

Autumn 2007

Week 3

After the students had left Brenda and Karen decided to concentrate upon the Primary classes in the afternoons which would give Brenda a chance to see Gambian life outside of the school compound. However, there had not been time to see the teaching in all the nursery classes so Thursday and Friday mornings were spent observing Sanna in the youngest class, where he has a wonderful rapport with the little ones. He teaches them English through songs and games and quietly watches them and engages them as they play in the sand, with the cars or with the dolls. There is still an issue about caring for these materials and it is disappointing to see that at best the toys are muddled in the boxes and crates that we have provided and, at worst, completely broken. There are hardly any whole dolls left and although the children seem to gain something from playing with headless torsos there is a problem with teaching people who are not used to possessions how to look after them. Perhaps it also teaches us that things do not have to be perfect replicas to gain pleasure and development from playing together.

In Nursery 2 Sainabou is doing well with the songs and stories but she is struggling to think of appropriate things to do with number. We showed her how to introduce the concept of "more" and "less" and she seemed very content to work with the new ideas. Jainaba in Nursery 3 has done very well in her final year of the Early Childhood Development course and has an average of over 80% for her exams. She always asks searching questions at the workshops and provides thoughtful answers, but there seems to be a problem with attitude and application. Her story telling skills are wonderful and she is very musical but she tends to indulge in the things that she enjoys and spends considerable

time sitting at her desk once she has “set the children work” instead of moving amongst them and conversing, watching and supporting their efforts.

Nonetheless, compared to other Gambian nursery schools these teachers are all working much more creatively and using the ideas of topics and the Early Years Foundation Curriculum ever more confidently. When Brenda sees the situation in nearby nursery schools, it will be clear that Yalding Farato has moved a long way forwards in the last few years. In Nursery 4 the deputy head, Abibatou, is doing a tremendous job. She plans her classroom meticulously and always has the tools to hand and a sense of shape to the lessons. She has a wonderful relationship with the pupils that is a mixture of enjoyment and clear focus.

The weekend heralded another workshop (the third in three weeks) and this time was aimed at teachers who have attended several workshops before and are on their way to becoming the future workshop leaders. Or that was the intention. However, forward planning is not a Gambian trait and although every nursery school that was invited was able to attend, the actual teachers did not always correspond to the name on the list. Head teachers saw the weekend as an opportunity to substitute new teachers and so Brenda and Karen realised by the end of the first day that changes had to be made to the proposed timetable in order to make the content meaningful. After hours of extra planning they came up with a weekend that gave teachers practical help in lesson planning – setting and meeting objectives – and working in small groups to discuss and produce child-centred lessons. The topics of shape and water helped to focus the two days and by the end of Sunday the two GamBLE teachers felt that their students had worked hard and probably understood a great deal. The balance between hard work, brain storming and pleasure by hearty breakfasts of sardine and potato in *tapalapas* – the local thin stick of bread, hot tea or coffee mixed with unbelievable amounts of condensed milk and sugar. Tony was obliged to buy a “trip” of sugar and extra tins of milk to meet demand. The lunches were cooked in the school garden by Binta, a member of the PTA, Jaja and Neneh. It was wonderful to see her arrive from market with a huge plastic bowl

brimming with colourful vegetables, fish and rice all carried on her head with superb confidence. The local firewood provided the cooking fire and there was ample for the 30 teachers plus the cooks, the builders who were working noisily on the new classrooms and the families in the neighbouring compounds.

On Monday we went into the capital town, Banjul and a nearby town, Bakau, to shop for crafts for the stall. Brenda will be taking the products straight back to UK where Pauline has a series of opportunities to sell crafts for GamBLE funds. We bought leather sandals, wooden giraffes, cats, turtles and elephants, lots of colourful bags, sarongs, kaftans in various styles and colours and a selection of necklaces. Shopping takes a long time in The Gambia because every single item has to be bargained for. At first, the haggling is all part of social interaction and forming friendships but as the day wore on and the heat built up it all seemed to be very hard work. Nevertheless, 5 hours of shopping resulted in some happy memories, funny jokes and lots of handshakes – a different experience to shopping in Tesco's or the Mall in Maidstone! We also bought some interesting vegetables and fruit for our meals: avocado, aubergine, squash, limes and sweet potato as well as water melon, pineapple and paw paw. Our meals are completely vegetarian but we vary them with rice, cous cous or pasta all locally bought.

On Tuesday we got up really early to go to a nearby village where you can hire a simple wooden boat – pirogue – to paddle out into the river, watch the birds, the sunrise and meander among the mangrove trees. We had our breakfast (coffee, fresh bread, jam and local fried donuts) in a wooden lodge on stilts rising from the river and shared some of it unwittingly with a troop of green monkeys who saw an opportunity to feast. They were totally unafraid of humans and one even made a face at Tony when he pretended to raise a stick to it! After this little indulgence, we returned to work and visited two nearby nurseries which provided a useful measure as to the challenges many schools must meet. One was a Catholic Church sponsored school. The three

classrooms were dark and crowded and although they had large desks, there were no materials and the teacher was trying to teach two classes simultaneously. Her aim was to prepare these very young children for primary school by teaching them the Primary syllabus from one text book. The 5-6 year olds did not understand the words she was chanting and had no opportunities to experience the concepts. In the second school two age groups occupied a tiny room, rented in a small compound and the teacher was trying to teach addition and subtraction by writing numbers on the board and then calling out the answers. He had even written the subtraction sums back to front. It was tempting to point out the error, but it was not appropriate when the teacher that accompanied us thought he was doing “wonders” because the situation was so difficult. In a small cupboard there lay a wealth of books and the complete Jolly Phonics scheme donated by an English woman. The teacher assured us that he used it, but it was still wrapped in cellophane and sealed. We assume so much – if these nursery teachers have only ever experienced chanting and a material free schooling themselves, how and where could they learn to use books and games?

On Wednesday we went into the nearby town, Brikama, to visit the craft market in order to buy more items for the stall in UK. This market used to be in a dust floor area made up of shambles of wood and corrugate but with so much local character. Now the Area Council has moved it to the outskirts of the town in purpose built shops off the high way. The expectation is that more tourists will visit but the reality is that the shops are more expensive to rent and when visiting visitors will avoid the flavour of a typical everyday town altogether. Nonetheless, the vendors all seemed excited by their new situation even though some had previously expressed doubts. We found the prices higher than in Banjul of Bakau which was probably due to our being early in the day and the expectation of numerous visitors who would offer good toubab prices. However, we managed to bargain for a few salad bowls and a really large giraffe.

Thursday morning saw Brenda and Karen up early to go to the village Medical Centre with towels, cotton wool, paracetamol, bandages and various items that Clare, a nurse, had donated from UK. All eyes were on the rucksack and large bag that we carried and later we heard that comments had been passed by teachers in the school that we should be donating everything to them. One look at the conditions in the Medical Centre and it would be obvious where the need is most. Sirra, the qualified nurse, has met Clare several times on her visits to Farato and corresponds closely to ensure that everything we bring will be of use. The health of the families in the village is an important way to ensure that the pupils of the school have the best opportunities to enjoy their education. There were several people waiting and the doors of the “surgery” were open with pills and boxes on the table – a sight incomprehensible to our UK eyes. After about $\frac{3}{4}$ hour Sirra arrived and took us into the inner room where we could see a clean couch and flushing toilet with washbasin. However, the cupboards were completely bare and it seemed that our contributions were the only items in the medical centre had. It was shocking to realise that the welfare of the people of this village is left to the outside chance that someone has donated the right medicine for their needs at the time when they need it. The nurse is qualified to identify needs but does not have the tools to cope with them.

We walked along the side roads past many compounds until we came to the Lower Basic School of Busumbala Farato – the primary school that pupils from Yalding Nursery School, Farato would go to if we had not built the new primary. There are three classes of 60 children for each year group with extra shifts in the afternoon. The teachers only get paid 50% extra for working both shifts and there are currently no text books unless the parents pay for them. The Deputy Head who showed us around was certain that the Government would provide one text book for each of the subjects Maths, English, and Integrated Studies. He assured us that the research and planning had been done and although the promise had been issued in 2004, he was expecting a delivery any minute. Meanwhile the teachers are struggling to teach children of a variety of ages in

one class. Children who come in to Year 1 could be 6 year olds and been to a Nursery school or 11 and from the provinces, never having been to school at all and certainly not speaking English. It came as a brilliant revelation to the Deputy Head when I suggested that the pupils could be divided into three groups so that those who had had the advantage of Nursery education would be in one group and those that could not speak English in another, so that their different needs could be catered for.

Back in our own school Brenda and Karen spent the week working with the Primary teachers both in the classroom and giving little workshops. The most successful one was on Phonics. The Education department have introduced Phonics into the Early Childhood and Primary Teacher Training but very few teachers seem yet to understand what it means. Our meeting with the staff ensured that they understood the approach and how to take it forward very slowly until we return in March. The way that children learn to read in The Gambia is usually through memorising increasingly long paragraphs that the teacher reads out. Because so few pupils have text books it is impossible for them to identify words or letters as they recite the content. We have started up a staff library too which enables teachers to borrow books to take home. Story and reference books are our priority. In a village where there are no newspapers and information is given out over a loud speaker it is hard for people to gain knowledge beyond their own experiences. We who are used to libraries, the internet and television have access to a rich variety of knowledge and it is easy to take for granted the things that we have learnt – gravity, outer space, the life cycle of a butterfly, the existence of giraffes – are all unknown areas and Gambian children have certainly never heard of dinosaurs! Within a few days the idea of a library has spread to the pupils who are queuing up to borrow books. Next step will be to extend the library to the community. However, there is a major problem – we have just discovered termites in the shelves where we keep the books! They appear so suddenly and are certainly very hungry. They have already started to nibble at the new text books fro

Grade 3. Fortunately the new classrooms will have concrete cupboards with steel doors – not appealing to these little terrors. There is always something extra to think about – even when we believe we have set a new idea into practice.

Brenda and Karen helped with practical ideas for subtracting fractions in Grade 3, for adding and subtracting in tens and units in Grade 2 and for reading individual words and short sentences in Grade 1. Because the primary children are coming to school in the afternoon their daily schedule is much shorter so there is no time at all for art, PE or subjects other than English and Maths.

We are, in fact, frustrated by the problems with the building. Planning ahead is not a Gambian habit and too often the painters arrive but there is no paint, or the nails have run out and no one has thought to buy more in advance. A significant problem is that the welder has never made a stair rail before and has some intriguing ideas about angles and the masoner has not had the experience of setting them into concrete. The result is that they are not anywhere near robust enough and will have to be redone. The carpenter has delivered the new desks but they are nowhere near the same standard as his sample. So he has been recalled to redo them on sight. We know from living here that making do is normal practice and in many circumstances that makes sense. If there is insufficient money to spare for goods then you can only have what you can afford to pay for – and no one can afford a quality that lasts for years.

Nonetheless, we are paying toubab prices and rightly or wrongly expect higher standards. These desks have to survive 5 months of humidity during the rainy season each year. It is interesting if exasperating to mix the two cultures. As we attempt to build a two-storey school in a village that has never seen the like and put in place high quality teaching facilities in a culture that has for generations managed without materials and teaching aids we are constantly having to reassess our assumptions and make sure we see things from the

point of view of the Gambians with whom we are working. We will achieve far less all the while we impose UK views without doing our homework!

Going in to week 4 sees us buoyant with ideas and opportunities to put them into practice, but there are always more hurdles to meet as we learn more – same as life anywhere in the world if you think about what you do carefully and try to solve problems in as far reaching a way as possible!