



**March 2009**

**1. Project visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo.**

*Background to the visit.*

For almost a year we have had links with Menelik Education, a charity set up to promote education for children in Kinshasa. This charity has for almost three years organised fundraising events to support a federation of seven schools, partly in order to provide much needed equipment for classrooms, and partly to pay for school fees for children who would otherwise have no means of accessing education at all. Only 22% of Congolese children are able to attend school for even a short while, and the aim of Menelik Education is to have as much positive impact as possible on this percentage, and to effect development of the whole community gradually by implementing its aims. The establishment of a link with Impington is a significant step in achieving these goals; the link was formally launched in October 2008, at one of the fundraising African music and food evenings at the St Paul's centre, Hill's Road.

It was clear from the outset that Impington could develop the citizenship curriculum through the link in a variety of ways; one learning manager suggested that it could be the charity her year group fundraised for, for instance, planning to raise awareness by using materials developed through Menelik Education while the sixth form, who had organised a sponsored walk for another African school, planned to make the walk their annual event to raise money for Kinshasa. Many sixth form students have helped to collect materials to send to Kinshasa in the container the charity is sending in April. Sixth form students also help on the African evenings in a variety of ways, and so are already part of the wider organisation, placing the College firmly in the wider community. However, a link which really only exists to fundraise is unlikely to be sustainable – there has to be some level of equity in the arrangement, and some sense of a developing relationship. Curriculum links are one way forward, as all the government funded initiatives make clear – the DCSF Global School Partnership programme, for instance, which I was asked to pilot at Impington with a school in New Delhi, has very strict guidelines for applicants: the collaborative work must be embedded in the curriculum, and must have definable and measurable outcomes for both partners. This and other funded projects have been useful as guidelines for the development of the Congolese partnership. The director of Language College suggested shared work between Congolese students learning English and Impington students learning French – a termly exchange of letters reflecting their progress in the target language; the IB world literature course, which focuses on African literature, is enhanced by the contextual background the case study of Congo's troubled colonial history provides, and which Dr Theodore Menelik (founder of Menelik Education) assists. The IB English A2 course includes a topic on peace and conflict, and this is similarly given relevance by our close connection with the Congolese schools. Perhaps the most obvious way of connecting the partnership to the taught curriculum is through fairtrade – this is a topic in English, Geography, IB Economics and IB English

A2 as well as being the focus of a new school wide citizenship initiative. It is a fundamental issue in Congo, which is the richest country in Africa in terms of minerals and resources and, largely because of this, is kept by trading partner countries in a state of utter destabilisation.

### *The purpose of the visit.*

Probably the most important benefit of the partnership identified by the Congolese project manager, Papa Percy Lembo, and Dr Theodore Menelik, is the potential it offers for professional development of the Congolese teachers. From the very beginning, Dr Menelik described this as the most significant single element because of the long term change it initiates. I realised very early in the nascent partnership that the only way it could become substantial, genuinely involving both sides in a mutual process of development, was by arranging a project visit. Government and European funded projects all include such a visit as a prerequisite. My aim was to include any colleagues who felt that they could learn from seeing the effects of poverty and destabilisation on education, and who believed that it could inform their professional practice. In order to make the partnership reciprocal, I wanted to talk to the teachers with whom we would be working, and thus to see how the partnership could best benefit the Congolese schools. The purpose of this visit was educational; since we already had sixth form students who wanted to spend some time working there as volunteers in their gap year, the visit also provided an optimum opportunity to assess the suitability of such an activity both in terms of what work volunteers could undertake and in terms of day to day living arrangements. (This was really important, given the conflict in the east of the country.)

### *The visit.*

From the outset, the partnership has developed in an organic way: as people have learned about it, they have realised what they can give to it and what they can gain from it – this visit was no exception. Since the sixth form is so involved in the project, and out of personal conviction, Carol Kelsall, Deputy Director of the sixth form, decided early on to take part; David Kaye, (Maths,) was also keen to see how poverty affected education, how he might manage such a situation, and how he could contribute to the development of teaching practice there. After reading about it in *Imprint*, Sarah Baker, (Special Needs,) joined the group, excited by the opportunity to see whether good practice here could be transferred to the conditions pertaining there. Externally funded programmes usually require evidence of involvement of whole staff, not just teachers, to ensure inclusion and equality – on this visit the participation of Danka Fabiszczak, an employee of the College's cleaning agency, evidenced this. We thus had a strong and highly motivated staff team, and were able to discuss plans for our time in Kinshasa, acknowledging that the situation could be very different from how we imagined based on oral reports from people who had been there and film footage of the schools we would be working in. We knew, for instance, that one of the schools desperately needed a wall to keep its students safe and clean, and that it could afford none of the materials – that it was fairly hopeless, in fact. This was one of the practical jobs volunteers could usefully carry out on a visit, and it fired the imagination of Carol's and Sarah's sons; they asked if they too could join the visit to work as volunteers. In the end, Carol's sons, Ewan and Fraser and their friend Jim, and Sarah's sons Ben and Will all came too. With Theodore

Menelik, director of Menelik Education, and Jenny Martin, the organisation's secretary, we were a diverse group bringing a variety of skills, and all keen to contribute and to learn. We took with us as many basic materials as we could carry – sixth form students contributed significantly to this, as did people in the wider community, and we all took the materials we would need for the activities we had planned. We were very glad we did so, because it was immediately clear that the schools had no materials of any kind.

The young men worked on the wall strenuously, digging the trench for a substantial section and laying the foundations; fundraising prior to the visit meant that we were able to pay for the materials and leave it in state that enabled the local volunteers to continue work on it. Symbolically, the work on the wall represented ongoing support, a promise of ongoing development. Danka, a qualified nursery teacher, and Jenny spent their time working in the “Maternelle”, or nursery section of the school worked in and with which we are most likely to maintain close links with; they did craft activities, something the children had never experienced before, and both felt that by working with the same children and teachers every day they forged genuine links of trust and affection. Sarah worked with KS2 age children, observing lessons first and identifying those who had problems accessing the content of the lesson, extracting them and working with a small group – the idea was to model practice that would be effective in the context of that school, where class sizes can be fifty or more. David spent one day on the wall, using his experience in construction to lead the initial work on the foundations; after that he spent one day observing Maths lessons and another teaching students – he used French as his medium of instruction, having prepared to do so for since the visit was first planned. Carol worked mostly with older students, delivering a Media lesson aiming to teach both students and teacher how to use digital camcorders to make a film about the school – intensely exciting for all, since none of them had ever seen a camera of this sort before; my aim was to meet the group of older students with whom some of our sixth form students try to make regular contact. I also needed to spend time with Papa Lembo, the school's founder, and teachers, to enable me to work out the way forward for our partnership.

The hope inspired by our visit was moving and humbling; it was as though our presence indicated the possibility of change and development where none had existed before. Most children and teachers had never seen Europeans before; the schools were absolutely destitute, and everyone identified the greatest need to be for materials.

### *The way forward.*

The conclusions we drew are the basis of the way forward. It was clear to us all that when the teachers say their greatest need is for materials, that is absolutely true; anyone doing anything there needs to take the necessary resources with them. There is, then, a need to fundraise to facilitate any future and ongoing link. The official language is French, which is already a second language for these poor students (and their teachers, also poor) and the only students who can communicate at all in English are sixteen to eighteen year olds; really this makes most curriculum links in any way we would imagine them very difficult. The resources centre – one room in the compound we stayed in which serves all the schools – has intermittent electricity, so internet access is also intermittent. The education system is very outdated – residual from the schools established during the colonial period by Belgian missionaries, directive, and limited by having large class sizes and no resources, awash during the rainy season (six months of the year) and without any

links to the outside, developed world. When we went to the school the children were fascinated by our difference, all wanting to shake our hands and greet us, never having met Europeans before. Our visit symbolised a connection with the developed world, and so it inspired the people we met with hope – a formidable responsibility for us.

My discussions with Papa Lembo and the conversations and reflections of the group members as the visit progressed enabled me to formulate a way forward that is multi-faceted, that meets many of our College targets, that is developmental, and that will help to introduce change and development in the Kinshasa schools we work with. This visit showed us what the possibilities are; the list that follows includes these possibilities, and suggestions of ways in which we can build on what we felt we started during our project visit.

- The visit was inspirational – everyone who went wants to go again to carry on where they left off; it was excellent professional development, and it has inspired other colleagues. I will certainly be planning further staff visits in the light of such success. One aspect of the visit that delighted me was that whereas at the beginning group members were asking me to translate everything, by the end any who had ever learned any French were using what they could remember, developing their ability to communicate in French, driven by imperative need, showing that good professional development is enabling and exciting.
- Carol and I saw how it would be possible to bring a group of year 12 students for a volunteer visit to fulfil the requirements of their CAS programme – a very satisfying conclusion, since we have a substantial number of sixth form students who are very keen to do this. Any of the staff who went on this visit would be able and willing to accompany such a trip. We have one student in year 13, Kiran Flynn, who is in fact going to go this year, after her exams, with a group from Birmingham University, as part of her gap year.
- There can be communication and at some level collaboration between older students there and at Impington, as a small group this year have discovered; they plan to publish a magazine of written reflections of each others concerns, hopes, fears and aspirations – this can be ongoing.
- Fundraising will be an ongoing feature of citizenship and the CAS programme, and it could be the adopted charity of a year group; the current year 7 have expressed an interest in this, and one French class has already written letters to peers in the Lembo school and had replies.
- The most important next stage for the Kinshasa schools is to address the training of teachers. It is easy to think that such a plan arises from an arrogant or imperialistic view of our role in the partnership; we learned that this is not the case. What is very clear is that we need to enable teachers from the Lembo school, with which we will be working most closely, to come to Impington for a training visit; they could see how we work on a day to day basis, how we use meetings and planning to inform our work, how we interact with students, how we plan and organise lessons – learning for change. I would like to do this for next summer, since the amount we need to raise is relatively small; Carol and I, and probably others, would be happy to offer accommodation, so we would only have to raise enough money to pay the fares.
- DfID have funding I plan to apply for which enables UK schools to send a group of two to four teachers to visit a school in the developing world with which they have established links, in order to work on a key policy or other whole-school

area and inform UK practice through the approach and experience of the partner school. This funding is for senior and middle managers, as the expectation is that it would influence key aspects of school life rather than focusing on curriculum development – there are other avenues for that.

- Finally, when we had an audience with the mayor of Kinshasa she told us that the Congolese are very keen to change the official language from French to English; this is because there is a very strong feeling that Belgium has done nothing to help the Democratic Republic of Congo to emerge successfully from what was thoroughly brutal colonial rule – she claimed that all other colonial powers have, in comparison, been much more supportive. It is also because they want to communicate effectively with other African countries, most of whom speak English; and because Rwanda has very recently made the same change very successfully. For the Kinshasa schools, then this is an optimum time to be developing a partnership with a British school, and it means that in future more curriculum links will be possible.

This project visit was quite spectacularly successful, both for what it achieved in its own right and for how it created a foundation for future activities. It shows how the whole school community can be involved very constructively in such international endeavours, and how we really can work together to effect change. The partnership is original and innovative, and I am sure it will continue to evolve variously.

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