991 and Makeni was attacked in December 1998. During that period the main concern was where to take the deaf pupils, as many parents showed no concern for their own children and often rejected them. Some parents had fled for their lives and could not come for their

children. Everyone was hoping that the war would end soon. Since May 1998 the school dormitories had given refuge to mutilated amputees, and staff and pupils helped to care for them. When Makeni Town was attacked most people ran away and some teachers took the children into their care as part of their families. Some pupils who stayed were forced to join the rebels as boy soldiers.

Some went to Freetown and met representatives of the deaf associations there. They became child labourers. Sadly, some girls became prostitutes and some were trafficked. Teachers who moved from Makeni to Freetown gathered some of the displaced pupils together. Sister Mary Sweeney asked for some classrooms and Sister Clare Stanley offered two small store rooms in the Charlotte Street Convent. In total, 89 children came to the school but the class area was too small to accommodate them all and so the courtyard was used as a teaching area. It was a difficult time for teachers and pupils alike as they had to walk long distances to attend school each morning. This displaced school lasted for about one year. Regrettably, members of the adult deaf community in Freetown put pressure on our older pupils not to attend or else tried to use them, because they were educated, as a front when applying for project funding.

During the war the Makeni School compound was occupied by rebel troops. All the buildings were vandalised and everything that could be moved was looted. All that was left intact were walls and some steel windows. With the combined help of generous donors, Cordaid, Irish Aid and Trocaire, rebuilding started, furniture was replaced and equipment began to arrive. Teacher training, delivered mainly by visiting tutors, began with workshops and in-service training.

Now St Joseph's School is full of hope and expectancy. Teachers and pupils benefit from a curriculum based on the maternal reflective approach, all pupils have hearing aids and the audiology department has two trained technicians. Our Headteacher, Umu Turay, has just returned from UK with a Master's degree in special education from Birmingham University. We are moving ahead with confidence.

There are many gaps in this brief account. Readers' personal experiences of working in schools for the deaf in Sierra Leone would be welcomed. Please contact Ruth McAree through the Editor of this Magazine.

*This article was written, with the support of Ruth McAree, by Patricia Gbetuwa, Siddie Kanu, Mustapha Kargbo and Romaine Ketekou, four students of the University of Makeni, as part of the Diploma in Special Education (Hearing Impairment).*

## BATOD Magazine

This article was published in the May 2010 issue.

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