

Bethany Visit February 1-17, 2024

Joanna Lavelle

This was my first visit to Bethany, and I hope it will be the beginning of deep relationship with the Family, the school, the staff and of course the children. John and I loved our time at both the Home and the School. It is impressive to see what has been accomplished in a comparatively short time. The staff are incredibly committed, and the children clearly adore them. Having been there I feel now that I could contribute more on future visit(s).

Volunteer life

Neither John nor I had an idea of what to expect. Although the volunteer pack does have useful guidelines, but it does not compare to the actual experience of being there. From a volunteer's perspective it is a long and tiring journey so not for the faint-hearted. Driving into Bethany we were moved by the warm welcome of the children and their eagerness to help us with our bags.

The accommodation was perfectly fine for our stay. A few wall hooks would help keep a bit more sense of order. To cope with temperature variations, we brought too many clothes, and I would be able to cut this down in the future and would stress this to potential volunteers. We washed clothes most days and had brought a washing line for the shower.

We arrived at a weekend which gave us time to acclimatise but if suitable flights are available, I would have preferred to get "stuck in" sooner, so that we could maximise our time.

On our first church service John was asked to say a prayer and I was asked to preach the following Sunday. It was not a problem for us, but some volunteers might feel uncomfortable with public speaking. Their strengths may lie in other directions.

classes

Having met Emma John went with Mr Alfred (maths and deputy head) and I went to the standard 1 with Miss Pita. I was uncertain about my role other than to observe. The classes may be a culture shock for English visitors. They are quite large by English standards. The children sit in rows and in the absence of hand-outs and work sheets they spend a disproportionate amount of time copying out the question into their exercise books. Unfortunately, this gives an opportunity for some children to opt out of the lesson. I was in classes where some children were still copying out the instructions towards the end of the class. I appreciate that some of those children may have learning difficulties but perhaps this would present an opportunity for a volunteer to work alongside particular individuals. Where the volunteer writes out the question for the child to copy later. This would enable the child to still be able to participate in the lesson. I appreciate that with the unreliability of the electricity supply printing may be difficult, but laser printing is not expensive and would release the teacher from writing the details on the blackboard giving more teacher/pupil contact time.

English

I did some reading with small groups in the chapel which I felt was very useful. It is something I believe most volunteers could do and would be beneficial to the children. Some of the issues were to do with pronunciation. For example, a frequent error with reception and younger was to add an "i" sound. "Redi, saidi." Now being aware of this I would make materials and bring them with me for a future visit to enable me concentrate on this aspect. There was a set of books "Who am I?" They were useful because they had more language but unfortunately there were spelling errors in the text "awe" for "ewe" and inappropriate vocabulary for young readers for example "equestrian, nutritious".

Some of the words are not in common usage e.g. a group of cats – a clutter. The hairs on a horse's tail – a skirt. I have checked and although these words do exist, they are not common and therefore not helpful to the children. I would suggest that a volunteer goes through the books correcting spelling errors and altering inappropriate vocabulary. I will research before my next visit what materials are available and could be adapted. If David brings a set of books back from his next visit I would be happy to go through them and annotate them.

Public speaking skills

There are many opportunities for public speaking both in Bethany village and the school, and it was encouraging to see how many children took part in prayers and debates. With some additional support I believe they could develop their skills further. As I trained in drama and have run courses on public speaking, I believe I could help in this area. It would need to be timetabled so I could work with groups to learn how to stand, breathe, enunciate, engage with audiences so that they are audible and clear. It is not just a question of speaking up. I would be happy to prepare this for different age groups.

I have written an email to Emma, copy attached where I covered some of these points. I appreciate that I have only been at Bethany for two weeks and the comments are observations based on that experience. Which may or may not be useful.

Thank you again for enabling us to be there and we look forward to going again and being better able to give help and support.

Regards

Joanna

