

Week 2

Wednesday and Thursday were workshop days for Phase One – the third 2-day workshop for the group of teachers that started in November. We started with a discussion about what everyone had done since November and December workshops that was new but very few teachers were prepared to say anything. So I asked them to write down a description of what they had tried. That helped some of them to express themselves a bit more but even so I was disappointed with the results from the majority. Even in some of the well supported German schools, the standard of teaching is not in keeping with the expectations to be child centred and to let children think for themselves. The tradition is that children do as they are told and learning to recite numbers is stronger evidence that the school is providing something than if the pupils spend the day matching one stick to one leaf or discovering how to fill different receptacles with sand or water.

The Maths test was another revelation. A Schofield test for 7-8 year olds was a real challenge. Very few people managed to finish the paper in half an hour (which should have taken 10 minutes) and most people found questions like “What is 2 more than 5?” or “what is the difference between 9 and 6” too difficult to even attempt. Fractions were another “no go area”, i.e. $\frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4}$ and finding the change from 10 dalasi having spent 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ dalasi plus 5 dalasi was very challenging. Even straightforward sums like $11 - 8$ were too difficult for the majority. I think the problem is that schools can only work to the minority who (a) have a text book, (b) a pencil and (c) understand and the rest get left behind. During British rule it was a policy not to educate Gambians beyond primary level and so it is taking a long time for high quality teachers to come through the system. Combined with the fact that it costs a lot of money to send a child to school and the result is obvious – very few Gambians gain a good education.

So that is what we are trying to change! These workshops provide more than a chance to gain new ideas for teaching. They are an opportunity to mix with other teachers and fill some of the gaps in one’s own education, combined with the confidence to give it a go.

At the end of the two days the oral evaluations ran along the lines that the simple, practical ideas – for drawing in the sand, making picture story books and learning songs that covered the whole curriculum had been useful, the food was certainly very popular (whole tapalapas = French bread with masses of mayonnaise, egg potato, jumbo flavouring and sardine; plus the hot lunches of peanut and beef stew or fish and oil stew were highly appreciated. So the way to Gambian heart is through the stomach too!

Thursday evening

We had a very long meeting with the Board of Directors of the school. First of all we deliberated over whether to accept the proposed structure – presented last Sunday – and although the opening speech was a definite yes, the discussion went on for hours with everyone agreeing! Then we had to agree as to whether Ansumana would be offered the post and, again, that was

unanimous but took a long time to clinch. Then we invited Ansumana to the meeting but took what seemed like an agonising amount of time to let him know that we wanted to offer him the job of Project Co-ordinator. He accepted immediately (without asking the terms or wanting to consult his wife!) and the meeting went on for a few more hours discussing the agenda that we had proposed: new salaries, the finishing of the toilet block, sustaining the wonderful garden, new appointments of nursery and primary teachers and other bits and pieces. So it was after 10 pm (4 hours later) that we said our last goodbyes. Far too late to cook dinner so we wound down with a beer and a popadum each and fell fast asleep.

Friday was a public holiday (even though less than 8% of the population are Christian) and so we worked around the compound, writing up the workshops, sorting out the rebuilding of the floors in the two new classrooms (because not enough cement was put in in the first place) watering the garden and sorting out some bits and pieces in our home. The carpenter, Sidate, has put up some shelves in the living room, kitchen and bathroom which gives us a bit more style to our living – instead of empty cartons and boxes and the plants in the courtyard are growing almost by the minute. We have already transplanted the beans to the front of the house where they will grow into blue flowers winding up the verandah posts and the nasturtiums have appeared looking sturdy and ready to trail around the front too. We are eating HUGE aubergines from the garden – the size of melons – some tomatoes, lots of delicious okra and now the carrots are ready. The lettuce is delicious and slug free and we buy beans, cucumber, sweet potato and cassava from the women's organic co-operative a few villages up the road. We enjoy taking the crowded bush taxi up there to choose our fresh veg. The oranges at this time of year are really juicy and we have picked our first hand of bananas from the garden. They are tiny but very sweet. We have honey from the local bee keepers and fresh bread and eggs every morning – so we eat very well. This time we brought out some fruit and herbal teas which provide a variety of drinks since we can not get milk for ordinary tea, but the greatest excitement has been the discovery that the water in the well is absolutely pure so we can drink straight from the pump. No more twobob's bottled water.

Saturday

We felt a bit tired on and so after helping to water the garden we worked more slowly at our paper work than usual. We went into Brikama in the afternoon and made a phone call home which was lovely but unsettling simultaneously, bought some material for Tony to make a sarong – costing £1.70 and caught up with our emails at the newly opened cyber café – so much faster and cheaper than our previous trip to the tourist area. The hose is proving very significant in the garden as the evening watering takes far less time – although nearly 2000 pumps needs to go into the tank. Tony has settled a way to start work on the repair to the floors in the classrooms. The trouble is that no builder has any money in hand and so the materials have to be paid for by someone (us) BUT with the understanding that it comes out of the final payment. Thank goodness that we allow for a percentage that is not paid until several months after we are sure everything is up to standard.

Sunday

Up to water early this morning as we planned to go to church. After a swift breakfast we walked in our Easter Sunday finery to the village Catholic church, having checked with Sang, the chair of the Board of Directors, that it was 9 am and not 8 am as he had previously suggested. It all looked very quiet and when we asked a lady who was cleaning the church she said the service was at 10 am! We turned around to go back home another way – as we were a bit embarrassed to pass the same people who had greeted us on the way, when we almost literally bumped into Sang – he lived in the compound right on the boundary of the church and was genuinely surprised that the service did not start at 9. He invited us into his compound which was interesting in so many ways. He has quite a superior job in the education department and has studied abroad and yet his home is as simple and basic as any other we have visited. We walked past the goat pen and kitchen hut to be introduced to his mother and sisters. He was not quite sure when we asked how many people lived in his compound but thought it might be about 16 – none of whom were his own children as his daughter from a previous marriage lived with his sister and had her own children. Pigs, chickens dogs, cats and goats wandered around – although one chicken reappeared minutes after without it's head – and just as we ventured to go, we were offered special pork breakfast as it was a feast day. Sang explained that the pigs were less in number as some lads had bought one the night before to cook for a pig roast to raise funds and the family were celebrating Easter with this one that we (well, Tony anyway) were eating.

We walked back home. Looked at some applications for the posts of nursery and primary teachers, which have come in without our advertising – because people have heard of the school – and then it was time to set out again – the back way this time, to see if we could get to church on time! 10 o'clock was much more like it. A few cars had drawn up and a fascinating array of costumes were sported by men, women and children arriving for the service. It was rather distracting to see so many colours and styles as well as hairstyles as we tried to follow the service. Most of it was actually in English but the singing was in the local language and that was done by a choir with drums and wonderful harmonies. For me that was by far the most uplifting part of the service. Everyone was very friendly and we shook a lot of hands both during the Peace and afterwards.

Abdoulie, our driver, was waiting for us when we returned to Tonka Kunda. We had asked if he was free so that we could take the day off – it is hard to ignore all the things we can be doing if we stay at home, so we packed our books and towels and set off for our favourite spot off Sanyang beach. First of all though, we called in at Makasuto Wildlife Trust to find out more about the connection with the Eden Project in UK as we have heard that they are trying to involve Gambian schools in a Gardens for Life programme. The person we needed to contact was in fact at another office but the young man who sought the information was very helpful and so we felt we had achieved something. The next few hours we just rested at Osprey beach, had a swim, a beer and a read and then returned home. We wanted to get back before dark so that we could visit Abdoulie, the caretaker as we had heard that his

mother had died that morning. The burial is traditionally on the same day and we wanted to go to his compound to pay our respects. There was a little gaggle of people we knew outside the school gates as we drove home, so we were directed to his compound and Ansumana came with us to help us follow the acceptable procedure. It seems as if some of the teachers and many of the Board of Directors had been to the funeral which was warming because he is such a hard working and pleasant man. He will have a few days off to mourn and the nightwatchman has automatically taken his place. To think that neither of these two gentlemen have a day off in the whole year is terrible. In fact, this point was raised at the previous Board meeting and the Board will think about what will be done. Even though it is illegal to employ anyone without 18 days holiday a year, the Board have made no provision and neither the caretaker or nightwatchman have complained in the years they have been working. It just goes to show that sometimes enforcing rules and regulations leads to better conditions and that all the rules and regulations in UK do have their benefits.

Monday

A normal working day for us even though it is yet another public holiday. We finalised the selection of candidates for interviewing and Ansumana sorted the appointments out for tomorrow. The builders started work on the renovation of the floor and I prepared for the workshop that is happening on Wednesday and Thursday. I did a lot of weeding in the okra and carrot beds and Kemo helped me to plant some seedlings that were given to us by our British friends Sally and Malcolm Reader. We popped in to see them yesterday and they seem to be thriving in their lovely house near Brufut. We invited them around for lunch one day next week, but now we are worrying about what to cook for them as we do not have quite the same facilities as they do! It will have to be lunch for a start as we have no electricity to entertain them at night. We started talking about how to create an oven out of sand, or tins, or bricks, but nothing constructive has resulted yet!

When we are working on the verandah in the afternoons and early evening we love to hear the frequent "Tony, Karen, how are you?" from the children who come to collect water. Some of the girls are no more than 8 years old and they fill large plastic containers of water and then wait until someone (often us) is near at hand to lift them on to their heads. Once balanced, they have no problems with walking off with them, but they are far too heavy for a young child to heave up. We feel quite settled to have people wandering in and out. Sometimes, they come to chat, sometimes to briefly say hello and sometimes we are just taken for granted, which is warming in its own way, too. We do not recognise everyone but enough to say, "How is your knee today, Adama?" or "Has Sirra had her baby yet?"

Tuesday

An interesting but very long day today. We interviewed applicants for the posts that have become available since Ansumana accepted full time Project Co-ordinator – so we need a new Primary school teacher, and Abibatou has become full time Deputy of the Nursery School – so we need a new Nursery teacher to take her Nursery 4 class immediately. We will also need a new

teacher in September for the Grade 4 children going up to the new class. We sat in the living room of Tonka Kunda – now known as the Board Room as we seem to use it exclusively for meetings and never for relaxing – and the panel was made up of Tony and I, Ansumana and Abibatou. The Board insist on being present at these interviews but none of them could make it. It was fairly easy to appoint a Nursery teacher. Khaddy Sanyang had already been interviewed by us in November and has done some cover recently whilst Sanna (in Nursery 1) has been attending his College training. Although she did not seem outstanding then, she certainly impressed us this time and so we will appoint her with immediate effect. She has just had a baby and left her previous job so is free to begin. Her 6 years experience in a Catholic Children's Fund school will give her plenty of experience of working with our materials and organising children in a pupil centred way. A young girl who has no job at them moment expressed an interest in working with us but she has no idea at all about teaching and seemed fixed on the idea of preventing the pupils from playing and forcing them to learn. She did stop short of saying she would beat them to discipline so we suggested that she came to us voluntarily for 2 days a week to work alongside an experienced teacher so that she could gain some idea of whether she really wants to teach. If she proves reliable and potentially employable we might offer to send her on the 3 year training course.

Another young girl – just completed secondary school and wanting to be a primary teacher seemed modest but intelligent and keen to work. SO we offered her a similar situation in the primary school. This will mean that we have two classroom assistants and will be giving real opportunities to these young girls.

The primary post was more difficult to decide and we are still out deliberating. One of the four applicants was completely out of the question. She could barely be bothered to sit up in the chair and clearly saw no problem at all with the fact that none of her Grade 2 pupils could read. She certainly had no idea what to do about it! It turned out when she had the opportunity to ask us a question that she was only interested in working in our school if she could transfer her son to it!

The other three were completely different and very strong. One is a highly experienced lady who is in line for a Deputy post at a large state primary. Her problem is that this will mean that she could be posted anywhere in the country – usually the provinces. As she wants to stay near home after working for nearly 20 years, she could be interested in taking a substantial salary cut to work in Farato. She would lend a balance to the rather young staff that we have at the moment but we are unsure if she will be happy returning to being a classroom teacher with no responsibilities. The other two were very impressive and one we would definitely like to employ, if possible immediately. But we have to let the Board consider the candidates so we meet on Thursday to make a final decision.

That took a marathon 5 hours and afterwards I had to plan for tomorrow's workshop so it was late to bed. Tony ended the day by injuring his arm

putting hole in a shelf for a hook (he actually re0-incurred an old bruising or cracking when he fell heavily just before we came away). So we wait to see how it feels in the morning. Every day has its little surprises and challenges!