



November 2019

Dear Friends,

This edition is devoted to a report by Isobel Blakeley of a two-week Professional Development trip to Nyabihu and Umutara Deaf Schools in Rwanda. The group was seven in number, and we will be publishing a report by Teresa Quail, another member of the group, in a later edition.

How do you sum up an action packed two weeks in less than two weeks! Difficult, but I will try.

Of course, the preparations started long before. Planning the sessions with our Rwandan partners by email, meeting together to discuss what to deliver and how, estimating time scales, predicting difficulties, managing logistics, and also collecting clothes, toys and other items to take with us. Luckily, I'm retired, but it did become a bit of a full-time occupation in the weeks running up to the flight!

I LOVE RwandAir – they let us take three extra suitcases as we had so many donations, and what we wanted to take wouldn't fit into the 14 x 23kg bags that we had. And they fly direct. It was an overnight flight there, which is my excuse for looking a bit vague in this photo of us arriving at Kigali airport and being met by some of our Rwandan friends.

Visit to Nyabihu

We picked up the eight-seater hire vehicle, and after breakfast and coffee at the well-known Chez Lando Hotel, we drove the four hours to Nyabihu. Four of us shared the driving. Driving in Rwanda is not too bad. You have to avoid the millions of 'motos' in Kigali and the cyclists and pedestrians on the road side when out of the city. Also, giving the local buses a wide berth is advisable, as you never know when they might stop, or pull out! But there are not too many vehicles on the roads, and the speed limits are generally kept to, with people driving on the correct side of the road – on the whole! I prefer it to driving on the M25 any day!



Teresa and I had already seen the new Nyabihu school when we visited in February, but the others just could not wait to see the new site. It did not disappoint! What a welcome we received. It was four years

ago when Louis first took us to this plot of land, and told us of his dream of building a school here. Then, when we came two years ago, we saw the first building which had just been finished – one of the dormitories. Now, they are nearly at the end of their first academic year here.

During one of the sessions, the teachers were asked what difference the new buildings had made to the school. Their enthusiasm was overwhelming! They told us that before, when they were living at the old site, they would be taking five children a week to the local Health Centre, due to chest infections, stomach bugs, etc. Now, they have taken two children per term!! We hadn't predicted that!

Space to play and keep fit, abundant water to wash themselves and their clothes, clean water by the toilets for hand washing, better toilet and washing facilities, a water filter for drinking water, light airy dormitories, with mosquito nets on all the beds, light airy classrooms, covered walkways so everyone can still walk around the school without getting drenched when it rains. There is space for people to find a quiet spot if they need to or to hang out with a few friends and a beautiful environment just lifts everyone's mood.

I was pleased to see the changes that they had made even in the few months since our last visit. Bright and interesting classrooms, a painted seat, young tree saplings planted in painted tyres, stones for visitors to paint their names on. A little imagination and a little paint can work wonders!



Louis (dark jacket) on the painted seat with our three TOD Congolese gate crashers!



New friends, new links, collaborative working.

Training – the main reason for our visit!

While four of the team delivered their training sessions to some of the teachers, three of us helped look after the 40 children who didn't have classes because of the training. We introduced them to the toys and

crayons that we had brought. The lack of a common language wasn't too much of a problem! As long as you know the Rwandan sign for 'toilet' which we did!

The team

A group of seven professionals joined together to make the two-week trip to Rwanda. The main aim was to visit two residential schools for the deaf and deliver 'Professional Development' to the teachers. There is no facility for this to happen in country as the expertise is not yet available.

Our group consisted of four teachers of the Deaf, one of whom was also an Educational Audiologist, a Speech and Language Therapist, a Maths teacher, and a long serving Classroom Assistant and experienced School Governor – now retired.

In conjunction with the Head teacher, Managers and Teachers of the two schools, we had come up with a range of topics for the sessions. They covered areas such as Early Interventions, Assessment and Monitoring, Speech and Language, Hearing screening, Safeguarding Policy, Methods of teaching Maths to pupils with limited language, and Organisational Structures. We planned to have four and a half days of training at each of the two schools.

About two weeks before the planned visit, three teachers from Deaf Schools in the Congo who had links to the schools in Rwanda asked if they could join our training! We did not feel we could refuse! The training was free and if we could fund their overnight accommodation and transport, then we wanted to help them to attend. It was decided that they could come! So now we had an additional group of teachers to train!



Fun sessions



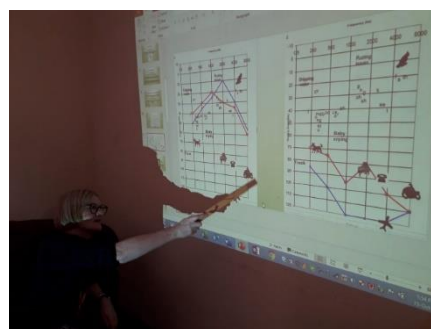
Practical sessions



Individual sessions



Pupil sessions



Technical sessions



And serious sessions

Safeguarding was one of the topics that we wanted to raise with both schools, as in Rwanda, schools don't as yet have Safeguarding Policies. But these two schools do now! Here we are discussing the issues with staff and adapting the policy to suit their needs and requirements.



Here is our technical expert Teresa Quail, Teacher of the Deaf and Educational Audiologist, working with Omar, the Head Teacher in Umutara. Teresa had her own remit – which you can read about in her individual report. Amazing work Teresa!!

Umutara

New Building

As at Nyabihu, Umutara have been building too! We were very excited to see the new boys' dormitory which has been funded by a generous donation from one of the DeafReach trustees. There are two rooms, one for the younger boys and one for the older ones, a water tank to collect the rain water from the roof, plus a toilet/shower/washing area block. The construction was of high quality, the rooms large and airy and the windows had reflective glass so that people can't look in but the boys can see out and get plenty of light.





Here I am, thanking the Builder and his assistant on behalf of DeafReach. The builder says that he would like to work with us again – because we paid on time!!

This picture shows the back of the new area, with the water tank and the back wall of the toilet/shower block on the right.

The boys are very excited about moving into this area in January.

Training

Our training sessions at Umutara followed a similar pattern to those at Nyabihu, though with less stress on technical management of hearing equipment, as at present they don't have access to hearing aids, hearing-aid support materials or expertise in the same way that Nyabihu do. We hope that this will change over time, and Teresa and the team were able to spend time in preparatory training for the teachers for when this might be available to the school.

A severe rainstorm, making the road to Umutara from the town we were staying in too dangerous to travel on, meant that we lost our last morning of training. We were frustrated because one of the sessions that morning was going to be cascading the Safeguarding training from our team and the Management to the class teachers. Undaunted by the rain, Dominique and Eleanie did the training themselves – a brilliant solution! How much better that they are now confident in training their own staff in the rationale for Safeguarding, and are delivering it in their own language.

Thank you rain!



Eleanie leading a Safeguarding discussion with the teaching staff

Vocational Training

It was very exciting for us to witness at both schools the work being done to provide pupils with access to vocational training on completion of their school studies. Our team-training did not involve anything to do with this as this is not our area of expertise, but of course, for the schools, it is a vital element in preparing their pupils for life in the real world, which for deaf young people in Rwanda, is not easy. Both schools are offering several choices of vocational training, visible places to work in the community as they develop

their skills, and opportunities to earn money and so build up their capacity to become financially independent.

One example. I first met Frank in January 2014. He was 12 years old and a bright, kind boy. He didn't go home during the holidays, because his parents couldn't afford the bus fare and didn't answer the phone to come and get him! So he stayed at the school, and Dominique looked after him. I got to know him well. When he finished his P6 two years ago, he decided to learn tailoring. Two years on, he can make shirts, trousers, bags, dresses, - you name it! He here is making a bag. I had to buy it of course!



Now 18, he is confident, living in the local community with other deaf young people, is part of a drama group (funded by VSO) is working in the Umutara vocational shop in the local town, and getting 50% of the takings from things that he sells. The rest goes towards the costs of the shop and buying more materials.

If he had not come to Umutara school, I cannot bear to think of the life that he might be living now. No language, no career prospects, no understanding of written Kinyarwanda or English, no understanding of number, no social group to belong to, no communication system with his family or community. The difference these schools are making to individual deaf children is immense. What a role model he is too.

Was our visit worth it?

It takes a lot of work, and not an inconsiderable expense for us to make a trip like this. We are self-funded, and do it because we believe that we can make a difference. But do we? We have to ask this question. Will we go again? Do we need to go again? Are we just doing this because it makes us feel good!

We asked ourselves these questions during the return journey.

It is very important for us to evaluate, with our Rwandan friends, the positives and negatives of a trip like this.

Their professional needs will change over time, as they themselves become more expert in their profession. At present, the teachers in schools for the Deaf in Rwanda do not have access to any specialist training dedicated to teaching deaf pupils as we do in this country. They also do not have the support staff or mechanisms available that we do – Social Workers, funded transport, Speech and Language Therapists (there are a few in Kigali, but these are not accessible to the poor), audiological assessment and equipment (again, these services are available in Kigali, but only to those who can get there and pay for the support) Specialist Classroom Assistants, Educational Audiologists. And the schools themselves are not Government funded so they have severe ongoing financial constraints.

Building up background knowledge in areas such as understanding audiograms, how the ear works, communication methods, classroom management, working with families, learning styles, behaviour management, developing concepts through sign, assessment of understanding, etc, etc, that we have studied as part of our qualification and are able to continue to discuss with colleagues, is the gap we are aiming to fill here. They do not have access to this level of specialisation which we take for granted. Quite a void to fill, but we have started and their desire to understand is insatiable! This is why these visits are so vital.

However, as they become more skilled, they will be able to deliver their own training – as we witnessed with the Safeguarding session, and how much better that they train their own staff in their own language

with their own cultural understanding, rather than having us coming and telling them how to do it! It is so easy to think that we know best!

Example! One of our team had brought some money she had collected from friends and colleagues before the trip. She asked the teachers at Nyabihu what could she buy for them with this money that would make the biggest difference to their everyday life at the school. We didn't expect this answer! Umbrellas and Ponchos!

It rains very hard sometimes, and the walk to the local school takes 40 minutes! The children and teachers arrive frozen and drenched! 'Our hands are so cold, that sometimes we cannot sign', one teacher said!



Lesson!

Don't assume that you know what is best for other people!

Ask them!



Sustainable training



One of the problems with 'giving aid' that people often bring up, is sustainability. The need to enable those being supported to learn to support themselves. This is really important, and we are so heartened by the responses of both Umutara and Nyabihu. Even before we had left the country, the Safeguarding training was being delivered to the teaching staff by the Head Teachers and Managers!

And, in this picture, Elie is training the parents of the children who have been given hearing aids, in hearing-aid maintenance and

care so that they can support their children during the school holidays. Here you see them using a stethoclip to listen into the sound that a hearing aid makes! What an experience for these adults from rural villages in Rwanda!

I asked Elie for the reaction of the parents. This was his reply.

Parents were so happy to get that training. They said it is so important to have the training about hearing aids because they will help their children to maintain them well during the holidays. They add that they were so curious about how a hearing aid functions. Some thought that hearing aids enable the user to hear as normal person, others asked themselves why some children wear two hearing aids others one. Some parents like the parent of Murava (the child whose Teresa gave conductive hearing band) gave testimony by saying that bicycle riders used to insult and tend to beat his son after ringing the bell and Murava did not give the way because of not hearing. But now, when he walks the parents and Murava feel safe.

I think it was a cold day – Elie has his coat and scarf on!!

Comments from both schools and our Congolese colleagues

The founder of Umutara School, Dominique, said the training was "wonderful for the students, teachers and staff" and the Head of the Nyabihu School told us that after their week of training the "children have been so happy with the games and learning materials visitors brought, and the teachers have been happy with the different training and talks."

The Congolese teachers said: 'We enjoyed the training on hearing aids methodology and on teachings maths. We wish that the same training could be organised in DRC. We also enjoyed discovering our colleagues at Nyabihu school. Also thanks for the clothes and teaching materials'.

Angelique, the Maths teacher at Umutara, stated that she has increased her knowledge of the subject and learned several new ways to carry out calculations which she feels will be of help to her students. She told her trainer that she was happy to find someone else with a passion for maths, as she is the only one at the school who loves maths! She too asked for extra sessions and would have liked her colleague to stay on to cover more topics with her

Comments from the Team

'The Nursery classroom at Umutara had a definite feel of a purposeful classroom environment.'

'There was a greater feeling of identity and purpose about both schools than we experienced two years ago.'

'At Nyabihu the senior staff trained to assess and support hearing aid wear are both committed and competent.'

'In both Nyabihu and Umutara there has been such progress since we first met (October 2014).'

'Both schools have opened successful vocational training sections and now have several students working in their local communities in paid employment in internships.'

'Our experienced Speech and Language Therapist was able to offer advice on working on listening and speech sounds in Nyabihu, and to discuss some specific cases of children with some vocalisations raised by the teachers in Umutara.'

'We had some great laughs and very interesting discussions and as always were struck by the similarities in the issues that we face in terms of supporting children and young people.'

'The Educational Audiologist on the team was able to fit hearing aids and train identified staff at the school in supporting the use of hearing aids recently offered to the school.'

'Here in the UK we are so used to having professional development and access to colleagues with whom we can discuss ideas and different methods. It is hard for us to conceive of a situation such as represented by the people in this report that they deal with every day. Their gratitude to us for taking the time and making the effort to share our knowledge with them in order to help their deaf students was very humbling.'



One final thought to carry with us when we plan any future training.

‘Many of the staff are not yet in a position to self-assess their competence so, when deciding on appropriate training, we need to try to assess what they **don’t yet** know. It’s no good going in with pre-conceived ideas about what you think ought to be tackled’

Wise words.

The Future of our team

It may not be in the same format, but I am sure we will be back again. Rwanda does that to you!

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