



December 2011

You helped to “Put Libraries on their Feet” in Burundi and Rwanda! Report by Rebecca & Paul Mosley, MCC

“Listen, Look, Touch.” Beatrice, the education coordinator repeated the words she learned in the 2010 teaching seminar, when pre-school teachers were introduced to modern pedagogical methods for young children.

The preschool teachers at the Hope School for the Batwa were excited about putting the new methodology into practice and began last year with extensive changes to the look of a traditional Burundian classroom. Rows of desks were pushed to the edges of the classroom to form a large open circle where students could interact actively with instructors. Students were invited to write on the floor rather than the chalkboard to ‘reorient’ learning more toward the perspective of wee ones. The children accepted the new methodology with enthusiasm: evidenced by smiling faces and attentive participation.



But there remained a challenge with the new “listen, look, touch” methodology. In a classroom in one of the poorest and most marginalized communities in the world, a westerner would be shocked at the utter lack of material—either visual or tactile—with which students can interact. Their rooms were empty of posters, pictures, blocks, Legos, toys, paper, scissors, paste, or any supplies. The school does not even have access to electricity. Most strikingly though, there was not a single book anywhere—here or in most other preschools in the country. Certainly no child owns a book at home. There was simply very little to interact with in the classroom beyond tables and chairs, chalk and the floor. Last year the teaching team was very creative in finding old magazines and even a few old Mennonite Central Committee calendars with which to create visual materials.

This academic year, the school is beginning to witness a total transformation, thanks to a small miracle in the form of a container of children’s books. Churches, school groups, playgroups, doctors, bookstores, networks of friends and many other generous individuals looked through their book shelves to make a real difference by sharing these precious literary resources with the Hope School and two other MCC partner libraries in Rwanda.



It is an emotional sight to see the 4 and 5 year olds opening colorful books, filled with pictures of tropical fish, wild animals, construction vehicles, planets, aircraft and ships, and stare in awe, turning the pages with slow, intent concentration. Others play with alphabet blocks or small toys, donated by Matthias church in Sydney, Australia.

These visual and tactile experiences have truly unified theory and practice. Teachers are able to use the books and other materials to give children the necessary sensory experiences to enhance aural learning (rote listening and repetition are the most common teaching methods in Burundi). “Listen, look, touch” is now a reality in the classroom, transforming learning so much this year that parents and neighbors in the commune and even neighboring school districts are taking note. The shipment of books to the Hope School included resources for older children, including research resources in science, math, atlases and encyclopedias, along with French literature.



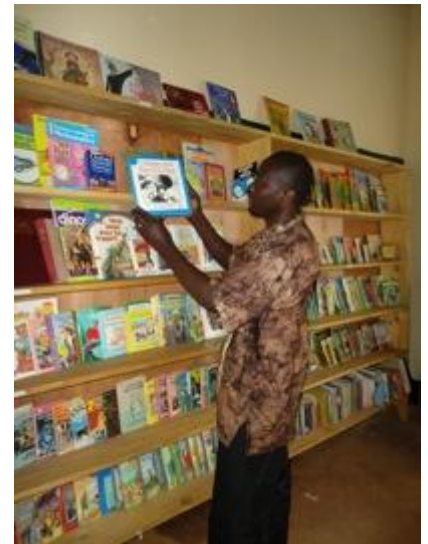
“One of the most exciting outcomes has been a much deeper involvement of parents in their children’s education,” explains Innocent Gihimbare, the principle of the secondary school. “We now have a very active parents group that meets regularly and has a new, genuine interest in the school.”

Another portion of the container of books finally cleared customs to be accepted in neighboring Rwanda. Children’s books will now greatly enlarge the collection of the Rwanda Children’s Peace Library <http://cpenrwanda.wordpress.com/library/>. Primary and secondary students are received by the librarian, who teaches them how to read and care for books—a necessary step in a context where books have been so scarce. The Evangelical Friends’ Church Schools will use other children’s resources. English books are priceless in Rwanda, where the official language of instruction changed from French to English just two years ago. Donated resources on peace, reconciliation and development now round out the specialized collection in the second adult Friends Peace Library, helping local peace activists to build a lasting peace and bring healing

in traumatized Rwanda.

While all of these MCC partners are delighted with the books they have received, some follow-up is still needed. Challenges remain for the Hope School nursery school, as the simple brick-and-mud constructed rooms have no secure windows or doors. There is realistic fear that these treasures, which may look to Westerners like Salvation Army giveaways, have high market value and may make the school a target for thieves.

Nonetheless, with a newly reanimated parents committee, there is hope that parents will take responsibility to hire and pay 2 night guards to protect the classrooms at night. “We don’t want to lose these gifts,” said kindergarten teacher M. Silas. “Children used to come to school crying dragged by their parents, now they come running ahead of them and arrive laughing.”



Other support may cost more than the MCC partners can afford, in these two impoverished countries.

- At present, many of the books remain in boxes at the Hope School because there are no shelves to house them. Local construction of the needed shelves for the Hope School is estimated at \$2100.
- Bookshelves were donated to the Children’s Peace Library in Rwanda (see photo), but these may not be sufficient to house the huge number of your donated books. More shelves will be needed to make those English books accessible to Rwandese school children.
- The time, expertise and materials to organize the various collections and make them accessible to their users include costs. These might include small stipends for librarians, or materials which volunteers can use to set up a simple check out system, as well as training teachers to incorporate books into their curriculum.

MCC is setting up a special year-long account for donations to “Burundi Libraries.” Small miracles have already taken place, and we expect even more to unfold over the next year, thanks to you, as these books are used again and again to open the world to children and families in Rwanda and Burundi. If you’d like to contribute, send Jean Sack an email for more details: jeansack2004@yahoo.com (she might be sending out a snail mail copy before her January 2, 2012 departure for a month in Burundi, working to make libraries from those books you gave in 2011).

