

## Exploring different cultures, finding common ground

### How playing Top Trumps, talking about football and listening to music by Holst changed perceptions of Uganda for Liss Junior School

As pupils in the UK and Uganda began sharing their thoughts and interests, they were amazed to discover how similar children are all over the world. It didn't really matter that they were over 5000 miles apart, they had more in common than they had ever expected.

Before developing an international partnership, pupils at Liss Junior School had very little exposure to different cultures. Set in rural Hampshire, England, on the edge of Queen Elizabeth Country Park, the school has very few ethnic minority pupils and most are fortunate to enjoy a good standard of living.

By linking with their partner school, Kafuro Primary in Uganda, the pupils have been given the opportunity to gain a wider world view. They decided to focus on the theme of identity and belonging and set up a blogging site so they could share information about their lives and their countries.

Teacher Adam Stanley talked about this approach to communicating with their partner: 'The blog has been an incredibly motivating tool for children and teachers because of the speed of response. Our blog posts will get a reply within a week, letters can take so much longer. And as teachers, it has allowed us to emphasise the message that through good communication you will find common ground.'

To understand more about each other, each school debated ideas around what pupils considered to be their basic rights, wants and needs using the UNICEF guidance. They began asking questions about what is essential in life such as: 'Have you got a TV or fridge?' and 'Do you have somewhere to sleep?' After the children had talked about it they realised that having material possessions didn't bring happiness. And although they had very different lifestyles, both schools agreed on the same basic needs wherever you are in the world.

## **Working together**

Using their blogging site, they continued to identify similarities through exchanging information and class activities. An extremely powerful example was when children in Liss and Kafuro listened to the same piece of music by Holst and created drawings to illustrate how the music made them feel.

Adam explained: 'When they actually saw the drawings produced by the children in Uganda their draws dropped. The moment of awe and wonder, when they realised just how incredibly similar the drawings were, was really something to see.'

For the Ugandan children, it was a new kind of learning experience and they really enjoyed a different and more interactive form of teaching where they are encouraged to express their thoughts and opinions.

This sparked a desire to find more things they had in common. They discovered that they all enjoyed talking about football and the same international players. They played the same games in the playground and PE – they just called them different names.

During his visit to Uganda, Adam took a pack of Top Trumps to share and play with the pupils. And although they hadn't played before, by the end of his trip he was struggling to win a game.

## **Learning from difference**

Not only have both schools learned from their similarities, they have gained a greater appreciation for things they may have previously taken for granted. Pupils in Uganda pay for all of their school materials so they treasure their books and pencils and ensure no paper is wasted. Now pupils at Liss will ensure every page is used materials are not wasted.

Pupils in both schools took part in a project to raise money for solar panels for the roof of the school in Uganda that would power teachers' laptops and mobile phone chargers. This activity has given them an understanding of the cost of electricity, the difference in use in each country and made them think about what is needed to power buildings and make things work.

## **Partnership development**

As the partnership has developed, more schools have become involved. There are now three schools in Uganda (Bukorwe, Kafuro and Katunguru Primary School) and three UK schools (Liss, Clanfield and Hart Plain Junior) who have formed a cluster to work together through Connecting Classrooms.

On their first visit, the UK teachers were warmly greeted by their Ugandan hosts. By the second visit, Adam says: 'The welcome was almost overwhelming as so many parents and pupils from all schools turned out. Word has spread and they are delighted with the work we have been doing through Connecting Classrooms and fully support the partnership. It has had a direct impact on boosting attendance in all three schools.'

During 2014, they will be working together on a new and exciting project to track mongooses so children can experience some of the dangers that mongooses face and understand how they use cooperation to survive in the savannah. Working with experts from Exeter University, pupils in Uganda will study and track a mongoose over 20 minutes then record and share their activities. There will be workshops, shared blogging and a special mongoose game developed to encourage pupils to work together and problem solve.

## **Professional development for teachers**

Adam has been blown away by his experiences since working in partnership with a cluster of schools in Uganda: 'It's changed my life! I've caught the bug since going to Uganda and just have to go back. After my first visit, I've self-funded further trips to accompany other teachers who have travelled there. I've tried to ensure the opportunity for professional development is shared.

'It wasn't all about my visit. I wanted to see that the learning was embedded across the school through practical activities that showed the real Uganda. Everybody needed to feel ownership and I made sure at least three or four other staff were directly involved.

'I love to travel but admit Uganda would never have been on my list of places to visit. But this experience has been incredible. All the staff involved have a new world view



and understanding of a different culture. They are very, very resourceful in Uganda. Nothing is wasted. We have learned a lot from them.'