

Africa stands for... courage, conviction, commitment, character, creativity, charisma...

Stephen Peet, teacher at St Patrick's Primary School, Leamington Spa, reflects on the visit in February 2012 by five Warwick and Leamington teachers to their partner schools in Bo.

Wonderfully well-organised by OWL Schools Co-ordinator, Liz Garrett, and benefitting from wise advice from several OWL members, particularly John Myers, the teachers' visit to Bo in February formed the initial part of a Reciprocal Visit initiative funded through the Global Schools Partnership programme and DFID.

Two members of our party had been to Bo on the teachers' visit 12 months previously, and their eagerness and enthusiasm to go again raised the expectations of us first-timers to such a degree that I was preparing myself to be disappointed; I needn't have worried. From the moment the airplane doors opened, and we got our first blast of oven-like heat, through the hustle and bustle of Lungi Airport, our meeting up with the marvellous Maada, and the sardines-in-a-tin adventure of our car and ferry journey across to Freetown, we could tell this was going to be an extra-ordinary experience.



Teachers from 13 Bo Primary Schools attend a Global Schools Partnerships workshop at the OWL Centre in Bo

After a very comfortable stay overnight at the convent, and a deft re-arrangement of luggage in the car, we left bright and early from Freetown on our way to Bo. After a pleasingly uneventful journey (we had heard the tale of the mechanically-challenging trip of the previous year) we arrived at the OWL Centre in Bo and were shown to our rooms – beautifully refurbished and redecorated since last year, much to Liz Garrett's delight and with understandable pride from the members of OWL Bo.



Teachers from partner schools take a break from planning their Global Education Project on 'Water'

Our first daytime experience of Bo, outside the OWL Centre, was our attendance at the Sunday morning church services. For Diane Quayle and me, it was also the first sight of our partner schools, since for those communities, one of the classrooms doubles as the church hall on Sundays. Later that day, discussing the day back at the OWL Centre, it was evident that our experiences shared some common features – warm welcomes, sunny smiles, and soulful singing. I can still hear the voices.

Next day, somewhat surprisingly (even to some of the Bo residents!), was a public holiday, and we seized the opportunity to meet and collaborate for the first time with teachers from our partner schools, sharing ideas and planning the teaching for the week ahead, the focus of which was the 'Write about Water' project; as a universal human need, with contrasting challenges in terms of its availability and quality in the UK and Sierra Leone, water had been our first choice of topic from the word go.

The following week flew by so very quickly. Days were filled with the challenge of teaching in classrooms with constraints of space, budget, and resources, feeling our way by adapting our usual child-focused, 'facilitation of learning' teaching style to suit both the setting and the prior experience of the children, this contrasting with the sheer delight of teaching children who were attentive, watchful, and so very eager to learn. Evenings were spent talking over the day's events, fuelled by the occasional Star beer at the wonderfully-named 'After Work' bar, a great deal of laughter, and the 'beyond the call of duty' companionship of Maada, Umeru, Joseph and others. The experiences were too many and various to detail here, but highlights that cannot go without

mention are the road trip to the SALWACO water treatment plant, a warm meeting with the Mayor at the Town Hall, the extra-ordinarily brilliant Cultural Show showcasing the school children's fabulous singing, dancing, acting and writing, and the farewell party at the OWL Centre which rounded off our week in Bo in such a heart-warming and memorable fashion.

Though this was my first visit to West Africa, I was born across the continent in Uganda, and I have always stated, rather glibly I now realise, that "I am an African". Up until this visit, however, I had no real sense of what 'being an African' meant. Looking back to February, I clearly see that, as embodied by our colleagues-turned-friends (and the children) in our partner schools, our tireless and dedicated supporters at OWL Bo, and our own experiences during the visit, I know from first-hand experience that Africa stands for... courage, conviction, commitment, character, creativity, capability, capacity to teach, capacity to learn, collective effort, community spirit, co-operation, conscientiousness, constancy, charm, charisma, camaraderie, chin-wagging, cabaret, choral singing, colourful clothing, celebrations, crowded cars crammed with cases, chaperons, cassava casserole, and catnapping. And that's just the 'Cs'!

The next chapter in the programme is the reciprocal visit of teachers from our Bo partner schools, which takes place from 7th – 20th June. It will be fascinating to share our colleagues' first experiences of UK culture and education, and wonderful to have further opportunities to strengthen partnerships and deepen friendships that were kindled back in Bo.