

# From King's Palace to Kigali Convention Center

## The Influence of Architecture on Children's Block and Stone Constructions in Rwanda

by Janet F. Brown and Leonce Mwizerwa

With updated education methods, Rwandan children have abundant opportunities to represent their country's traditions—and begin to build a more promising future!

Just 24 years ago Rwanda was embroiled in a genocide. Today a few young children—some from the most vulnerable families in the country—are joyously thriving in high-quality preschools and early primary classes. These children are creatively using unit blocks, made in Rwanda, to cooperatively build block structures of cow houses and outdoor kitchens, as well as modern airports, the Kigali Convention Center, hotels, hospitals, Kigali City Tower, and much more.

How could Rwandans shift so quickly from civil war to peacefully working



Janet F. Brown, B.S., M.Ed., is an Iowa farm girl who played teacher with cats. She eventually moved east and became a child care teacher/director. Jan was director of publications at NAEYC, editor of *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, and managing editor at

Crayola, while raising two children. After retiring in 2009, Jan volunteered and within months accepted an invitation to start a preschool in Rwanda.



Leonce Mwizerwa, B.S., is an experienced Rwandan teacher who recently completed his undergraduate degree in history education. He began as a dynamic nursery school teacher with TEACH Rwanda five years ago. He successfully coached a young teacher, and became the organization's first national Teacher Mentor in 2016.

and became the organization's first national Teacher Mentor in 2016.

together to rebuild the country? The government's policies, including those for health, nutrition, business, and education, are progressive. Rwanda has adopted a new, competency-based curriculum for preschool through secondary. Countless international aid organizations are promoting peacemaking, entrepreneurship, community development, and education in-country.

One of those international non-governmental organizations, TEACH Rwanda, is changing the face of early childhood education and teacher education in Rwanda.

### Humble Beginnings

After a long teacher education career in the United States, Janet Brown retired. Within months, she was asked, as a volunteer, to start a preschool at a home for orphaned and abandoned children in Rwanda. Teachers were hired and began their professional learning journey. Children in the school flourished.



Photo by Janet F. Brown

Eighteen months later, in the middle of the night, Louise Batamuriza, one of those teachers, called. "Mama Jan, help! All of us teachers quit our jobs and I started my own preschool." TEACH Rwanda was born in 2012 in a small rented house. The living room was the only classroom. There was a plastic mat on the floor, a Rwandan basket, a few notebooks, and one box of 24 crayons. Two eager teachers, 20 lively children... and nothing else!

Today, TEACH Rwanda is a catalyst for change in the country. Now a 501(c)3 in the U.S. and a Rwandan international non-governmental organization, this small organization has developed a

system of project and exemplary schools that meet Rwanda-relevant accreditation; teacher education modules for in-service and pre-service teachers to introduce research-based, time-tested, culturally attuned methods and materials; operation of Bright School in the Southern Province, a flagship demonstration school with three preschool classrooms, plus one P1 (first grade), two P2 (second grade), and one P3 (third grade) classes; and partnerships with a public school, a private school in the Eastern Province, and Premier ECDE Teachers College, and Ecole La Colombière in Kigali.

## Contrasts and a Catalyst for Change

Most schools in Rwanda still use colonialist methods. The results are heart-breaking and mind numbing.

- Preschool classes often have 60 to 100 children. Preschool teachers are rarely paid.
- Rwandan primary classes enroll 45 to 50 students. A high school-educated teacher lectures to one class in the morning, another in the afternoon.

Primary teachers are paid about \$75 a month.

- Classrooms are bare. Most Rwandan teachers have never seen a children's book, puzzles, blocks, or a magnifying glass.
- Stern teachers wear lab coats and wield sticks to maintain discipline.
- Children at all levels are humiliated, fall asleep, and soon forget whatever they memorized.

No wonder high drop-out rates, starting in P1, plague Rwanda. The country's average educational level is P3. Rwanda's leaders recognize that change is essential if the country is to progress. TEACH Rwanda is working with the government to make it happen.

TEACH Rwanda's project and exemplary schools focus on high-quality, engaging learning experiences. Each preschool class enrolls just 20 economic- and ability-diverse children. Up to 22 children are in primary. Well prepared Rwandan teachers choose themes to scaffold and integrate children's learning. Preschool classes have two teachers; primary classes have one. Classrooms

are equipped with Rwandan-made tables; open shelves; children's books in Kinyarwanda, English, and French; unit blocks (Hirsch, 1996); and dolls made in Rwanda, as well as abundant Rwandan learning materials such as banana fiber, animal bones, rocks, and bottle caps (Brown, 2017).

Perhaps most importantly, children joyously learn — indoors, outdoors, and in their community — primarily through play and hands-on experiences, much like they do in world-class schools in other countries. They often are found outdoors, preparing traditional Rwandan foods such as ubugali (cassava bread) and bright pink juice made with pineapple and beets. Children routinely visit construction sites, carpenter shops, local markets, butchers, churches, and once so far, the King's Palace (Mwizerwa, 2017).

## Construction, Past and Present

Through hands-on, culturally relevant experiences like these, teachers scaffold and integrate children's learning. They use KWL charts to find out what children know and are curious about. Then the class sets out to explore what's happening in the village and beyond.



Children follow up by documenting their field experiences with original stories, creative illustrations, block structures, and masonry experiments.

One of the most engaging themes teachers have implemented is construction, which is everywhere. For example, one day all Bright School classes walked across the street to a new home where a roof was being installed. They took their journals with them to sketch what they saw workers do: measure, cut iron sheets with a machete, and carry huge metal sheets on their heads up a rickety wooden ladder! Some children even helped to measure and cut the sheets. They watched and heard nails being pounded high up on the roof.

At other sites, children saw workers make mud bricks in wooden molds. They watched masons mix cement, carry heavy containers of concrete on their heads, and align bricks. A few children in our rural schools have been to Kigali to see the completed convention center, the most expensive building on the continent.

**Wherever they go, Rwandan children are curious about:**



Photo by Janet F. Brown

■ **Construction materials:** grass at King's Palace, iron sheets, sand (which they represent with sticks, cow bones, scarves, and leaves) when they build with blocks and stones.

■ **Round buildings:** King's Palace, convention center, and houses in other countries they see in picture books (Komatsu, Nshiyama & Amemiya, 2004). Children re-create these structures with sticks, rocks, blocks, and wet sand.

■ **Tools:** molds, shovels, machetes, jerricans to carry water, feet to mix concrete, decimeters, hammers and nails, saws — most of which children use nearly every day at home and at school.

Their block and stone structures, drawings, and stories reflect their understandings and skills.

## What Teacher Education has Taught TEACH Rwanda

During their eight years in Rwanda, U.S. volunteers have coached Rwandan teachers about world-class educational practices. But these volunteers have also learned a great deal from Rwandans. Rwandan children are just as clever as children anywhere else in the world — when they are able to attend high-quality schools and have food to eat. Rwandan teachers are just as passionate about their work as teachers everywhere. Rwandan parents want the best for their children, just like parents in every country.

Aside from these commonalities, Rwandan culture is diverse. In isolated rural areas, memories of the genocide linger, so teachers refuse to pretend to be animals when a children's book is reenacted. They dare not serve food at school for fear that if a child gets sick, teachers will be accused of poisoning the

child. Rwandans are naturally analytical thinkers. They use wire to quickly put a broken cooking pot together. They ask butchers for cow bones and horns to use as building blocks. Curiosity and the ability to solve problems can return to adults, even if their spirits were broken when they were young. Finally, Rwandans are eternally hopeful. Despite poverty, scarce medical care, routine hunger, and high unemployment rates, young Rwandans have a vision for a brighter future for their country!

## TEACH Rwanda's Vision

*"To transform early childhood teacher education in the country."*

**Accessibility.** The organization began with one classroom in a small town. The dream is for an exemplary school to be on every campus where teachers are prepared: universities, colleges,

## TEACH Rwanda's Philosophy — Roots and Wings

- Best practices in ECE based on research, theory, practice
- Infused with respect for Rwandan culture/history
- Standards that grew out of experience with NAEYC and Middle States accreditation
- Teacher education led in Kinyarwanda by experienced Rwandan teacher mentors
- Learning materials sourced in-country whenever possible
- Building Rwandan capacity to lead the organization in Rwanda and beyond



Photos by Janet F. Brown

and teacher training colleges. Until Rwandan teachers are able to see what world-class schools are like, they cannot imagine teachers who sit on the floor and interact with kindness, while small groups of children choose to engage in a variety of experiences. High-quality children's books, geometric wooden blocks, wooden jigsaw puzzles... items never seen by most Rwandan teachers are becoming recognized as essential for every classroom in the country.

**Interactive workshops.** Instead of lecturing to hundreds of teachers, TEACH Rwanda workshops are for ten to twelve people. They are led by experienced Rwandan teachers. Everyone is engaged in hands-on learning, using all five senses. Teachers practice key skills, such as how to talk with children ("tell me about..."). They read a children's book and then re-enact the story. Teachers learn to play "Pease Porridge Hot," analyze what children learn in various activities, begin to write learning plans, and leave with books to start a school library.

**Follow-up.** Skilled teacher mentoring is key to maintaining and expanding new teaching strategies. TEACH Rwanda mentors have proven themselves in modern classrooms and now are moving into leadership positions.

Building Rwandan educational leadership capacity is challenging and

rewarding. TEACH Rwanda's expert in-country presence assures that attitudes, skills, and knowledge are being developed by Rwandans, who are just now beginning to share their learning with teachers in every part of the country. Soon, volunteers will step aside!

## References

- Brown, J. (2017). *Learning materials for young children: Find, play, understand*. Muhanga, Rwanda: TEACH Rwanda.
- Hirsch, E.D. (Ed.), (1996). *The block book* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Komatsu, Y., Nshiyama, A., & Amemiya, N. (2004). *Wonderful houses around the world*. Bolinas, CA: Shelter Publications.
- Mwizwerwa, L. (2017). *We visit the King's Palace*. Muhanga, Rwanda: TEACH Rwanda.

