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Key Theme: Africa –tough arenas for developing teachers.

A volunteer’s experiences in South Sudan and Rwanda -2005 – 2007

Context:

- 1. Working as a volunteer Education Coordinator for JRS –Refugee Service in South Sudan**
- 2. Acting as Headteacher Mentor and Teacher Trainer in Rwanda – NAHT /VSO**

‘Teacher Training under the Mango Tree’

South Sudan has experienced Civil War for decades. Officially, from 1983 to 2005, the civil war raged between the north and the south of the country. Unofficially, the tensions continue and it will be many years before the people of the south live in peace. The Lord’s Resistance Army, a rebel group, continues to wreak havoc and this activity directly affects the schools, their pupils and staff. Education, at all levels, has not been a priority during these years.

Access to Teacher Training is very limited for most prospective Sudanese teachers and those seeking these opportunities usually need sponsorship from NGO’s or individuals.

There is currently one training college in Northern Uganda within reach by road [A day’s travel by boat and by bus/on foot] or alternatively access to university is through Kampala, Uganda; an expensive alternative.

In the last few years, a satellite-college was established in South Sudan, within a reasonable distance to the camp. However, the rebel activity in the area has closed this college a number of times, with students and teachers fleeing for their lives and the college buildings being destroyed.

There is a grave shortage of trained teachers available in South Sudan. Many of those who currently teach are those who ‘did well’ at school and are prepared to work for the small stipend the Refugee Organisations are offering. Recently the Government has agreed to pay teachers for their work and, if maintained, this will encourage young people to train and achieve qualifications.

In Sudan the status of teaching as a profession is low and therefore trying to attract quality people to this role is not easy. Often people who take up teaching as a job leave as soon as a better paid job comes along. Indeed the fact that teachers have not been paid by Government in the past makes job security very fragile.

Many of the teachers are male. There are few female role models for the girls and there are many reasons for this.

Firstly the status of women remains low in Sudan. It is still accepted, from a tribal perspective, that a 'woman's place is in the home.' Therefore as young girls reach puberty they are made available for marriage. Every term saw many girls failing to return to secondary school classes as their marriages were arranged.

However, despite all of this, there are a few women who are teachers; some who fled to Uganda when the war was at its height and some who have persevered and challenged the systems in place.

Invariably these women teach with their babies on their back, stopping to feed them as required. This is perfectly acceptable practice throughout the region.

The money, if any, available within family life for education, is focussed on the boy. However, part of the work that is being carried out by NGO's is to change these attitudes and encourage equal access to education for all.

Daily life is a struggle and it is within this context I describe the challenges and successes of teacher training in this country.

In the role as Education Coordinator for South Sudan, I had responsibility for 14 schools spread throughout the district. Some of these schools were situated within the camp, while others were further out in the Bush. The distances between the camp office and the range of schools were a challenge to coordinating in-service training activities and meetings.

Volunteer travel was assisted by a vehicle, while the travel of school staff demanded long journeys on foot, through dangerous areas. There was a constant risk of being shot, abducted or worse. Therefore arranging teacher training presented a whole range of items to be considered, alongside the content of the training itself.

The school buildings were mainly made of mud brick and thatch- their 'open aspect' was appreciated in temperatures or over 40 degrees. Having few walls, no access to electricity and very few resources, preparation for teacher training took on additional challenges.

The venue for training events was often 'under the mango tree' and delivery was with the use of paper and markers or a portable blackboard.

Sometimes the local secondary school was used and having benches and a blackboard was a bonus.

In far from ideal conditions, the teachers who presented themselves at weekends for training were prepared to sit for long periods of time, listening to pedagogy being delivered. They joined in the discussions and role play with enthusiasm and a sense of fun, knowing that they were indeed privileged to be receiving education in any form.

If the course ran for more than one day they were also prepared to sleep on the classroom floor for the night, as a long walk home in the darkness was completely out of question.

Their commitment to learn and to teach under these conditions was astounding.

The school curriculum is now in the process of developing to reflect the changing face of South Sudan, who now has the political power to govern the people of the South. With that power comes financial responsibility and therefore progress is slow.

For many years the curriculum and teacher training has been based on old colonial models, with the majority of content coming from Kenya and Uganda.

The principal language of the curriculum has been English and with pupils coming from a range of different tribes [over 700 tribes in Sudan] it has been necessary to deliver the curriculum in a common language.

However, most pupils have no English at all when they start school, and as it is rarely spoken at home, this is very challenging for all pupils and teachers.

Similarly in teacher training English is most commonly used and this presents challenges to all, as it is a second language.

All text books are in English and the few resources that are available usually come from Nairobi and are therefore only available in English.

For teachers to access and read the theory of teaching it can be very difficult. Therefore most of what they learn about teaching is in practice.

Progress for pupils and teachers is slow and generally there is little pace to learning.

Attendance in class is challenging for pupils and teachers. The climate of unrest and uncertainty makes it very difficult to focus on long term goals such as education.

The immediate needs of food, shelter and safety take priority at all times.

Fetching water and firewood in the mornings and evenings can be a major task. Try walking three miles or more before being able to access water...

Therefore, particularly, but not exclusively, for girls and women, these tasks often lead to late-coming and non-attendance.

Marking is generally poor and does not seem to effect change for the pupil.

This is an area under constant discussion.

Strategies to encourage and enhance attendance have been put in place, including regular checks by the education teams and withdrawal of wages for non-attendance in class.

The Government of South Sudan is now working with the NGO's who have sponsored schools and training in the past. They are looking to overhaul the whole of the education system and have already appointed Ministers and Consultants to implement the changes.

A significant change will be to the curriculum which will change to reflect life in South Sudan rather than depend on a stereotyped version from neighbouring and formerly colonially ruled countries.

This will obviously require changes to the content of all teacher training and to school based resources.

In the long term this will help to give the children and the teachers a clearer identity and an opportunity to learn and teach some lessons in local tribal languages.

It is hoped that peace prevails long enough for this strategy to be implemented and to build the capacity in education of the country in the long term.

Rwanda –

Most of us will remember the terrible events of the ‘Genocide’ in Rwanda for 100 days in 1994. During those dark days Rwanda lost more than a million of its people. The country also lost 70% of its teaching population and the infrastructure of its education ministry.

Some schools were destroyed and many of the buildings were used as sites for massacres and unspeakable acts.

The picture is very different today. In a relatively short period of time, and with the help of the International Community, Rwanda has turned the situation around. Many schools are up and running some teacher training has been re-established.

The teachers in the majority of schools are currently untrained and learning on the job. They have had little opportunity to read and discuss the theory of teaching, however they are most certainly committed to providing education for a new generation.

The generation of parents, whose children are currently in education, has certainly missed out on education due to the events of the Genocide and the country’s struggle to establish peace. Some of these parents are learning alongside their children.

One of the challenges in schools, today is to teach the many blind and traumatised children of the war and the difficult times that followed. It is very encouraging to see these special needs being catered for within a mainstream classroom. Some Braille equipment is available and although it is rather antiquated equipment it is well used and appreciated by the pupils.

A challenge for teaching and teacher training in Rwanda is that lessons are taught mainly in French; the language of colonial times.

The official language of the country is Kinyarwanda and French is fairly widely used, although in some regions more than others.

For some pupils and indeed teachers, explaining mathematics and science in a second language, or reading the text in a second language is very difficult.

To complicate matters further the Government today has decided that English should supersede French. The curriculum is now under a full review and teacher training colleges are also undergoing significant changes.

Happily, the teaching profession in Rwanda enjoys a slightly more elevated status than that of Sudan. However it remains very poorly paid and generally does not attract quality people as yet.

The female teacher is valued in Rwanda and indeed women do enjoy a little more freedom and choices than in many other African countries. Women are still very much the homemakers but it is acceptable to work too.

As in much of Africa resources are few in the schools, particularly in rural areas, which is the majority of schools.

Generally, blackboards and chalk are available but the buildings are in a very poor state of repair. Few enjoy electricity or water. For primary schools ICT is not an option although some secondary schools do have access to computers and the internet.

There are very few resources for use in teaching and text books are very thin on the ground.

One initiative in teacher training that was developed to assist in the areas of resources was using rice sacks to draw alphabets, songs, rhymes, numbers, science information etc. The rice sacks last a great deal longer than paper pinned to walls in buildings open to the elements and 'creatures'. The provision and demonstration of the use of these materials helped to highlight the important use of display for reinforcement of key facts.

Teacher training was also provided in the use of drama and role play to develop language and communication. The teaching of rhymes and action songs was a resource that could be fed directly into the classroom. The teachers who took part in the training were committed and enthusiastic. They were thirsty for further training and strategies that could help them in their teaching.

If there are any positives to take from these experiences in Sudan and Rwanda it is that the 'job' can be done fairly successfully with the minimum of resources.

MFL may be new to primary schools in this country but nursery schools impressed in Rwanda with their aptitude for second and third languages.

The challenges for African countries are immense but they are clearly beginning to tackle the issue of education for all in the best way they can, with limited resources and in very difficult circumstances. The cycle of war and misinformation can only be resolved through education and hope for the future.

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