

Some Reflections on My Bethany Visit

3 Feb – 17 Feb 2024

My previous experience has been as a Secondary School Maths Teacher for 37 years (until 2010) and as Chair of Governors of my village Primary School for over 20 years, until 5 years ago.

Any comments here are meant to be helpful. They are my opinions and may be wrong. You may have heard similar before.

Both the home and school at Bethany, have a wonderful atmosphere built on sound Christian/Human values. Resources appear to be good in a Tanzanian context but limited compared to Britain. Staff and children are enthusiastic and care about each other – and this counts for a lot. My comments are meant to be points for consideration after a visit of only 2 weeks, teaching 3 periods of Maths per day (Standard 3, 6, 7), 2 RE lessons and sitting in one or two other lessons.

Lessons appeared to be traditionally structured within the constraints of a nationally determined curriculum/syllabus. I saw “chalk and talk” with notes copied from the backboard, some verbal questioning of children, and questions written and answered in exercise books.

Given that the children are growing up and preparing for life in a rapidly changing world - international trade, technological change, climate change, ... - what could help?

English is a universal language and there are many varieties, with different accents, and some different vocabulary and grammar. The English used at Bethany is distinctly Tanzanian. The children learn it from the adults and the range of confidence, accuracy and accent amongst the adults is broad. In conversation with some of them, I spoke about the way that regional accents in Britain, as I grew up, could be strong, and that some people were prejudiced against some accents. There have been changes, but I felt it was advantageous to soften mine. I think that the primary help for all visitors to Bethany, is to listen and speak with adults and children respectfully. It is beneficial to try to speak clearly – slowly with spaces between words – and to give people the confidence to say if they don't understand.

Some comments about maths lessons, and in no particular order.

In my latter years as a teacher, there was a recognition that we learn in different ways, and that effective teaching should reflect that. VARK is a mnemonic:

Visual – images, diagrams, graphs, ...

Auditory – listening, speaking, discussing, ...

Readng (and writing) – note taking, lists, ...

Kinesthetic – handling things, touching, ...

I am not an expert in teaching Maths to Tanzanian children, but teaching is a job where we don't get many opportunities to see others at work. I hope that I was able to show Mr Alfred some different ways of teaching which might be of use to him in the future, and, in particular, looking at topics from different directions in order to help understanding. I must also admit that sometimes my understanding of the children's prior knowledge was wrong, leading to an unsatisfactory lesson.

Mental maths versus standard written methods versus calculators. All three are important.

Standard written methods can sometimes slow down learning other topics. I didn't ask about calculators. Does the school have 40 to use with a class where appropriate? Approximations and mental arithmetic are important for developing a sense of the right size of answer.

Number properties – multiples and factors of numbers, and equivalence of common fractions, percentages, decimals are important for mental maths.

Rulers are important for measuring and drawing straight lines. They can also be used with younger children to visualise addition, subtraction, ordering numbers ($>$, $<$, $=$)

I used, and left with Mr Alfred, a class set interlocking cubes which can help, in conjunction with isometric dotted paper - (dots in a 1 cm triangular pattern):

to visualise and draw, 3 dimensional shapes introducing volume and surface area,

to create investigations leading to organising data, pattern recognition, description, explanation and introduce graphs and algebra.

They can also be used in early work with fractions and ratios.

I left Bethany changed. In my final years of teaching, I was jaded, and I had lost my enthusiasm. The positivity of Bethany reinvigorated me, enthused me. I enjoyed being in the classroom again, working with the children and staff – though thankfully I wasn't expected to submit detailed lesson plans or carry out assessments.

I would love to return, God willing.

John Glenn

