

Journal Week 3 (cont) & Week 4

Sunday 12th April – Easter Day...continued

Shirley and I sorted materials during the afternoon – there are just too many boxes of toys, books and Maths schemes to call this a living room. We assigned toys and games to the various classes and I finished off some of the birds in my “aviary” as well as putting the final touches to the seascape in the wetroom and brightening up the Tonka Kunda sign with some flowers.

We ate a delicious stir fry tonight.

Monday – 13th April

We ate the rest of the eggs for breakfast this morning as an omelette, they are not so tasty when they are stale, but they cannot do us any harm and they make a change from bread and marmite every morning..

Shirley and I continued to sort materials, this time the books for the library and uniform and it was so good to come to the end of the day with a feeling of having completed a task (or two). Tony worked with Ansumana on getting the details ready for the draw of places for Nursery 1 in September. This is the second year of running a draw for the 40 vacancies but neither Ansumana nor Abibatou (to whom he has delegated the task) seem to quite understand the new system. This is not surprising as not one single component is a known factor:

- 1) Confining the intake to one academic year (birth dates 01/09/05–31/08/06;
- 2) Running a raffle;
- 3) Making the whole system transparent and visibly fair;
- 4) Organising all the information beforehand.

Tony dictates what should happen but it is quite a lot to ask both of them. Abi is just beginning to learn about putting information on computers and Ansumana, despite considerable training, is having to learn a huge number of new things all at once (filing, entering information in a number of different formats and correcting his written English).

We worked right through the day and Tony cooked a pasta meal to complete the evening.

Tuesday – 14th April

More sorting, this time the reading scheme and we found more uniform. Also we allocated exercise books to the classes. We are determined to give each child the opportunity to take a full part in their lessons by having an exercise book. We have numbered each one (Over 1000 of them) so that teachers can record each pupil's use of a book. Tony continued to work with Ansumana on the data for the draw on Wednesday. There are over 130 applicants and now that the news of the draw is up in the village, a steady trickle of parents continues to apply. The system is that they pay D5 for an application form and get given a number which is then entered on to a brick (red for boys and yellow for girls).

This wall of bricks will be constructed to show everyone at the draw that their number is present and then the wall is broken and the bricks put into 2 boxes (girls/boys). 20 bricks are drawn from each box plus a few extra in case the allocated places are nullified for any reason. In this way the race for first come first served or strongest wins, is avoided. However, it is beginning to become apparent that around 30 applicants have been given a number even though their birth certificate has not been seen. We cannot verify therefore, that they qualify for a place. Abi assures us that those parents will come with their proof in time but we are doubtful!

Seedia Sowe arrived in the afternoon with more wooden rhinos and elephants for the craft stall. He made murmurings that he was making no profit on all the items we have bought but I find this hard to believe. Nonetheless, it is hard to hear his story and he looks so down! We have in fact, bought over £100 worth of craft from him which can't be bad!

We had soya and mushroom soup sauce with pasta for supper. Quite an inventive concoction! We have not had time to go shopping for fresh salad or vegetables, so the store cupboard came into its own. Fresh mangoes for lunch were good though!

Wednesday – 15th April

The day of the GRAND DRAW! After days of hard input by Ansumana, Abi and Tony we aimed to get ready for the 10am kick off. Parents began arriving at 8 am and still the applications increased. About 10 minutes before the event, Tony discovered that very many of the application forms bore the wrong date of birth and that, to our horror, over 100 of them were too old – some by 3 years! It was clear that even though Abi had seen the birth certificates, she had accepted so many pupils who did not have a chance of taking a place. In fact we only had 28 qualifying applications. With the 4 who automatically have a place because they are blood children of teachers and Board of Directors, that makes 31. So no need to have a draw at all!!!!

It was all madly chaotic, exasperating and gave us hours of debate, reflection and exasperation!

Week 4

Thursday 16th April

Today was a preparation day for the teachers. We have written such occasions into their contract in order to proceed along the path towards a strong and effective school. Traditionally teachers in The Gambia start a new term on the date given by the State office but for that day and the subsequent week they have Sports. This is a euphemism for let the children play outdoors while the teachers clear their classrooms and slowly return to work mode. The result is pupils who start out excitable and end up bored and precious hours of schooling wasted. The Education office as announced how many hours and weeks are needed in order to complete the units of the curriculum and so we are devotedly sticking to them in order to follow our motto: "Do not follow the old path, go where there is no path and persuade others to follow". I heard this at the Education college during the Graduation

ceremony – a policy suggested by one of the main speakers so straight from the Gambian education policy makers.

So at 9 am we met to discuss the new term. We started with a new team song to the melody of Bella Mama and even tried it in canon.

Yalding School, Farato is our team,

Yalding School Farato is our team.

Yalding School, Farato is the best school in the town, Yalding School Farato is our team.

That seemed to go down very well and formed a good bonding exercise. We then decided on the new theme (topic) for the Nursery classes. Jainaba suggested Religion and everyone agreed – rather quickly so it seemed as if no one else had really thought about it. We later sat as a team to plan this and it soon became clear that the only two religions that anyone knew anything about were Muslim and Christian. We discussed stories that the two religions share (Jonah and the whale and Noah) and underlying values. Kaddy suggested that these could be covered through drama and Jainaba was ready to invite visitors to talk about Seventh Day Adventists, Shia and Abi was keen on this idea, though appointing someone to arrange it needed more pressure from me.

Her philosophy of “T will, it will” when she wants something to happen does not always have a result. The idea of exploring Hinduism and Buddhism via the library and the website was accepted but I will be interested to see whether this happens. In the past we have spent these meetings and my workshops making a spider plan to ensure that the topic covers the 6 learning areas. I wrote the centre title and a few pointers and Abi and one or two others copied this but NO ONE wrote down the ideas we were discussing and Sainabou did not say a single word. At one point I asked where Amie, our Koranic Studies teacher was. She had appeared at the free breakfast that we all had and then disappeared. I seemed to be in a minority of 1 in thinking that she would be useful for a discussion on religion! She was sent for though and returned to tell us about the subjects she would cover in a typical Koranic studies lesson so that we did not duplicate that in the topic time. I will be very interested to see what planning takes place in time for Monday.

They are supposed to spend all the period after break on Topic using the timetable to help them cover the different learning areas. My observation of the previous topic, Environment, was that there was nothing written down to share as a group of teachers and very little consultation on how to take the subject beyond keeping our compounds clean. Planning is often a difficult subject when I teach adults in UK so I must not be surprised that here the teachers find it difficult to put ideas together. The one thing that is strong is that they are keen to change and to develop their approach to teaching and match it more to the Primary teacher methods. A final point on this subject that I found interesting was that no one had heard of the Jewish religion. As this too shares stories from the Old Testament, I was a little surprised. Abi had clearly seen rabbis on TV but found it difficult to describe her image and no one else had any information to hang it on. All this makes me wonder yet

again about the pros and cons of broadening the mind and finding out about subjects way beyond one's own experience. Understanding one another, especially across religious beliefs is essential for peaceful co-existence, but the Gambians already tolerate their friends, family and neighbours who are from different tribes and Christians and Muslims mix, inter marry and share one another's festivals. So what further benefits are to be had from knowing about what Hindus believe? Or Buddhists? As for understanding atheism, it did not occur to any of the teachers that this existed, so in truth, what would they gain from exploring the idea? Does contentment arise from knowing a little about lots of subjects or from knowing a lot about one and accepting it?

The day was also spent organising classrooms. I had ambitiously hoped that everyone would redecorate their rooms. Grade 1, Jorjor's classroom, where we were meeting was particularly messy. The pictures hanging on the wall were either not straight or had fallen off and the work displayed was ripped and tatty. The pictures for each group which had been made by pupils using glue and tissue are in fact, remnants of the previous year so not meaningful to the current pupils (entering their 3rd term!). Actually Kemo's class looks fabulous as Yvonne and Shirley have painted it with Maths and English words and diagrams. Haddy's too was fresh from the display that Naomi did in November. Baba has new signs for the tribe names he has given the groups. It is a shame and ironic that the Senior teacher, then, is the only class that needs revitalising! Unfortunately she was not at the meeting.

Ansumana had informed the staff about the date (given by Tony weeks ago in a spreadsheet document for display in the office) on the last day of term by which time Jorjor had planned to travel to see her parents.

Fair enough in the holidays, but if A had prepared them for the dates, he could have suggested making it later so that she could plan her trip around it. Forward thinking is not part of a culture that lives from hand to mouth and responds to the moment.

Shirley helped the Primary teachers understand the materials we had given them and Haddy put up some sand paintings on a rather snazzy piece of display paper that we had acquired. I helped the Nursery teachers to organise the books in their cupboards so that they were catalogued and kept in subject groups. That makes it easier for the teachers to find a book that links to their lesson whereas at the moment, the books are all piled in the cupboard and difficult to get at. If I accept that no planning takes place, at least instant reaching for a book from a subject group will result in an appropriate book being used. They all seemed to go for that idea. We finished at 1.30 but I was disappointed to see that all the classrooms were still tatty and that the visual aids had not been changed. One exception was Sanna, the student teacher who knew that he would be at college today and so he had come in the day before and started clearing out his cupboard and cleaning his classroom. Shirley and I saw him and suggested that we give him his materials then and there and he sat down to keenly learn how all the new games and books worked.

We spent the rest of the day between Tonka Kunda where there are still numerous materials and the classrooms, allocating books, games and PE equipment. I really do feel that we now have plenty of aids for the teachers and that we must button down to train them how to use them to best effect. Between us all (Linda, Shirley and Yvonne on this visit and Brenda and Pauline on previous visits) we have sorted, considered and organised a wealth of reading books, library books, exercise books, pencils, rubbers and rulers, supplementary maths schemes, supplementary English grammar books, dictionaries and art ideas. To a great extent the teachers are using these to good effect but it is a slow business to train teachers who for years (and during all their own school experience) have had little more than a shared text book, a shortage of pencils and everything else coming from the chalk and talk of the teacher (who may or may not be present much of the time). We have made giant strides with this team of teachers but I still think there is more to do and that the teachers want to do it. They do enjoy the new ideas, most especially because the pupils do.

Friday – 17th April

Another day of sorting the reading scheme and getting on with making folders of Maths ideas for the Nursery teachers. I have written a Maths curriculum for them but I thought it might be easier for them to follow it using clear ideas on A4 paper all sorted into a file that is relevant for their age group. The building has reached an accelerated stage at last. Things have been dragging for the last few weeks and we have had terrible trouble with finding a clerk of the works who will actually do what the job entails – be on sight to make sure that the builders are following the plans fully and correctly. Last phase we had to sack the man in the role because he was actually doing 2 jobs at once and was hardly ever on site. The new one started last week, arrived all efficient looking in smart clothes and appeared for 2 days running, accepted Tony's gift of a pencil and ruler set and then disappeared. The new one arrived today and actually asked for the plans - which was a first! We are hopeful!

Saturday – 18th April

We decided to work as usual this morning and then Shirley suggested we go in to Brikama Craft market as she wanted to give us (a) time off and (b) a present. We tidied up the office. Stripped the notice board of really old and dusty photos (which I did keep for the teachers to re-display) and put up a royal blue backing. When Ansumana saw our efforts he was very pleased but I did say, I will leave this blank for you to fill in .. He was quick to respond, "But this is the academic office, feel free to put more things up." So Shirley and I put up headings such as TOPIC, TEACHERS ABSENT (and made out laminated name cards) EVENTS and CURRICULUM NEWS. We also posted up categories of photos: teacher workshops, outdoor play and visitors that Saffie had previously started in her era.

Adama Njie had invited us to her husband, Ebrima's, new daughter's naming ceremony. We dressed up to go and were welcomed by him. His third wife, Jarre had the most lovely little girl and to honour his first wife he had called

her Adama. Quite an unusual concept to our minds: to honour your first wife by naming your third wife's second child after you!! He explained how Africans can never save money because the cost of celebrating births and marriages is so high. A full naming ceremony would involve buying a whole sheep and cooking special food, organising soft drinks and dressing the whole family in new clothes. This was just a modest event with a meal for the wife's family and callers by but even that necessitated him running his car as a taxi morning and night either side of his day job, in order to earn extra to fund the occasion. He now has 10 children by 3 wives and wants more sons to form a football team! His eldest son, Lamin, is in the army and Ebrima explained that he can only leave the family home if he either gets married or buys his own compound. He cannot leave to rent a compound and all the while he is living at home he has to give his salary to his father. The father may or may not choose to give some of this back to his son. Ebrima has a good job with prospects of promotion and his family are comparatively comfortable, but keeping up with the growing demands is perpetually a challenge.

Later that afternoon Adama sent around a dish of food from the celebration lunch: rice, fish and cassava, aubergine and cabbage. Not an extravagant meal but tasty and we shared it with little Karamadu, Abibatou's son, who had come to fetch water and came to greet us. He is in Nursery 3 (about 6 years old) and enjoyed practising his English.

We asked him his name and how his mother was. He replied "She is fine, her husband is there." Abi's new husband (a marriage arranged by her father since her first husband sadly died) already has a wife and compound elsewhere so he visits her and her 8 children on Saturdays.

She is not exactly head over heels in love but as her father has persuaded her, she will have no one to bury her when she dies unless she has a husband. As far as his motives are concerned, it seems that the bit of fish money that he gives her on Sunday mornings is worth the gain he takes from his=2 0visit! When we had eaten all we wanted we offered the rest to Abdoulie the caretaker and he took it off to share with one or two of the builders on site. So a big share all round!

The trip to Brikama was eventful. We took the bush taxi and were very good about calling in at every single shop/kiosk. We were the only buyers there so everyone was very keen to try to persuade us to buy from them. Just looking is free worked for many but there were others who pushed really hard using the difficult concept that they had no fish money for their families and that it was the end of the tourist season (both probably very true). We did see a lovely bas relief wooden carving of scenes from Gambian life: a compound and musicians using kora, drums and balafon. This seemed the perfect gift and Shirley had a real laugh bargaining for it. When we had finished we tried to get a bush taxi home but they were a bit full, so we settled for a local taxi, provided he charged the same as it would have cost 3 of us in a bush taxi. No problem with that and off we went, still being pestered by one particular man who wanted Shirley to buy his salad dishes. Not long after we drove away we reached a police check.

The driver handed over his driving licence and went off with the policeman. We stayed in the car for about 10 minutes and then realised that he would be a ges coming back. So we got out of the car, left the fare on his seat and walked back to the village. It was an interesting walk along the boundaries of Farato Farm which has recently been bought by the President and past a variety of compounds, some very poor and dirty. I was made to realise just how poor some of our pupils are when it was explained to me that some of them have to leave school at break time to go to their mothers who are selling a little of something in the village market. These parents have no money at all when the children come to school, but they may have earned a few dalasis to give to their children by 11 am. The children then return to school to buy a snack from the school vendors.

As we passed the Alkalo's compound we decided to call in to introduce her to Shirley. It is customary to visit the head of the village when staying and so we wanted to do the "right" thing. We waited a long while watching her chickens and goats wander around the clean compound.

The goats even tried to wander into her living room! Her husband is the builder of the school and he is constructing a new building in the compound with glass and aluminium windows! I've never seen those before in The Gambia – we must be paying him enough! Chatting was limited as neither the Alkalo nor her husband speak much English, so we tried to excuse ourselves. But she would not have that, "Stay to chat". So we stayed on for another half hour or so by which time it was getting dark.

We did not feel like a full meal tonight so we sat on the verandah with a few drinks and Tony concocted a snack of tinned tomatoes, fole beans, home grown rocket and peanuts. We ate it with spoons in the dark and it was really tasty!

Sunday – 19th April

We had decided to work this morning and go to Sanyang beach in the afternoon to chill out but continue with action that could be discussed and notes made. Shirley and I worked on the challenge cards and I put together more ideas into the Maths files for each class. It was very hot indeed – the temperature is definitely rising as we progress towards the rainy season (May/June). Tony worked in the office where he could observe the builders. The trusses for the roof arrived by donkey cart and Mr Dumbya, the builder, directed from under a shady tree – Gambian remote control. But no sign at all of the clerk of works. So the fourth occupant of that role has failed! It really is a nonsense even employing anyone. Tony does a far better job than all of them put together. In the heat it was quite impressive to watch the masons, plasterers and welders. The amount of scaffolding was minimal, wonky and very precarious. We could not bear to watch the man on the apex of the roof working at a horrifying angle. Even worse was the three pin plug in the office which consists of two bare wires (no earth) going in to the socket with a stick to hold it in!

We really enjoyed our hours on the beach even though we spent them discussing organisation for the Primary and Nursery in September and I planned the topic for the next month. Shirley walked up to the fishing village escorted by a local guy and I tried a spot of body surfing – great fun! We had chips and beer under the shelter and finally drove home via Lamin Balajoh's compound. He was not in but very soon after we arrived home he strolled up to our home. Word had got around that we were trying to see him and we talked until well after sun down about education.