

## KENYA 2017

I began my gap year adventure in Kenya on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2017 when I landed in Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Nairobi. There I was met by Andrew who would be my driver for the coming month. Although Andrew was a very lovely man, his obsession with Bob Marley has meant I don't think I will ever be able to listen to 'no woman no cry' ever again!

My first day in Cheleta Primary was a shock – I did not expect to see so many children in one classroom. Each class had about 50 children. Not only did this make the room much less comfortable as the children were forced to share seats or take it in turns to use the desk. But also it meant that the heat in all the classrooms was stifling, as there were only a few small windows. The sheer volume of people in the room also made it much more difficult to keep the attention of all the children at once – I ended up finding it easier sometimes to break the class up into groups and give them tasks to work on at the same time. However the biggest shock I faced when I walked in on the first day was that the headmistress came to greet me and as she shook my hand she handed me a strip of bicycle tyre. When I asked what it was for she said all of the teachers carried one to keep the children in line. I hadn't expected this at all so was quite stunned as I tried to explain politely that I wouldn't be needing one.

The other thing I found embarrassing was that, with so many children in one class, it was really difficult to remember each of their names. This is made harder by the fact that in Kenya each person has their Kenyan, often tribal, name, for example 'Njeroge', however they all also have their English first names like 'Peter'. This meant that effectively each child had two names I had to learn. This was totally exploited by the very funny and cunning children that could see my weakness, so I was often in a position of being put on the spot, unable to remember the name of a child I had just spoken to! What I learnt while I was there was that, in fact, there are not that many names in circulation and more often than not George, Dennis or Peter were good guesses!

I was mainly put to use in the maths classes, as I wasn't much use teaching Kiswahili or Kenyan history classes, but this suited me well as I found maths much easier to teach than science and English. Also what I found was that, unlike in the UK, most of the children's favourite subject was maths. It was really fun for me to teach kids at each level of the primary school – from basic adding sums to algebra and geometry. However I found that the struggle with the Cheleta learning environment was that there was a big range of ability in each class, as they were so large, so I had to try and find a balance of making the class easy enough for the less strong children to engage and not just lose focus, while at the same time keeping it challenging enough for the stronger students to actually be learning something rather than getting bored.

Another thing that I came to understand while I was working there was that many of the kids are exhausted when they come into school and so find it very difficult to

concentrate in class. This is because they are given a lot of chores at home that often mean they either have to go to bed very late or wake up painfully early in the morning to avoid being in trouble. The fact that this is combined just one meal a day, which they receive at school, made up of Ugali (maize flour and water) and sukuma wiki (a bit like spinach) means that they often just don't have the energy levels required to learn. I realised that I had never really felt hungry in my life, especially not at school where there seemed to be food at every interval.



Figure 1: My first taste of ugali and sukuma wiki

The teachers at Cheleta Primary were also not like anything I had ever seen before. As well as carrying around bicycle strips or thin bamboo sticks at all times they did not seem to have any concern for the mental welfare of the children, often calling them stupid and encouraging other pupils to pick on an individual. However I am sure this is exactly the norm for a small local school like Cheleta, where most of the teachers went to school themselves. Even if the teachers did decide to go into a classroom to teach, which they often didn't, the classes mainly consisted of the children taking it in turns to copy out something written on the board into a shared book. The reason for this is that the teachers are on a very low salary and as a result often go 'on strike' until they can be persuaded to go back. This happened for the last two weeks I was in Nairobi. As a result I used the small marquee, used for Sunday school in the slum normally, and ran some classes from there. I enjoyed this a lot more because the class size was much more manageable and I was able to do the subjects and topics that the kids wanted help on – so they were much more engaged. I decided that in the mornings I would do academic classes and then in the afternoon, before EDCLUB, I would do more creative classes or workshops.



Figure 2: Team Leopard performing their winning story

This seemed to work really well, I got to know individual children much better and built a much stronger trust and bond with them. Again unlike the UK, the children in Huruma slum love school and are desperate to learn so I found more and more children sneaking into the classes I ran in the slum. On my last day teaching we had a big competition between the different groups to

perform the stories they had been working on with the

theme 'Robot.' I was really impressed with all of these because it was clear the kids

had been rehearsing at home and some of the stories were so creative and absolutely hilarious!

At 4:30 each afternoon, after school, all of the kids go to the EDCLUB computer lab in Huruma slum to skype with their teenage mentors in the UK. As we have just installed a new extension to the lab, our capacity has now doubled. For me to see this up and running first hand was really exciting. I was able to see every day for myself what was working well, what needed fixing, how the kids are progressing etc.



**Figure 3: With Chege, community leader, in front of the new lab extension**

Because we give mentors in the UK quite a lot of independence when it comes to when and where they skype, it is quite difficult to police from the UK. What I was able to do while I was there was keep a check of who was actually skyping and who wasn't. As this project has too much demand for the amount of places, we have to be sure that all mentors are fulfilling the agreement – now I can go through and speak to these mentors to see whether they find they are too busy and need to give up their place or want to continue and just need more encouragement.

The other obstacle we face running EDCLUB is that the cost of internet is very high. We have managed to find a solution that gives us strong enough connection for 20 or so computers to be skyping simultaneously however this is draining us of our funds too quickly for the project to be sustainable. Being in Kenya meant I was able to speak to Gideon, who works for our internet provider, about our situation and discuss the alternatives. This continues to be an issue so we still need to decide what our best option is, though that can be done with the committee, based in the UK.

Running a computer lab in a slum in Kenya, without lots of thick security, also means that EDCLUB relies on the community's support for the project. As soon as we lose this, things start to go missing and we run into problems. As a result we have to be really careful and not take this mutual trust for granted. While I was working in the

slum I was able to speak to a few of the parents of the kids involved – this was really useful as getting feedback from the parents about how they think the project is going lets us know how to keep the project sustainable. I was able to listen to their different concerns and reassure them that we have good intentions and their children are safe. While they all had huge praise for how their children have excelled as a result of EDCLUB, they were able to tell me the things that they didn't want the mentors to teach their children. Also, being able to speak to the community members in person meant that I was able to set clear rules for how and when the lab is used. I had to explain to the local bible group that although they were members of the Huruma Slum community they were not allowed to use the lab to skype their patrons in the US because the lab is solely used for EDCLUB and the children of Huruma, and any internet used by outside parties takes away from the kids in EDCLUB. This was a long discussion but in the end all was resolved and everyone is happy.

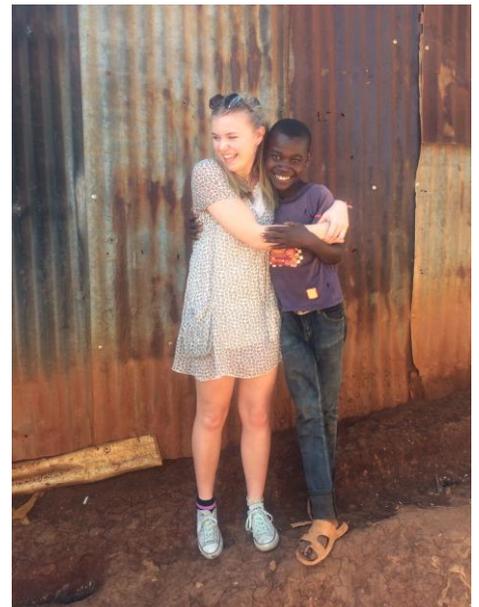


**Figure 4: Cracks in the walls of the old lab**

Also being in the lab every day, as opposed to seeing the inside of it in the background of a skype call, meant I could see the structural damages of the lab – especially the old lab which is now almost 2 years old. As good of a job as Joseph, the caretaker, does, he doesn't like to tell you what you don't want to hear until it is too late to fix it!

However the best part of my trip was that while I was there my timing coincided with the results of the big exam all final year primary school students take in order to qualify for secondary school. Before we started EDCLUB, very few children from Huruma passed this exam. It was absolutely thrilling for me to be able to celebrate with the EDCLUB kids (who took the exam), all of whom have passed. Some of them have even been given scholarships and have made it to some of the best secondary schools in the area!

I am so grateful for the funding to be able to do this trip as I have not only learnt so much but also really feel as though EDCLUB now has a much better chance of sustainability. However this will only be the case if I can implement my plans for what I now know needs to be done!



**Figure 5: First mentor celebrating the first mentee's excellent exam results**