

WEEK 3

Wednesday and Thursday

These were workshop days for Phase Two teachers who have been to our workshops before and most especially, started Session A of the series last November. So they are fairly well known to me (provided the right ones turn up!) and it is easier to (a) plan for their needs and (b) give them group assignments as they progress towards working more creatively. Nonetheless, it always feels quite a drain on energy once they are over - suppose, due to the amount of adrenalin pumping away as they take place.

We covered learning through play by revising how it feels to play in the sand and with water. Even I found there was a great deal more to this than meets the eye: experimenting with moving sand down a slope, for instance, when it is dry compared to when it is wet, compared to when it is wet and in a lump, wet and in a ball, wet, in a ball and covered in dry sand! And what a sense of achievement as we tried the variety of ways, predicted and discovered.

Teachers are used to telling their pupils what to do rather than asking them or watching them behave and so this was a very useful exercise. We also spent a lot of time in understanding the value of making marks on paper – as a pre-writing skill but also to understanding children's development and the properties of colour. When I asked the teachers to choose one dark colour (for example, blue) and produce any shape at all, then add a light colour (say yellow, or in one case red) the look on the teacher's face when before her very eyes the mixture of colours produced a third colour. It was as if I had guided her to perform magic!

I made an attempt to explain a Maths curriculum that I have been working on for many months and which Wendy helped me with at home in UK. I think there was far too much information at once, but I have a feeling that one or two of the teachers will take on board the message of structured stages and, as we have established: KISS (Keep It Slow and Simple).

We discovered a lot of language and physical activities and I wrote them all out with clear instructions after we had done them practically and experienced the teaching points. Then the teachers recorded them in their books to produce a permanent teaching aid. There is such a wealth of ideas to work towards understanding that use little more than your pupils and your environment. We had a fantastic time with partners drawing our shadows in the sand at 10 am 12 noon and 2 pm. Those of us that used our fingers learned an important lesson as a by product too – the sand at 2 pm is singeingly hot! Proof that tools develop from short comings in the human body. The Robert Louis Stephenson poem, "*I have a little shadow*" sprang to mind and they all enjoyed that.

As requested I covered the subject of Phonics again. We started learning our own Gambian Jolly Phonics actions last workshop – demanding, demanding = little by little) because some of the English actions will be meaningless to Gambians. The sign for "g", for example, is an imitation of water gurgling down a drain. Well, I have never seen a drain in Farato or any of the towns

nearby and I think we are the only people in Farato to have a sink. That is not a good illustration either, because the “plumber” fixed it so that the water runs in the opposite direction to the “drain”!!!!

Another example is the sign for a donkey for the sounds “ee” and “or”. Since learning French at school I am aware that animals indifferent countries make different sounds and recently we learned that in The Gambia the donkey is completely silent in the rainy season. The reason? Well they are allowed to roam freely with the goats, chickens and cows throughout the dry season but once the rains come they are needed urgently for work. If they keep quiet no one will find them!

So there is a great deal for me to learn as a leader of teachers’ workshops and transferring what I know wholesale to another culture is a huge and somewhat arrogant assumption. The adjustments and changes that I make are the satisfying result of enjoyable conversations, many laughs and a great deal of listening and understanding.

The meals were well appreciated again and the whole breads stuffed with all sorts of goodies at breakfast time are very popular. The gang working on repairing the classroom floors as well as those finishing off the girls’ toilets all enjoyed a share too. We had a new recipe (to us) for the second lunch – plassas. A delicious mixture of any green leaves that are edible (cassava, sorrel, lettuce, potato and some others I do not recognise) – up to 7 different flavours – are mixed with onion, pepper and pounded. Sometimes dried fish is added, but for me that is best omitted. Then this is cooked together to form a sort of puree and served as a sauce with another mixture of onions, palm oil, cassava root, bitter tomatoes and tomato puree. All on a bed of rice. Very tasty but very, very orange. Eating with your hands can be mastered gradually if we take small balls and quickly pop them in our mouths. But the tell tale signs of the palm oil demonstrate that we are still very messy eaters.

Friday

Tony woke up very subdued and lethargic. His right arm that he hurt when he fell in the office just before leaving UK was beginning to substantially improve but he jarred it again pushing a hook into a wall and now it is painful and difficult to move. Our plans to take the next two days off and travel were dismissed this morning. That is, until Tony returned from Brikama where he spent all morning getting money out of the bank and trying to wrestle with the internet services. At 1.30 he said, “Let’s go” and literally in 30 minutes flat we packed a small bag each, locked up the house and caught a bush taxi to Banjul just as all the men and boys knelt down in the mosques and along the roadside for 2 pm Friday prayers. A strange phenomenon not to see any women at all, for as our journey proceeded so the prayers finished and streams of gowned men and boys, carrying their prayer mats, wandered home, straight down the middle of the road and traffic had to negotiate the sauntering throngs!

In Banjul we bought our ferry tickets (all of 18p each) and were rushed straight onto the ferry as it departed. That was good and we arrived in one

piece, disembarked in the crowds of goats, people, cars and packages that were dispelled from the vessel all at once. Plenty of urgent help to find transport onwards, but we stuck to our plan to take a bush taxi to Jinack island despite the offers of numerous taxi drivers. Actually we negotiated a fare of around 80p each to travel for an hour in an open jeep with a crowd of assorted people along a road that was so full of pot holes that the drivers all ignored it and drove on the bumpy verge beside it. We swerved off this “road” after a while and bumped and slid along sandy tracks through the bush for quite a while. Some wonderful birds but otherwise very flat and scratchy. The only crop that can grow in these conditions is cannabis. Legend has it that any officer who comes to the district to enforce the law that forbids either growing or smoking the weed (“wee-wee”) will suffer the wrath of the spirits of Mandinkan ancestors. So all the inhabitants happily (!) grow two crops a year. Smoking it is perfectly open but selling it across the border is dodgy. Our driver had served 2 years in the very grotty prison outside Banjul for trying to sell it on the mainland. The only market is to the north – across the Senegalese border. Even that is not a money maker, so the small population drift along in a mild and friendly state of anarchy.

We seemed to be the only tourists present and, consequently were asked to pay a small fortune to cross the tiny stretch of river in an even tinier wooden canoe to reach our proposed abode. That last leg of the journey would have cost almost double the entire three hour journey from Farato (i.e. £2.25!). Tony managed to point (or rather shout) out to the young men who poured out to “help” us that ¼ of the original asking price (it did double by the second) was ample and that has selling was counter productive if they wanted tourists to recommend coming to their island.

We found Coconut residence where we had planned to retreat for two days but no one was there to greet us at first. Eventually, though the manager appeared, offered us two beers and later gave us a choice of rooms – no one else was staying. We took a large hut with comfortable bed, wet room – but no running water and ELECTRICITY (solar powered) what a novelty. We sat and read whilst two girls cooked us a delicious meal of vegetarian domada (cooked in peanut sauce) with rice and fell into bed very tired and very, very glad that we had made the effort to come away.

Saturday

We just spent to day sauntering through the bush to the beach which was totally deserted apart from one man catching fish with a line and a small fishermen’s boat that landed whilst we sat and read. A couple of large crabs scurried into their even larger holes but otherwise very, very quiet and no one really took an notice of us. As there was no shelter we ambled back to the lodge – a somewhat different route to our outcoming as we took a wrong turn at the dusty junction – one marijuana plantation with its numerous boreholes looks just like any other – and sat for a few more hours reading and sipping a beer or two. Just what the doctor ordered really – total chill, no hassle and a really good book.

Sunday

We left really early – before the crack of dawn to walk in the dark to the river bank, cross the river (definitely crocodiles there) and wait for the 4-wheel drive to set off at 7 am to the ferry terminal. We knew that ferry crossings in this direction can be fraught with frustration so we were determined not to leave it too late. What a set of characters on the jeep with us! A young man spoke English and kept up the usual conversation of where we came from, how long we had been coming to The Gambia and that “Ooh you are Gambians now! A marabou gesticulated towards Tony’s arm in a sling and offered to cure it; an elderly gentleman in robes smiled toothlessly and tried to converse in French and a very tall and beautiful young girl who sprang into the seat opposite me. She spilled various plastic bags across her and my lap and a cotton bundle on top. From this she immediately produced her wig and with a large hand mirror to direct her, she put this precisely in place. Then she started to unwrap a new razor blade and to our silent amazement shaved her eyebrows. Bearing in mind that this was an 8 seater vehicle (2 rows opposite one another at the back and then one front seat passenger plus driver) we felt very much as if we were intruding into her bathroom. As more people piled in (we were 13 when we eventually set off) she remained nonplussed and chatted away as she put herself together: eye makeup, lip stick, body cream and all until the English speaking chap announced, “She is making herself “African Queen”. Eventually she finished the ritual by garnishing her head with the cotton head wrap that had borne her wig.

Our journey wasn’t perfect – a real rough and tumble at the ferry terminal with too much pushing and shoving. The queue to the ticket kiosk was long narrow and very uncomfortable but the knot of anxious people trying to buy tickets simultaneously was distinctly uncomfortable and careful though we were, Tony found his wallet had gone from his zipped pocket in a few seconds it took him to leave the kiosk and walk five steps to the departure gate. Fortunately he had very little money in it and the only thing that we later missed that must have been there were the extra credit cards for our Gambian phones (about £4 worth). An irritating convenience rather than a disaster. We waited amongst all sorts of dubious looking bundles and dead chickens to get on the ferry and when the gates opened there was a manic rush to the boat. We stood squashed together in every available deck space for the half hour crossing but arrived safely, found a bush taxi to Farato and were home by 11 am for an egg and bread sandwich on our own little verandah

We spent the rest of the day watering the garden and chatting to Kemo, doing a little catch up work and slowly moving back towards that Monday feeling.

Monday

Back to school today – thank goodness because the holidays simply mean less time to get into the classrooms to see what is happening and help out. Kaddy started in her new Nursery 4 class. She got straight in to the Clothes topic which is the Nursery subject of the month. I had imagined she would be working with Abbibatou at first, but Abbi had to go in to Banjul to sort out her passport and visa for her trip to UK. I had previously consulted her before I re-writing the Nursery classes’ time tables so they are more meaningful in two

respects: first the amount of time spent on a subject needs to be more flexible than the current rigid half hour for English or Maths; and secondly to give more reflection to the stage the pupils are at. Nursery 1 for instance, needs more free flow time while nursery 3 and 4 need to know more specifically what aspect of English or Maths they are covering (phonics, writing, counting or measuring). I have also suggested that all classes to the Topic after break so that they are united in their inclination to think about it and that they all have a story before the home bell goes.

Apart from that, I did not spend time with the teachers as Tony and I did the staff appraisals. Each teacher came to us for a half hour chat on their strengths and areas for development. Sanna in N1 seems very pleased with his work, the college course and we are more or less content with the way he has adopted a more creative approach to his teaching. He interacts with the pupils as they play and seems to have a very good understanding of individual pupils. Sometimes I think he misses opportunities, such as helping the children to understand what they are singing about and he seldom seems to plan the day but we have to understand that planning is absolutely foreign to Gambian life. At least he is making progress and happy with his pay rise!

Sainabou in Nursery 2 is another success. Our concerns last year about her motivation and even ability have evaporated as I have seen her teaching in a much more thoughtful and organised way. She herself is enjoying her teaching and for once, has not asked us for extra help. She is certainly the poorest of the teachers and we know she asks the others for help – for instance on a Monday her son cannot go to school because she does not have the D5 (13p) to give him for fares. The significance of Mondays is that she is not in school to ask Jorjor (Grade 1 teacher) for help with fares. We really, really feel that her 17 year old son could do a lot more to help himself. She is a widow with 4 children and struggling to manage her life. She has an interest free loan from us to pay for him to go to a private school (partly because she did not enrol him in time for the local state school) and he does nothing at all towards his keep. She actually pays more than half her salary on his education and yet feels no need at all to involve him in understanding this.

Jainaba in Nursery 3 is of more concern. She is a very intelligent lady and probably better educated than any of the others and knows all the answers at workshops and yet we have seen evidence of lazy teaching and certainly reports from Saffie when she was Head, Ansumana and Abbibatou have all referred their concerns to us. So we tackled her and had a good long talk and listen to her points of view. We have agreed that I will support her more and she will think about what we have said. She certainly understood where we were coming from when we asked her to explain why she needed to hit one girl around the head – which I had just seen her do. Although corporal punishment is a much lamented practice of the past in the “new” approach using the principles of Child Rights, it will need a lot of time to help teachers to curb their generations of experience that children should be beaten into obedience. Twisting the ears of children who are not standing still or sitting down is common practice too. The gap between knowing what is

recommended practice and being able to act on that is wide and this is understandable in terms of learning processes. We all take a long time to assimilate a new idea, especially if we have been experiencing and doing something quite opposite all our lives.

Jorjor in Grade 1 was very happy with her situation and we are sure that she has made thorough steps to improve the reading and writing skills of her class. I still think there is a long way to go before all the teachers become fluent at asking their pupils to come up with the answers rather than telling them and asking them to copy, but at least she has made quite radical changes in organising her pupils and the syllabus since December and, most importantly, seen the benefits and enjoyed them.

Kemo in Grade 3 is a smashing teacher and quietly gets on with the job. His pupils have made fantastic progress in hand writing, mathematical reasoning and speaking English and his classes always have a definite buzz of brains working. He is doing a courageous job in the garden – watering morning and evening even at weekends. I am concerned that he is taking on too much from the point of view of keeping everything going. He should, too, be giving the pupils in his class more of a role to play in watering, weeding, harvesting and planting as it really is a wonderful outdoor classroom and opportunity for experiential learning.

Tuesday

An interesting day! I spent all morning teaching. Sanna had gone off to the dentist and Jainaba was at an all morning rehearsal for graduation. Ansumana started off in Nursery 1 but very quickly decided it would be better if I took on the job. It was fine at first with songs and actions and even to the point when I settled them all down on their mats for various play activities. I repaired all the dolls by putting their heads back on (!?) and showed some of the children how to do up the clothes. I involved a group in chalk drawing on slates but one boy was upset because his mother had not given him bread. Then the bread arrived and he immediately sat down to eat it which attracted his friends (because Gambians always share their food). I didn't feel that this should be happening as break time is eating time and Abibatou confirmed that food was not allowed. After an hour she came in to take over and I went into Nursery 3 (Jainaba's class) where she (Abi) had been covering. Everything was quiet and they were drawing from some work she had given them on the board. I kept a low profile but walked around to see how they were getting on. Then they needed more to do, so I worked with the whole class from the board to do addition. Once a child asks to "excuse" or fetch a drink it all starts, almost imperceptibly to go wrong! They soon start to almost gang up on the teacher who can't speak the local languages and to test the point at which I will try to control them. They are used to very direct responses (if not beating, then a shout) and it seems contrary to my method to act so sternly. After break I taught Nursery 2 and again all seemed brilliant at first but by the time it was going home time it proved quite a challenge to send one table at a time out of the room. They were so used to rushing to the door but Abibatou came to sort it out and even she had quite a challenge.

I had made a game for a child in Grade 1 – Maimouna – because she had salvaged a board game from the rubbish tip yet didn't know what it was for. I related the words to a unit in their English text book so it was a reading game and a counting on game. It was quite interesting to teach it to a small group with the teacher watching because it was clear that she did not really understand the full learning potential of it. I will need to play it several more times before I could even think about her using it in my absence.