

# Learning to Read in Sierra Leone

Jo Kuyvenhoven, June-July 2008



A village school – typical of the structure and furniture of most schools found in the smaller towns and villages in Sierra Leone. Such a structure often serves as many as a 100-150 children and is conducted by a single teacher.

## Introduction

I'm not a stranger in Sierra Leone. From 1981-1985 I lived and worked in a literacy development project in a small village. I learned about the language and grew friendships that remain steady to this day. However, that was long ago. Since then a war devastated the country from 1991-2001. Today, people live in its wake of trauma born of extreme violence, corrupt economic and political interests and acute poverty. Studies and statistics bear me out when I observe that the general population is poorer and struggling even more mightily for survival today than they did in 1985. Today, Sierra Leone ranks at 177<sup>th</sup> on the roster of 177 nations of the world on the [United Nations Human Development Index](#). The United States is ranked 12<sup>th</sup> for its quality of living. This is calculated on such factors as access to clean water and health care; citizen's average wage and life span; as well as educational opportunity and national literacy statistics.

Since 2001 I have gone to study and work in Sierra Leone for about two months every year. For the last four years I have regularly offered teacher training workshops for very modestly prepared elementary school teachers. I've helped develop and establish a primary school where new strategies can be tried out. I've also facilitated a national conference for Sierra Leonean expert-professionals in the field of teaching language and reading. I'd like to take a few moments to reflect on some of the work that happened this year, 2008.

Before going on, I first acknowledge the support of the Kuyver's Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning. My gratitude is great –but it's very small beside the abundantly expressed appreciation of the workshop and conference participants. The Kuyver's Institute facilitated three teacher training workshops and a national conference. I'll write about these.

## Teacher Training Workshops

It is hard to imagine the scope and impact of the challenges to teaching children to read and write in the conditions the great majority of teachers and children face in Sierra Leone. In the northern area, fully 89% of teachers are “untrained and unqualified” to teach. They have the equivalence of 7-9 years of education. They have very few or no visual aids, teaching resources and supporting text books. Children don’t have books or papers. Some have pencils or pens. The classrooms are crowded – statistics for the district say 63 students to one teacher. Most villages have school structures that look like the one in the photo. The furniture and space are not conducive to reading and writing. These conditions are especially extreme at the lower end of elementary school. The least qualified teachers teach the largest classes with no material support. The [Sierra Leone Encyclopedia](#) includes additional details.

My challenge is to find teaching methods that grip the attention of many so many bright minds jammed together; to help teachers do a lot with a wee bit of material; to develop teacher’s understandings of the process of learning to read. So, I work between what I know about the teaching of reading and what I have learned about schools, teachers and children in Sierra Leone.

This year I led three workshops – each had about 50 teachers. We gather on Sunday evening to register. I get the statistics and give out our teacher training packets. These contain the things we will use during the workshop. In the packet are two booklets I’ve written: an interactive workbook to teach about reading and a trilingual storybook, *The Crocodile’s Reward*. This booklet was illustrated by Margaret Hofland. It was received with interest and used enthusiastically. (In September all 150 teachers will receive a set of 50 books for use in their classrooms). The teachers also all received a pen, pencil, eraser, scissors and pencil sharpener, a notebook and a very good marker. These materials are helpful when we make cards, charts and small booklets for classroom teaching. These packets are highly valued. Students carry them every where they go and guard their materials. If a pencil is lost, I will definitely hear about it. The material poverty that limits education is heartbreaking. It is too great.

We begin promptly on Monday morning, at 8:30. We work intensely through the day until about 5 PM – breaking for something to eat around 10 AM and for a huge dish of rice and stew around 2PM. Students come early and leave late. Teachers share teaching problems and encourage each other. We talk about what children need in order to learn reading skills. We learn and practice strategies with flash cards. We play games, sing and chant together. We tell stories and riddles. Finally, every class concludes with the making of a teaching aid. They make alphabet strips, phonogram cards, charts, teaching-of-writing booklets etc. It is a very, very busy week. It is also immensely satisfying and thrilling work.

Some of my readers surely have questions about the language. Sierra Leone has 17 different spoken language groups. Five of these have approved orthographies, that is, they are sanctioned for use by the Ministry of Education. Although the Education Act says that children should learn in their own language for the first three years, there are no materials available for primary schools in these languages. To complicate matters further, most classes have 2-3 local language groups represented and a teacher who might not be a member of any of them. Now add to this that the supplied texts and materials are all in English. The linguistic tie that binds is Krio, the lingua franca. Certainly all the teachers speak it well, and about 98% of adults have some facility with it. The linguistic snapshot I’ve just offered should suggest the complexity and problems that are

at the very foundation of teaching reading. Because I speak Krio with modest facility and the local language where I work, I work hard to encourage and demonstrate the ways in which teachers should tap every possible means to teach the ability to read print.

Teaching these workshops is a gift to me. It is a rare privilege. I pay for it with bucket bathing, uncertain water quality and interesting beds. I share space with creatures I don't easily co-habit with. But what an adventure for a middle-aged academic! And what tremendous welcomes are lavished over me. I was given the highest possible gift in Yiraia – a large male goat. I was welcomed by a wooden xylophone player. The chief and mammy Queen joined our workshop on a bench outside the window one day. I meet interesting, courageous and creative colleagues. But the greatest gift is the gladness of students, their intent participation and insistence of the value of this workshop to their practice. I hope my readers read this as a sign of how professional development opportunities are highly valued and urgently desired.



Teacher training workshop in Yiraia – Koinandugu District.



Holidaying and hooting children in my home town of Badala.  
New building built and donated by Catholic Relief Services.

## **National Conference for Studies in the Teaching of Reading and Languages of Sierra Leone**

At the end of my stay I hosted and facilitated a conference I've run annually for four years now. It was attended by a good range of the diverse stakeholders in literacy programme design. Four of the six colleges attended. The other two sent their regrets. Other participants include organizations who do literacy programming. For instance, UNICEF and the US embassy were represented. So was the Sierra Leone Language Institute (TISSL), Partners in Adult Education (PADECO), CAUSE Canada and others. This year we had the Central Library Board attend – they were an important new partner and dimension to our learning about teaching and programming. All participants were most enthusiastic about the trilingual reader, *The Crocodile's Reward* and its great potential. Five copies are going into each of the libraries in the country. Perhaps, most significantly, we had the participation of two departments from the Ministry of Education: the Deputy Director for Curriculum Research and Design as well as the Department for Tertiary Education (teacher education).

The main topic for this conference was the relationship between traditionally oral education and the current emphasis on formal, institutionalized schooling for education. Four papers were presented to help us think about how and what “traditionally oral” educational modes offered communities. We studied the juxtaposition as it creates a gap and for places of overlap. We then went on to embark on the development of an association of professionals in Sierra Leone for the teaching of languages and reading. A committee is pledged to meet on August 29 and will be supported in the effort by a student internship (Caleb Den Ouden) I've garnered from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Canada.

At the conference I also presented the tentative research findings I have from the new [Christian School in Kabala](#) . This is the school at which I've worked with the Sierra Leonean teachers to learn a few new strategies in language arts teaching. I tested their children last June and compared their progress with two other schools. The results are astonishing. The children at the new school outscored the other two local schools by margins that were not just 2-4 times higher, but in some instances they scored 8-9 times higher.

For example, the grade one children in the Christian school scored an average ability of 95% success in recognizing the letters of the alphabet. The two other schools scored 47% and 36% respectively. The children scored 80% ability to make the sound the letters they were shown. The other two schools scored 08% and 00% respectively. Even if the sample was small and problems with variables exist, these are compelling statistics and insist on significant variation.

My colleagues at the conference were galvanized by these and other statistics; convinced that much more attention needs to be given to the teaching of reading at higher levels. Sierra Leone needs –desperately—the means to do this kind of research and develop apt, effective teaching strategies. Significantly, the changes implemented at the Kabala Christian School are not large or onerous. They are key, foundational-to-literacy teaching emphases.

It has been my hope to significantly contribute to literacy teaching in Sierra Leone. The results of the test show that we may be on the way to developing methods and understandings that truly affect teaching of reading in the real circumstances teachers and children are working. It seems that we are close to some answers. And the long

relationships I now have with people at the so-called-higher levels promise that real changes might happen.

Being engaged in this project makes me feel so close to the heart of Christ in the world. There are times when I feel simply awed by the unspeakably great privilege of working across languages, cultures and experiences. I am enriched by so much wonder and love-enacted in the world. Sometimes, when I watch my teacher-colleagues working, when I am buried under the arms of children or when I eat steamy rice in a crowd around a basin ... I feel myself choke with tears. How uncontained and vast is God! How diverse and infinite are the faces of his revealed self. Work like mine is a gift –shared a little with you, now.

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Karifa Merah with me and our book: *The Crocodile's Reward*  
The book is about a boy who goes fishing and meets a crocodile.  
Karifa is very good at fishing. The story is set in his own village and his  
Picture is on the back of the book.