

Transition – Rwandan Deaf Education from 2018 to the future

Isobel Blakeley and Teresa Quail describe a return visit to the UK following a VSO placement in Rwanda

You may remember Isobel's earlier articles which were the direct result of a VSO placement in Rwanda from January 2104 to July 2015. Since returning to England and retirement, it has been impossible, of course, for her to pretend that the challenges facing those few individuals trying to provide education for some of the deaf children just 12 hrs flight from London did not exist.

With a few friends who have also become involved, we decided that it would be helpful to invite a few of the individuals we knew to visit England to see what services were available to children here and start with them a discussion around how they could adapt some of these to their own situation in a very different environment. There was a host of practical problems, which she won't even begin to tell you about!

We invited Louis, Elie and Omar on a 20 day whistle stop tour of English services for deaf children and young

people. Two of them had never been out of East Africa before, and none had been to a European country. And they came in November!

We visited:

- five different 'Hearing Impaired Units' for primary pupils observing pupils in class with support and also in separate language lessons with the ToD
- children in mainstream classes with weekly support from a ToD
- a pre-school group
- three residential schools for the deaf, looking at how they manage out of school activities as well the academic provision
- an FE college which provides support on vocational programmes for HI pupils
- two Deaf clubs
- groups of parents of deaf children



Elie and Louis in discussions with staff from the Peterborough Sensory Service. You will notice by their clothing that the transition from the equator to England in November was also a challenge!

- staff of Sensory Services, including VI and Communication provision
- deaf pupils with significant additional needs
- an audiologist
- speech and language sessions with deaf pupils.

We were also able to visit individuals and groups who have fundraised for the schools during the last five years, to thank them in person for the help they have given. This was particularly moving for both the donors and recipients. At most of the places we visited, our visitors were also able to present their PowerPoint presentations from Rwanda – so giving both staff and students a taste of a different world.

As you can imagine, we have engaged in a multitude of different discussions, both with those we met and between ourselves. Driving home from many of the visits, rapid in depth discussions in Kinyarwanda were going on in the car!

Their visit is now almost over and I asked them if we had been right to invite them. Seeing the provision – however imperfect and incomplete – that we have here compared to their situation at home, was it unkind to show them? Would it have been better to leave them unaware of what is possible?

'It is hard for us to see what deaf pupils can do when they have good support, but if we don't know what is possible how can we plan for improvement in the future', said Louis, the founder of Nyabihu Demonstration School for the Deaf.

'I did not know that it was possible for profoundly deaf children to learn to speak like that. At first, I did not believe that they were profoundly deaf' Elie said of children he observed with cochlear implants.

In terms of transition, they are already managing some of the practical situations that they face. The transition from home to primary school, from primary to secondary and then to vocational training in rural Africa. This often happens on the same site, in a residential setting, so the situation is very different from here, and in many ways, simpler.

However, the challenge is much bigger than that, and what is needed is potential leaders who understand what can be achieved. The major transitions that lay ahead for Rwanda if their provision is to move into line with what is available to deaf pupils here are:

- The transition from a charity funded provision for a few deaf pupils to a government funded provision for all
- Medical assessment for early identification
- The transition from a fully sign dependent education to one where hearing equipment is available for those who can benefit
- Facilities to train Teachers of the Deaf
- The transition of teaching methods to develop speech for those with 'hearing aids'.

The list could go on, but most of all, what is needed is a transition from a society that does not understand the value of educating deaf children into one that sees that a deaf child, given the financial investment necessary to provide the right human, educational and equipment resources can become a contributing member of the economic development of the country, channelling their unlimited potential.

Many of you older teachers will, like Isobel, have seen huge changes in the education of deaf children and young people in Britain over the last 40 years. My hope is that Omar and Elie, two young men of 30, will see a similar transition in their lifetimes.

'I am excited' said Omar with his unstoppable enthusiasm. 'Now I will not be satisfied with where we are. I know that we can achieve much more'.

Web links:

Umutara School for the Deaf – Omar's school:
<https://umutaradeafschool.weebly.com>

Nyabihu Demonstration School for the Deaf – Louis and Elie's school: <https://nyabihucenterforthedeaf.weebly.com>

Donation Charity: <https://deafreach.org>
(Beware, not .com – that's another charity!)

My individual fundraising page for teacher training:
www.wonderful.org/fundraiser/teachertrainingatnyabihurwanda-f0eba5cc



After gaining a degree in English and Psychology, and a PGCE from Keele University, Isobel Blakeley began her career as a Primary School teacher. Two years later, having moved to Stoke on Trent at short notice, she found work at The Mount School for the Deaf. Thrown in at the deep end, knowing nothing about Deaf Education, she began to be fascinated with the issues of teaching language and life skills to deaf children. She gained her Teacher of the Deaf qualification from Manchester University, and over a career that lasted 40 years, has been involved with the education of deaf children from birth through all the age groups up to College level, as well as with deaf adults with learning difficulties. After her retirement in 2014, she spent 18 months with VSO in Rwanda working to support the schools for the deaf and their teachers there in many different ways. She is now actively involved in trying to raise support back home for these schools, which have many needs, and is privileged to have become a Trustee of DeafReach.

Teresa is a member of BATOD's Northern Ireland committee and has recently been appointed as BATOD Magazine Editor and Assistant National Executive Officer. She is also a DeafReach Trustee.

deafreach.org

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