

Volunteer program Nicolas Robinson School

This document describes the volunteer program at the Nicolas Robinson School and how it is supporting the vision of the school. It explains the main areas of activities in which visitors to the school are involved, and how the program ensures that both visitors and the school benefit from the collaboration.

The Nicolas Robinson School, founded in 2005, was built up over the last decade and now is a well-established school, providing education to around 1'400 students with a teaching staff of 80 and full staff of 150. The school offers education for children from the poorest families and does not select students based on their academic results or intellectual potential. Still the school has been exceptionally successful, which is demonstrated by the fact that a 100% pass rate was achieved by the students in the National Exams for grades 8, 10 and 12 in the past years. As a result, the school has become a model for other schools, not only in the Tigray region but across the whole country.

The foundation of this success is the school's dedication to excellence. These efforts are not limited to the teaching activities, but also extend into the welfare and health programs, school management and leadership development, continuous improvement programmes for teachers, and on-going support activities after the students graduate from the school.

The expertise and skills of volunteers and visitors to the school is fundamental to the success of the continuous learning and improvement efforts. By providing a structured and systematic approach, the expertise, skills and experience from people volunteering at the school can be optimally used to the benefit of the school and at the same time ensures that visitors have a positive, fulfilling experience at the school.

Main areas of support in which visitors are involved are:

- Development of English reading and speaking skills of students and teachers
- Development of laboratory practical and organizational skills of science teachers and lab technicians
- Improvement of the learning environment by training teachers in the use of collaborative learning techniques.
- Development of management and leadership skills of the school staff, especially the management team
- Engagement in extra-curricular activities, such as discussion groups, clubs, art and sports activities, as well as developing the health program.

The NRS volunteering program ensures that volunteers and visitors that come to the school can apply their skills and expertise in areas that fit with the school's needs. It is important that activities of visitors are aligned with the strategy and programs in the school and that they understand how they can contribute within this framework.

The process that is followed to ensure that both the visitor and the school can benefit from a positive experience is the following:

1. Potential visitors contact Rainbows4Children to express their interest for a visit or volunteering at the school

2. A first discussion takes place to exchange information and explore if the visitor is mainly interested to learn more about the school or is interested to work as a volunteer for a certain period of time.
3. If there is mutual agreement that a visit and/or volunteer work at the school is of interest, the person is informed about the school's child protection and security programs and is requested to provide R4C with the required information. As the next step the visitor and R4C both sign a contract, which describes the nature of the collaboration and the rights and obligations of both parties.
4. Once this is completed, a second discussion takes place to determine in which activities the visitor can and would like to be involved. A program proposal is prepared and sent to the school director for his review and approval.
5. Once the program proposal had been refined and approved, the director of the school division in which the person is proposed to work (kindergarten, primary school or high school) will prepare a detailed plan and informs the relevant team leaders and teachers.
6. In parallel, the visitor is informed by the R4C program coordinator about travel, vaccination and visa requirements. The visitor books his travel and prepares for the trip. If special materials will be needed to make the visit effective, the program coordinator works with the visitor to secure or arrange for the materials.
7. At the time of the planned visit, the visitor travels to Mekele and is welcomed at the school. The first day program includes a tour of the school, and an information session about the rules and organization of the school. On the first day there is also a meeting to review and discuss the detailed program, as well as the main objectives for the work. The visitor is introduced to the people he or she will work with during the stay, and can then start their activities.
8. During the stay in the school, the division or team leader who is responsible for the visitor is regularly checking if all goes well, and if needed provides additional support or guidance.
9. At the end of the visit, the visitor is requested to write a report. The report includes a short summary of the work that has been done and the main outcomes, as well as any recommendations or proposals for next steps. Visitors are also encouraged to share their observations about the functioning of the school, students and teachers (addressing both what works well, and what could be improved).
10. If the visitor has worked at the school for a longer period of time (more than 1 week), usually a short meeting is organized at the last day to evaluate and review the work and agree on any follow-up activities.
11. The report of the visit and a summary of follow-up actions is shared with the volunteer program coordinator, so that these can be considered or included for next programs.
12. After the visit, the R4C program coordinator follows-up to gather feedback about the volunteering experience and any recommendations for improving the program for future visitors. Typically R4C stays in contact after the visits shares regular updates about the school with the former visitors.

Appendix A: Examples of activities in which visitors at the Nicholas Robinson School are involved

Develop English reading and speaking skills of students and teachers

- Visitors with teaching experience can work with the teachers in English and support them in lesson preparation, during class and tutoring work
- Visitors without teaching experience, can participate in class for instance as a guest speaker, or to support in the class exercises on pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary training
- Participating or leading discussion groups
- Be involved in reading, singing or drama sessions in the library and music school
- Work on a one to one basis with students who have difficulties in this subject
- Informal discussion groups with any students or teachers keen to improve their language skills.

Develop laboratory practical and organizational skills of science teachers and lab technicians

Visitors with a science education or background are involved in training teachers and lab technicians in laboratory and practical skills. Since most schools and universities in Ethiopia do not have science labs or only ones with limited equipment and materials, most teachers and lab technicians that start working at the school have little experience in doing practical work. Since the NRS is fortunate to have 3 fully equipped labs for biology, physics and chemistry, and practical lab work is considered an important part of the curriculum of the school, the school puts large efforts in developing the laboratory skills of the science staff. This includes local training programs as well as training sessions provided by volunteers to the school.

Examples of activities that visitors of the school have been involved in:

- Training on laboratory safety and use of personal protective equipment, materials risks and hazards, chemicals storage and disposal practices, inventory and general laboratory management
- Training on laboratory skills: for instance making solutions of given concentrations, conducting experiments, using and maintaining equipment (e.g. balances, ovens, autoclave, pH and other sensors, electronics)
- Reviewing, discussing and conducting experiments from the biology, chemistry and physics curriculum. Identifying and testing alternative procedures or experiments if materials or equipment is not available
- Training on preparing and executing laboratory classes: writing of lab manuals, writing of student hand-outs with procedures and instructions, class organization (time management, working in groups, pairs or individuals, ensuring student safety during work)

Improving the learning environment by training teachers in the use of collaborative learning techniques

Whereas teacher education in Ethiopia is at a high level with regard to subject matter expertise, less time is spent on use of different teaching methodologies. Most teachers use traditional teaching forms such as lecturing, repetition and testing. The teachers are focusing their efforts on transferring knowledge to the students, with the main objective to helping them pass the National Exams. The vision of the NRS is to bring out the best in every student, regardless of his or her ability. There is more attention for building up the skills and competencies that will help students to be successful in their careers after school. To enable teachers to not only transfer knowledge, but also build up the skills of their students, the school management has a program in place to train teachers to use a larger set of teaching methodologies and create a collaborative learning environment for students. The main objectives of this program are to increase student activity and engagement in class, focus on skill development (beside knowledge transfer), and to train teachers to offer a variety of learning methodologies to enable all students to reach their full potential.

Examples of activities that volunteers with an (adult or student) education background have been involved in are:

- Organize and conduct workshops for the teachers to get to know and build experience in using a variety of teaching methodologies
- Train teachers on use of learning objectives and self-reflection to improve effectiveness of teaching and identifying personal development opportunities
- One-on-one work with teachers to coach them on use of new learning methodologies
- Preparation and execution of classes in which alternative methodologies are being tested, followed by reflection on suitability of the method
- Work with the school management team to refine the strategy and programs to support the activities in this area

Develop management and leadership skills of the school staff, especially the management team

In the past years the school has been in a fortunate position that among the visitors to the school have been a selection of people that have a broad experience in business, school and management skills. For example these include people with long-year work experience as school director, business manager, finance or purchase managers and professional people development experts.

Examples of some of activities and training programs that these people have been involved in are:

- Training and workshops to develop leadership skills of the management team and team leaders
- Training on project management skills (specific for the role of the person) in areas such as planning, budgeting, root cause analysis, writing contracts or proposals
- Supporting the staff in developing and implementing policies and procedures, stream-lining process and work flows, or improving productivity
- Training on negotiation skills and purchasing best practices

- Support the school management in defining and articulating vision and mission statements, and developing the supporting programs
- Training in communication and interpersonal skills

Extra-curricular activities

Beside the activities described above there are many other activities that volunteers and visitors have been involved with over the years. The schools offers a variety of after school activities, such as discussion groups, clubs, art and sports activities. Many of the visitors to the school have contributed to these programs. Examples are:

- Supporting sport teachers in classes and after school sport activities
- Activities for kindergarten and elementary school to promote and develop creativity (both for teachers and students), such as crafting, painting, playing games
- Music lessons for gifted students, e.g. flute, guitar, piano or singing lessons
- Supporting club activities, help with development and execution of an attractive club program for all subjects

Furthermore, the health and welfare programs of the school regularly benefit from support of volunteers with a medical, special needs or social science background. Activities supported by visitors in this area include:

- first aid courses for the staff of the school
- supporting the development of programs for students with special needs
- support in diagnosis and medical treatment advise for students with serious illnesses or conditions
- Training teachers to detect learning problems (e.g. dyslexia) in early phases