

Journal week 3

Monday, 30th March

Back to school this morning! Assembly was preceded by a Senior Management meeting with Jorjor, Abibatou, Ansumana and myself. Linda came too and the meeting really just consisted in a crazy discussion about the end of term. The document on the office wall is from the State Office and clearly states that the holidays begin on 9th April. I provided a separate document that showed a table of who is coming to visit from UK when they arrive, when they leave and when the school holidays are. Even though they had all thanked me for this information and put it up for all to see, Ansumana opened the meeting with a declaration that there was a rumour that the holidays were going to start on 3rd April and that the staff were willing to do extra days whilst the students were here. My response was, pardon? What extra days? The students leave the day that the holidays begin! It was a calm but serious discussion and I think I made it clear that I was not happy with the muddled thinking.

Tony went off with Ansumana to clear the Duty Waiver saga, I stayed in Nursery 3 to observe one of the students, Sohna and Linda worked with Jainaba in Nursery 1. I think Sohna worked as well as could be expected. Sainabou, the class teacher did not seem to have any lesson plans and I have the feeling that poor Sohna was given lessons to lead that had not been prepared. Nonetheless, I think she will make a good nursery teacher. She is intelligent, interacts well with the children and shows a calm demeanour and quiet humour. She is certainly devoted to teaching and works well with the team.

Linda had some good experiences with Jainaba although she thinks that perhaps she has locked into certain ideas and could expand more. I feel that she is enjoying the age group and understands about watching them and what they can achieve through play. Energy and high levels of work ethic are what everyone needs and this is coming slowly. Since it exists in very few Gambian work places I think our teachers are doing well.

Jorjor seemed to spend rather a lot of time out of her class today. She said she was not feeling well, but it is worrying that she demonstrates excellent teaching when I watch her and yet seems to have the habit of leaving her children alone to work rather a lot. She said she had heard her Monday group of readers but I later found out that she had actually just sent them home with their reading books!

In the afternoon, Tony arrived with Ansumana in great mood. They had got the materials from the port. Everyone was so relieved but the disappointing news was that in order to obtain the materials they had paid the duty. So D500 towards getting a duty waiver for school materials and over 3 weeks of hard labour scored no result whatsoever.

Linda and I unpacked all the boxes which took back breaking hours but at least it is all sorted and we are ready to accept an almost equally huge consignment from the 12 students coming on Wednesday. We have a huge number of toys and books for the Nursery, some great Maths and English text books for the primary (which I really do

hope will replace the verbal and quantitative reasoning books that they insist on using) plus sufficient exercise books for all children in the school to have a full set. I never want to see a child in this school ever again sit doing nothing because they cannot afford their own exercise book.

We ate couscous and Moroccan aubergine tonight!

Tuesday, 31st March

Tony met with Ansumana to discuss the plans for the students and Linda and I went with Mr. Demba (new member of the Board of Directors, father of a boy in N2 and Senior teacher at a large Lower Basic School in Brikama, to visit 4 other Nursery Schools in the village. Our plan is to offer teacher training workshops to the staff at these schools, and continued professional support so that the children of the village do not feel that they are missing out on a good education if they cannot get their child into Yalding Nursery School.

The first school seemed promising and was run by Primary School teacher who seemed well organised and to know a little about good teaching practice. The second was a bit of a contrast and contained three teachers who clearly thought it was easier to have the children play outside rather than teach them in the classroom. The third was a strange combination of beautifully equipped environment and poorly equipped solitary teacher and the fourth was a really basic set up with a teacher who was so enthusiastic and inspiring. She was particularly keen that the students coming to our school tomorrow would visit her. It would be very interesting for them to do that as I keep forgetting the distance our teachers have progressed since they were all struggling to think of what to teach a hoard of children and how to set about it!

We walked back with Mr. Demba and discussed all sorts of interesting things about Gambian education. It is a desperate situation because so few pupils leave school with good grades, especially poor are Maths and Science and, often, English. Free training for Primary school teachers is available but the entrance requirements have to be reduced in order to fill the places. This, clearly is a vicious circle, because people with inadequate education are becoming teachers. In the second and third years at College all students are sent to schools to take full and sole responsibility for a class. There are not enough tutors to observe them and no one fails the 3 year course. Because these teachers cannot really cope with their job, the syllabus or organising a class, they dislike teaching, they leave, there is a shortage and the training college has to accept anyone who comes to train (usually people who cannot get a job anywhere else!) Where do you break the circle? It is definitely encouraging to see the teachers at our school develop a work ethic (as described by one of our Board of Governors), to want to learn more new ideas and to increase their enjoyment of teaching. This is resulting in happy and fast developing pupils who, dare we wish, could become the next generation of teachers? Let's follow that dream!

Linda and I returned to school about 1pm hot and exhausted but it had been a really useful morning. We planned a date with Abibatou for a workshop to which we will invite the teachers of these 4 schools and Linda and I, together with 2 teachers from our school, will lead the workshop and start the process of sharing good practice with all the schools in the village so that all children in the village have as near to possible, an equal opportunity to good schooling.

Tony had spent the morning shopping for the forthcoming students: pots, pans, basic foods and then set up an electric light in the end classroom so that they can use that as a base. A new flushing toilet and shower cubicle in the original toilet block gives the school the facilities for staff and visitors that the teachers have always wanted and the light will provide security at night which is another request that has been long sought after.

We helped Jainaba to sort out the toys in her Nursery 1 class so that finally we can remove the larger toys that have been broken and unattractive for nearly 8 years.

To children (and adults) who have never had toys they are still very attractive but as teachers we feel it is time to replace these with the better quality and longer play potential donations we have recently received. So anything that could possibly be used we gave to children in Jainaba's compound and the rest that was deemed by her and Ansumana to be "dead" we incinerated. The hardest thing to watch here is when we carefully select what really is rubbish, having recycled whatever we can to all manner of imaginative uses, we put it in the rubbish bin. But unless we burn it completely straight away, children jump in and excitedly remove unusual objects, expecting to be able to play with them. When they soon find out that we were right, it is useless, they leave it scattered around the school compound. Our society is very wasteful, but sometimes we have to accept that a well played with toy does finally expire.

After that Tony and gang prepared the student area and Ansumana was very excited to be involved in all the new arrangements. It was hard to persuade him to come to the pre-arranged meetings with 3 young students who had applied to work as volunteers at the Primary school. Linda, Jorjor, Abibatou and I joined him as a panel and all 3 of the candidates seemed sincere and potentially useful to the school. Our guarantee is that we will give them advice, experience and good examples of teaching practice but we cannot guarantee to offer them future employment or even sponsor their training at the College. We have done that with Darboding because we were impressed with her after a term of voluntary work and we know we will need a future teacher. Although the Primary Teacher's Certificate is a free course run by the Gambian government, teachers can be sent to any school in the country for their teaching practice. If they are sponsored, the sponsor can decide which school they do their TP. Our plan is to engage her for teaching practice in September, hopefully under the supervision of the new Deputy Head who we will need to appoint in the next few months – all busy, busy with development!!!

We ate ratatouille and pasta for our last cooked meal together – we will be eating with the students from tomorrow for a week or so.

Wednesday, 1st April

After breakfast we had expected to interview a teacher who will be substituting for Kemo who has had to change his days at college. We sponsored his course on Gender and Development on the understanding that it would be during the weekend but for reasons beyond our control (tutor shortage at the college) it has to be in school time. Kemo has agreed to forfeit his salary so that we can replace him properly. When Kemo turned up for work unexpectedly he explained that he had "oversighted" – great

expression and that his expected exams were tomorrow, therefore we did not meet his replacement because he was not needed today – get it???

I observed the second work experience girl, Ida in Nursery 4 and Linda observed Sohna whom I had seen previously. It was plain from the start that Ida was struggling with writing, with understanding the Maths lesson and with controlling the class and so I allowed the class teacher to take over and I too suggested learning opportunities in the lessons they were trying to conduct. Rather than draw a body and label it on the board, I rubbed the board clean and asked children to name parts of the body, then draw that part on the board. For simple words, like head, hand, nose and leg I asked them to give me the initial sounds and then write them on the board. After we had completed a person, I rubbed all but the words off and the children had to draw from memory and, if they could, label the parts. This meant that they were all organising their thoughts, recording at their level of capability and stretching themselves individually whilst the teachers had the chance to go around and observe each child's progress. The compulsion to Teacher talk and expect children to copy everything is so strong that this approach is quite foreign (literally).

There is a huge problem still with exercise books and pencils. The former take ages to give out (and the same books were collected and distributed on two separate occasions within one hour) and the latter are never sharp or ready for use. Admittedly they are a pain to sharpen and too many crumble or break on sharpening. But there is no system for using them at all. Teachers never ever expect to prepare materials in advance, if at all. I suppose if they have previously been unused to materials at all, how to prepare them is not part of anyone's experience.

Over break time Linda and I had a moan about how dull the lessons can be when the teacher talks all the time and repeats so frequently but after break I had a good experience watching Sohna dramatise *Walking through the jungle* and involving 3 children at a time in movement and speech. Even this went on rather a long time and the children were beginning to shout but at least it was enjoyable for all! I interrupted by choosing the following story as I thought it should follow on from the previous activity and, as the topic was environment, it should all link. So rather than *Sleeping Beauty* I chose a simple story about a Koala Bear who moves through the Australian bush looking for alternative food. We sent one group out to look at the fruits as this was part of the story. I tried to demonstrate how to involve the children in the story rather than read the words and, as these were Nursery 2 children, I needed the teacher to translate but it all extended to trying to memorise the story upon repeating the pictures and asking children to offer their own ideas. I really enjoyed it!

Straight after school we were all involved in putting up the 3 tents for the students. It was hot work and very interesting as we tried to follow the instructions and direct the Gambian helpers. We had time for a quick lunch of hot bouillon and peanuts before showering to go to the airport to meet and greet the students from Sir Roger Manwood school and Shirley. Ansumana had posted up on the staff noticeboard that we were going to greet Roger Man hood and Linda and I had had to explain to him what this would mean to an English reader! Abibatou and he thought it was a great laugh.

Everyone arrived on time and we transported them back to Farato to the typical greeting of whole school and parents at the mosque, escort to the school compound and songs and speeches. Everyone was very involved and moved. The students settled into their tents and we showed Shirley around Tonka Kunda and then we all got together to look around the school and gain some background to the project and week ahead. The food was being cooked by the PTA members and all the teachers waited on after the welcome, they were obviously going to benefit from chicken yassa for dinner! We ate, some with spoons and some with hands, the delicious supper in the N1 quarters and after a short meeting with Paula and Scot, the teachers about our proposed programme, we retired to beers at TK and the students were all quiet by 9.30pm. They have quite a good set up with two nightwatchmen and the night seemed comfortable and quite.

Thursday, 2nd April – Bruce’s birthday!

I started by texting my brother to wish him happy birthday!

The students all took turns to observe the teachers and students in every class and Linda worked with Sainabou making plasticine models of the environment and at this point Linda took the executive decision. Shirley went straight into the fray by watching the teachers in the classroom too and finished the morning by listening to children read in Jorjor’s class. It is always interesting to hear the comments of people when they spend their first time in the school. However much we recount and discuss our experiences out here and the adaptations we have accordingly made, it always comes as a surprise when people work in the classrooms. Understanding the journey that our teachers have made to be where they are in introducing practical teaching methods, reading schemes and phonics requires extensive observation of not just this school but the other schools in the area and the ones that our teachers have been used to working in. Most of them are accustomed to working from one text book (the teacher’s) and, therefore, writing its contents on the board and reading it to the pupils repeatedly so that eventually memorise the contents. The result is that many children cannot understand the difference between a sentence, a word, a letter and a sound. Now that we have introduced the units of language development and reading progress is definitely happening but probably imperceptible to an outsider.

I spent my morning in the office catching up with keeping my records and trying to deal with the situations that arose from so many people working in different classrooms. Kemo was not in school because he had an exam at his college course on Gender and Development and Ansumana went in to Grade 4 to replace him. However, Tony needed him to organise getting small change from the market sellers so he was out for some of the morning and Linda and Abibatou took Grade 4 for football. That kept them very happy for at least an hour. Grade 3 were taught rounders by the students and at break time they tried some of the tasty snacks that the vendors sell to the children: fried poppadoms, peanuts and fish pies.

After school the students and Shirley went in to Brikama by bush taxi to catch a flavour of local life. They saw the regular market and then came back via the craft market where some of them leapt into the throes of serious bargaining. Linda, Shirley and I sorted out some of the materials that they we had brought and the rest of the port stuff so that we would have a system for organising the extra materials that the students have brought with them. Uniform and exercise books have been stowed in

the store room for organising later and we concentrated on book, puzzles, games and stationery.

At 5 pm we had cultural group. I was surprised how few pupils turned up (we usually have at least 30) and no teachers. So Shirley and Linda helped out and we learnt *My Paddle's clean and bright* and the counter melody to *Ram Sam Sam*. Towards the end (around 6 pm) many more pupils arrived together with Jainaba, my co-leader and other teachers. At this point the reason for the absenteeism was revealed. There had been a live match on TV and Gambia won the African Cup at an away match in Algeria. Everyone was so jubilant and *Bravo, bravissimo* fitted the mood perfectly! We all dispersed to the rumour that tomorrow would be a public holiday. Sure enough the announcement was on the radio and thanks to the President's pride a joy work was suspended for a day. We were a bit miffed because it means that the school students have one less day to work in the school.

Our evening meal was benechin, cooked by members of the PTA and the teachers and we ate with the students in their den – that has been converted from the Nursery 1 classroom.

Friday, 3rd April

We heard this morning that the national day of celebration was in honour of the under-17 football team, not – as we had supposed – the national one! Anyway, we found lots of work to do around the school with painting classroom walls with bright educational information and everyone was happily employed. Sadly, no cultural group this evening because of the public holiday. I really want to progress this and move towards our performance with the Folkestone community choir. Tony and I went to the airport to meet and greet Yvonne (HT of Laddingford Primary School and Keith (a computer expert). I had been to the Njie compound opposite the school to arrange accommodation. Ebrima has talked for years about how wonderful it would be if our visitors stayed with Gambian families. He showed me a very simple room with a concrete floor and Tony went to buy 2 single mattresses (“sponges” as the locals refer to them). He also bought some material and Shirley and Linda spent ages sorting it into the appropriate lengths to make two sheets. Shirley and I went up to the tailor's shop to ask him to have it ready by 3 pm – which they were and all was set for Yvonne and Keith's arrival. Within half an hour of their appearance in the school compound they had tasted a cool Juhlbrew and were heading off to spend the afternoon in Abibatou's compound. Abi had visited Yvonne's school when she was in Yalding last summer, so they knew each other. We had arranged for groups of students to spend the afternoon at a teacher's compound, enjoying local life and mixing with their families and neighbours. Yvonne and Keith were keen to do this too so we walked them to Abibatou's compound and left them there. We returned to finish off some reports and sort out more materials. Various interruptions slowed down our plans and in fact, Tony spent most of the time talking to Ebrima and later Saikou's wife, Ida who appeared during the course of the afternoon, sat down and relax with us. Ebrima informed us that the President has announced a 10% pay increase for civil servants at the lower end of the pay scale in order to help them and so we will have to consider this in our salary reviews.

When Yvonne and Keith returned, hot, tired but very full of their experiences, we took them to the Ebrima's compound. Everyone had been given a meal at their

various host's so we did not have a shared one in the school this evening. Instead, Tony and I cooked our own pasta with reconstituted dried pesto to make a sauce.

At the Njie's compound the plans had been changed. Instead of sleeping on the concrete floor in the outer parts of the compound, Ebrima had rearranged his house so that they could sleep just off the living room on a lovely tiled floor with access to the flush toilet and the electricity for a fan and light. A veritable palace and Ebrima laughed when I told him so! Far from going straight to bed, Yvonne and Keith were settled on the plush sofa surrounded with a multitude of children (Ebrima has 6 with his first wife, Adama, two with his second wife, Amie, and 1 ¾ with his second wife, Jarre. They also found the unfamiliar voices of cockerels and dogs difficult to eliminate and did not really have a restful night!

Saturday, 4th April

The students, Yvonne, Keith and Shirley all went to Bakau as part of Tony's Tours and spent a relaxing time at African Village, then on through the streets of Bakau (seeing town life amongst rubbish and open sewers) to the Katchakali crocodile pool where they touched the beasts, survived and looked around the new folk museum.

Back at the ranch Linda and I continued to sort materials and I did a bit of painting to relax. I put some fish in my sea wave on the wet room wall and added several more birds to the aviary in the courtyard. I must admit I am quite pleased with my new found skill! It is very relaxing to do and think about and the results are pretty immediate and effective.

We ate on our verandah this evening as the students seem quite self sufficient. Shirley made us all laugh as she had bought a litre bottle of gin for £2 and a small packet of ginger biscuits for a similar amount. We decided to be really ex-pattish and indulge in preprandials as the sun went down. The domada was not a good choice as the meat was, apparently, tough and not at all tasty and the shopping list had included sea snail. The knowledge of this put many off too!

Sunday 5th April

We had omelettes with our tapalappa for breakfast this morning which was a lovely treat. There was a slight hitch in the plans when we learned that Pa's minibus had broken down and the transport to go on the second leg of Tony's tours had to be replaced. Our brilliant friend and driver, Abdoulie, did his research and just as we were about to give up and replan the day, he appeared with a new driver and minibus. So we were all set to go to Tanji fishing village. Mr Happy, who usually has a jealous feud with another guide to show our band around, was the sole agent this time and his tour of 12 sections was eternal. He made the students recap each section each time we proceeded which caused great mirth and one of the students commented that Section 9 was riveting (it had an a, b and c part to it!). We went on from there to Paradise beach and everyone really enjoyed relaxing in the shade, eating their lunch and lying on the beautiful beach.

We returned to find the school in the midst of setting out the programme that the VDC had arranged. Jellybah – an internationally renowned band consisting of various drums, a lead kora, guitar and keyboard – were booked just 2 days ago to raise funds for the village but also to consolidate party loyalty. They are the President's men.

We had been told that the event would start at 3 but upon our arrival at after 5 there was no sign of much happening but around 8 pm after we had eaten our plassas meal it all started and we joined in with the dancing and general enjoyment. We were very tired by the end of the evening though!

Monday, 6th April

Rumour had it that the victorious football team would be returning to the country this morning, causing another day's holiday. Luckily for us they returned on Saturday and we had a full day in school. Microscopes were issued to Grade 4. There was great excitement because such apparatus is not usually seen in a Lower Basic School in The Gambia. Kemo, their teacher commented on the lesson as "very significant".

Yvonne went in to observe all four primary teachers and was particularly impressed with Kemo and Baba and concluded that they were as good as any good teacher in England. That is very heartening news! Linda and Shirley helped in the Nursery and Shirley also helped with hearing reading. I restarted hearing reading in Nursery 4 as the records seem to have disappeared and their teacher, Kaddy, said that she had been told by the Senior Teacher in the Primary to keep them all on the first book.

Eventually Shirley and I between us managed to hear every child, assign them to their individual level and issue them with a diary and tin to take home words to practice. Learning to read is so fundamental to everything that happens here. The familiarity with the printed word is absent in a typical Gambian child's life and so we are having to lay down as many reading opportunities as possible in and around the classrooms. Some of the students did some lovely art work with the Nursery children – tissue butterflies and fish, and painted butterflies. Jainaba had a lesson on the key board which one student had brought to leave. She was thrilled with that opportunity.

In the afternoon I took them to Neneh's compound to have a lesson on batik making. Shirley and Linda nobly stayed behind to sort materials and Yvonne and Keith returned with me when they had bought a few sarongs and jewellery bits. We travelled in by one of the large new express buses which was very impressive and comfortable and cost no more than the bashed up old bush taxis that usually travel too and fro rattling along with people, shopping and livestock squashed together. The students returned just after dark in a taxi as it had been difficult to get transport for so many of them. Neneh's son had supervised their safe return and she rang several times to make sure they had all got back. She had given them a marvellous time and they were all really happy with the opportunity to relax in her shady compound, eat freshly dug sweet potatoes fried in oil, but her jewellery and materials and conclude with their own creation of a batik picture.

We ate fishballs tonight which everyone agreed were very tasty.

Tuesday 7th April

We carried on in school this morning in the same way: students doing sports, creative and reading projects with the various classes, always making sure that each teacher had had a similar input. Yvonne moved towards advising the teachers and having a second opportunity to observe Haddy in Grade 2. As the most experienced teacher (24 years) she has the most to unlearn in order to absorb our new ideas for literacy

and practical learning.. She is eager to learn. We are thinking of giving all four of the Primary teachers an area of curriculum responsibility in September, the start of the new academic year, so that they have the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths, their commitment to team work and, eventually their potential to become Deputy Head. As our pupils grow older and head towards the next strata of Gambian education (Grades 7-9) our teachers will need to be subject specialists anyway.

I spent the morning patrolling, recording what was going on and slipping in the odd idea and suggestion to teachers as I felt appropriate. In Nursery 4 Kaddy was trying to work with one group as we have suggested that teachers can focus on one group at a time as well as teach to a whole class. However, another group was left doing absolutely nothing at all. So managing different groups and abilities is still a very big learning curve. “We will , we will” rings in my ears as a Gambian phrase for being optimistic and wanting to take on new ideas.. I also spent some time with Abibatou discussing the reports I had written on the Nursery teachers so that I can go into the appraisals of each teacher before term ends on Thursday.

At around 12 noon teachers from the 4 other nursery schools in Farato started to arrive to observe our teachers in the classroom, as they had been invited to do this prior to a workshop that Linda and I had planned for them. 2 teachers from 3 schools and 3 from another eventually (by 2.20 pm) joined us for a workshop to share good practice. Our aim is to give all the children in Farato an equal chance in Nursery education by joining forces with the other schools in the village. We will only ever be able to accommodate 40 new pupils each year (and we have applications from 120 for this coming September!!) so it makes sense to help to equate the teaching standards and provision in the other schools with Yalding so that parents have similar opportunities to send their child to a good nursery. We started the afternoon with some simple songs and demonstrated ways of repeating that are interesting and increase interest (as opposed to the ubiquitous call of the teacher, “Again!”) and joining in with the actions and ideas broke the ice and enabled all teachers to feel comfortable. Abibatou as Deputy Head had been invited to lead some of the workshop and I wanted also to give a chance to Jainaba, our Nursery 1 teacher, to demonstrate good practice. She was very good at putting the points over and had some excellent examples of her own teaching and pupils to give the visiting teachers. We also covered making a sound bar, sand play and creating a stimulating classroom. Abi’s 2 daughters provided lunch and after that enjoyable “relax” we talked about story books and story telling, touching a little on the English curriculum and lesson plans that I have introduced here. By 5 pm the workshop was over and everyone participating related how much they had enjoyed it and gained from it and we look forward to keeping our links. The 4 schools are all quite different but regular meetings, sharing of ideas and visits from one to the other should help to consolidate good practice.

The students had been in to Brikama to learn to drum and returned very tired indeed! Yvonne and Keith had intended to leave them at the craft market and head back after some shopping, but were lured into the session and Keith bought yet another drum!

We ate Chicken Yassa again tonight as it is a favourite (onions, lime, vinegar and lots of black pepper in a sauce) but I was still full of the lunch I had had at the workshop, so was unable to eat much.

Wednesday – 8th April – Tony’s birthday!

We woke to a breakfast of festive cheer! Tony opened his cards and a few presents. I had bought him a little present in UK but also fell for a pair of wooden parrots that he had admired when Seedia Sowe called round with our elephants, rhinos and giraffes for the craft stall in UK. He always brings a little extra “something” in case we want to increase our buying and, of course, we always do! All the family had remembered to organise cards somehow or other and he enjoyed a lot of attention.

Another morning of teaching for everyone and the afternoon was spent busily sorting materials. Yvonne has started a great painting project in Grade 4 where she is putting lots of English and Maths memory aids and stimulators for the pupils to use in their work. Hopefully, other teachers will copy the ideas and, somehow, replicate the murals in their own classrooms.

Saffie arrived to visit us. I had phoned her yesterday and she is working at the College in Brikama on the ECD course. So it was easy for her to pop by. I was proud to show her around the school and I hope that she was impressed by the enormous improvements that we have made, both in the buildings and the standards that have been achieved since she left.

I stayed at Tonka Kunda to continue the sorting whilst the students, Yvonne, Keith and Shirley followed another phase of Tony’s Tours to Abuko Nature Reserve. Apparently they did not see very many animals by the water hole but enjoyed the monkeys. It is becoming a bit run down now and in this dry season the trees and plants are not that interesting. The Gambian President has created a safari park in his own village up river and that is much closer to the notion that people have of African nature reserves, although completely artificial because none of the big mammals have survived the massive hunting of past centuries. The last lion died in 1920.

Our afternoons for getting down to cataloguing, categorising and creating ideas is always interrupted by visitors. Sometimes children call by to see for reading books and we encourage them to sit quietly looking at the wealth of books that we have. They are so eager to learn more and very good about caring for the books and returning them. The older ones come to water the garden and often finish work early and come to read. Nene, the batik lady called by with the batiks that the students had made. She stayed to help me count exercise books which was very kind of her! We are hoping to issue books to every child so that they never have the situation where they cannot work because their parents cannot afford a book. We are going to number each one, allocate it to a pupil and then ask that they demonstrate good use of it before they receive a new one! Our biggest challenge is trying to introduce strategies for caring for materials in a culture where hardly anyone possesses anything so organisation, preservation and security are not issues that have been considered. What are we doing when we try to encourage our teachers and pupils to look after things? Are we saying that materialism is important?

Linda went to visit Abdoulie, our driver friend, in his compound. In the 5 years she has known him she has not had the chance to do this and she reported a lovely time.

She met his children, his wife and lots of neighbours and he was thrilled that she had taken the time to visit them.

We ate fishballs again tonight which is another favourite Gambian dish. The students have enjoyed the food for the most part but probably think that rice every evening is monotonous. That, however, is how all Gambians live and the quantity of choice that we have in UK shops is unnecessary and wasteful.

We did have a lovely gin and tonic on the terrace of Tonka Kunda to celebrate Tony's birthday and once again we all fell into our beds tired from the amazing amount of work that we attempt each day.

Thursday 9th April

Sad day as Linda leaves this afternoon. Her time with us has whizzed by and the teaching, sorting and discussing that we enter into full force, makes her contribution so important, fun and stimulating. She achieves a great deal in the nursery classrooms and has all the confidence and initiative to go in and help where she sees that she can advise and change things. Her friendly nature ensures that all the teachers accept and even seek her input. I will miss her!

All the teachers, and especially the PCO, were in a very excited state as the students had organised a Sports Day. It was impossible to extract any sense or focused management out of Ansumana (PCO) so we left him to join in the madness of the event and quietly got on with individual staff appraisals. Yvonne and Shirley witnessed a Farato Sports Day for the first time and were incredulous as to how crazy and excitable everyone was. We were a bit concerned about the total lack of security in the school compound as the event took place on the village prayer ground just outside the school and the back entrance to the school was opened to give the pupils access. It also gave outsiders access to come in to the school and the 3 caretakers (extra reinforcements for the students' week) were otherwise engaged. One was asleep, the other was having his hair shaved by the third – so not very alert to the situation!

Our appraisals were, for the most part, positive. Jainaba and Kaddy are both very strong teachers and we were able to give them very encouraging reports. Sainabou, however, is a worry. She has been teaching for 22 years. Since we sent her to the training college and have given her support for the past 9 years she has definitely made progress but there are clear signs that she finds it difficult to control a class, that she does not understand what her objectives are. She certainly is not managing her post as resources manager and we have now given her nearly 2 years' of support on this and still the materials are a shambles and the library is underused. So we will have to seriously rethink her position in the school. There will definitely be something for her after all her time here, but possibly working with small groups and certainly not taking a whole class. Now that we have 3 strong teachers and 2 potentially good students it is not going to help maintain developing standards if there is one class where the teacher is not stretching herself or the pupils to their fullest capacity.

After break – and sports day everyone was feeling very tired so the students played a variety of board games with the pupils and Linda and Shirley issued new toys to

Nursery 1. It was lovely to see the children playing so attentively with the activities and I do hope that Jainaba will take on board the importance of looking after these and storing them effectively. There will be time at the beginning of next term for Shirley and I to oversee this.

The school assembled to receive the results of Sports Day – blue team one and there was much jubilation. The students gave out presents, Linda gave out lollies and there was a general melee of end of term feeling. It all came to a brilliant conclusion when the school sang the national anthem and the students flew the huge Gambian flag that they had made from the verandah of the Primary school.

Abdoulie arrived punctually to drive Linda to the airport and Shirley wanted to come to see her off. It was very sad for everyone and groups of children called out to her as we left the village. They have such an endearing way of pronouncing her name – it pulls the heart strings!

It was party night for the students tonight. We had a disco and food in the classroom, lots and lots of dancing and they made presentations to all the teachers, the cooks and the ancillary staff. They have all had such a brilliant time working and especially living in the school and the camping has been really successful. Tonight's meal started with stewed cassava with a delicious bean sauce and hot onion and tomato drizzled on it. Delicious!

Friday – 10th April

Rather funny feeling really over the last 24 hours. All of a sudden we have gone from 6 adults at Tonka Kunda for breakfast and evening meal and a bunch of students to manage to the advent of just us 3. Yvonne continued with her painting up to the last minute, fed me with excellent ideas for the Primary classes and sat with Keith, Tony and I to plan the staffing structure for the next academic year. Keith gave us brilliant input on the management of the project and has created a fabulous structure for understanding the growing organisation of this project. His input has been so thought provoking and practical in such a short week. Shirley and I waved the students and Yvonne and Keith off and returned to sort out the materials. We keep doing this – every afternoon it is the same objective: to catalogue the materials, assign them to classrooms/teachers and then store them before issue. Why is there never enough time? Probably because we have so much donated to us. We are storing much of it for future classes and opportunities to deliver it. We are increasingly aware that training the teachers alongside issuing the materials is absolutely essential because all of it is so very new to even the experienced teachers. In a country where even text books are hard to come by, the flood of games, activities, puzzles, extra text books, reading schemes, phonics games, etc. etc. combine to produce a huge learning curve for the teachers. They are so willing and eager to learn more but we need to drip feed and support perpetually.

It has been great having so much help over the last 2 weeks. Now that term has ended we have a few days for Shirley and I to consolidate on the learning materials and plan the final 9 days of term for which I will be present in the classrooms. We need to sort and issue the uniform; clarify the Maths curriculum and revise the Phonics approach and how it connects to the reading scheme. Not a lot then!!!!

The 3 of us cooked a quiet dinner in our kitchen – first DIY meal for 10 days – and we ate rather a good pasta meal with home grown okra and aubergine.

Saturday – 11th April

We worked in the morning – putting records on the computer, sorting uniform dresses and issuing exercise books. The building is making good progress, although Tony had to ask the builder to take down the front wall as it was nowhere near in line with the doors and windows of the downstairs classroom. The new Clerk of Works has been absent for 3 days and seems to have written a report for the Structural Engineer based on no evidence. Tony spoke to the SE and they have decided to sack the CoW straight away. We are not having much luck with this role!

We stopped at 1.30 and arranged ourselves the afternoon off. Abdoulie drove us to Bakau where I wanted to phone home but the Gamtel office was shut and the one in Brikama has been burnt down! We negotiated necklaces and bracelets with Neneh at African Village Hotel where she has her stall, bought sandals from the stall next to her and then relaxed with a book and a beer for an hour or so by the hotel pool. This is the place we used to stay when we first started coming here so it has memories for us, but it now seems very strange to be sitting amongst tourists. We've really moved on!

We bought some lovely mangoes, cucumber and tomatoes from Abdoulie's "sister" and then stopped by the roadside to buy some potted plants for our courtyard. Linda had given us some money to spend on our Gambian home so this seemed a really brilliant idea. It will make the place seem bright and colourful when she returns to help us next year.

We felt surprisingly tired after our time out and had a leisurely drink on the verandah and then cooked curried soya for super. The gas cylinder was playing up and we were out of candles but we managed!

Back to full pumping now that the students have gone. Linda was doing over 1000 a night and they were all in competition to outpump each other. I do around 7-800 which is ample for showers and washing up. Tony does thousands and the children all do their own for the garden. It is hard work though and a very vital part of our day!

Sunday – 12th April EASTER DAY!

We had hard boiled eggs for breakfast – they floated when we boiled them, so not very fresh! Then we went to church. Such a colourful occasion. Whole families all decked out in gorgeous gowns using the same material. And the choir – wow they sang a moved in wonderful harmony and the drums had fabulous cross rhythms. Long after the service was over they carried on singing and dancing. I have arranged to go to one of their practices. I would love to record their music and play it at the Choir Fest that we are planning in Yalding, Kent.

Back at home, after a relaxing wander through the village, we got on with sorting uniform and keeping up this journal. Saikou called in for a long chat and we discussed agriculture, waste management, religion and youth. So that was important and very interesting! We found some very melted chocolate biscuits left over from the staff meeting last week and used those as our Easter celebrations.

