



Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO)

Former volunteer thanks VSO for inspiring his award winning book, 'Teaching English in Africa'



Jason Anderson, a teacher trainer and educational consultant from London, volunteered in Eritrea and Rwanda nearly a decade ago with leading international development charity, VSO. This summer, his book won the 'British Council Elton Award for Local Innovation'. Jason talks about his inspiration behind the book.

'Teaching English in Africa' has been nearly ten years in the making and has drawn on best practice from African teachers and teacher trainers who I've had the privilege to work with, initially for VSO and later for UNICEF.

I first travelled to Africa in 2007 to volunteer with VSO in Eritrea as an English methodology trainer in an area called Adi Keih. I noticed a significant difference in the quality of teaching between the local town, which had more experienced teachers, and the more remote locations, which had more newly appointed teachers.

I began to build links and explore ways to support and improve the local professional development network that existed. I felt that the biggest gains could be made from encouraging the more experienced teachers to work in small mentor groups with the less experienced teachers. As a result, we introduced 'Teaching Buddies' and non-supervisory lesson observations.

I directly embarked upon my second VSO placement in Rwanda, where I worked with just four primary schools this time. Despite the 2000 km between these two locations and the differences in language, culture and history, there were a number of common challenges that teachers faced. Much of what I had learned in Eritrea was useful in Rwanda. I also noticed a similar gap between the more and less capable teachers which became the focus of the teacher development programme which we set up at the four schools.

I was still in contact with my old colleagues in Eritrea and found opportunities to share innovative ideas from the Rwandan teachers with the Eritrean ones. It was at this time that one of the head teachers suggested it would be a good idea to produce a booklet of lesson plans that drew upon expertise from both countries. This was the starting point from which my book would gradually develop.

Rwanda was switching from French to English-medium education, so I found myself involved in national curriculum development projects and English language training projects for teachers. While working with both Rwandan and Ugandan English Language teacher trainers, I had often noticed them using Harmer's 'The Practice of English Language Teaching', a good book, but one written for a very different world.

Subsequent work in other parts of East Africa, Southern Africa and North Africa, provided opportunities for me to compare contexts and recognise the commonalities of socio-economic challenges. During a UNICEF project in Kenya, I met a member of the East African Educational Publishers team who suggested a potential collaboration and that's how 'Teaching English in Africa' came about.

Africa has many contexts, especially in education. Significant differences often exist between rural and urban schools within the same country. Yet, while there is much cultural, social and linguistic diversity in Africa, there are socio-economic challenges which are common in classrooms across the continent - large classes (sometimes over 100 pupils), a lack of resources, inadequate training and the challenge of trying to teach English to children who are still struggling to read and write in their mother tongue. 'Teaching English in Africa' provides support to teachers working in the most challenging circumstances.

Over the last nine years, I have been able to work in a wide range of African contexts, both longitudinally at classroom level with teachers and also with methodologists, materials writers and consultants. This combination is something that few teacher trainers ever get the opportunity to experience.



► www.vsointernational.org/educationroles

British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA)

Why MATs need to be monitored closely



This month, BESA Director Patrick Hayes discusses the transformation of England's schools through the rise of Multi Academy Trusts and advocates a rigorous process of monitoring to ensure they function correctly.

Like it or not, our school system is entering into the Age of the MAT.

There are now 973 functioning MATs across England and the number is growing rapidly. Estimates for the number of MATs that will be needed over the next few years range from 1,000 to an enormous 10,000.

Such a seismic transformation of the structure of England's school system needs to be monitored carefully. This is one of the reasons the Education Select Committee is currently undertaking a wide-ranging inquiry into the role of MATs.

In June, the two "Knights" of education were summoned to give evidence to the inquiry. Sir David Carter, the National Schools Commissioner and Sir Michael Wilshaw, outgoing Chief Inspector of Ofsted, were given a two-hour grilling by a group of MPs.

There are a number of reasons why we need to keep a close eye on the rise of MATs, as became clear during this session.

First, and foremost, teachers are evidently concerned about the rise of MATs. A recent survey of 800 teachers by research house Schoolzone found 71 per cent disagreed with the idea that most schools will have to form or join MATs. A greater 79 per cent of teachers are opposed to the further development of MATs.

Secondly, schools risk losing considerable autonomy. Schoolzone's research found that "teachers value being able to exercise their personal judgement [in the classroom]". And rightly so, as given they have more practical experience than anyone else about what works and what doesn't work in terms of helping children learn.

Much noise has also been made about the large salaries of the CEOs of some MATs. The salary of the highest paid leader is now reportedly £370,000. While it's important that MATs get the best people to run them, it is equally important that these leaders are accountable for their progress. MATs must be every bit as transparent and open to scrutiny as the LEAs were before them.

In 2014, Royston Schools Academy Trust was bailed out by the government as it reportedly faced an £800,000 deficit. This was a smaller-than-average sized MAT, but it raises awkward questions. If we expect MATs to run like businesses, then we must expect some to fail. If so, how do we deal with the consequences?

Finally, some MATs are looking to increasingly make cost savings through centralising services and rationalising the procurement of resources. It is vital that the resources and services necessary to drive up standards of education in the classroom are not cut back on as a result.

Sir David claimed at the inquiry, "This is an embryonic and emerging form of structural leadership in the system and it's going to develop very quickly". It is of great importance to teachers, parents and the next generation alike that this rapidly emerging form of leadership is monitored closely.

- For information from BESA contact:
- Patrick Hayes
- 020 7537 4997
- patrick@besa.org.uk
- www.besa.org.uk

