

Placement date and project



Lisong and Dianne

This was an ECD project, working with Lisong Bah to develop a course to train teachers and managers of ECD in The Gambia.

Pre-departure preparation

This is a relatively new project so there was not much information available before I left on what I would actually be doing. I did have a copy of the Draft Policy Document on ECD produced by The Gambian government which gave a clear picture of the government's intentions to prioritise this area of education, as well as some outline information on the country. As a secondary school specialist I was nervous about working on an ECD project so I spent some time with an ex-colleague who teaches the British DCE course (an A-Level course which qualifies students to work as nursery nurses and nannies) and I felt that the ideas and books she lent me were very useful. The most useful textbook has been left in The Gambia so that Lisong can use it when delivering her course.

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement

On arrival in The Gambia I was made extremely welcome, both by Lisong and Adama Bah from Faces and Places and by Tejan Nyang, the owner of my accommodation. I was met at the airport, taken out for a meal on the first evening which was a good opportunity to meet both Lisong and the other volunteer who was there at the same time as me, and given a comprehensive orientation tour of the area the following day which was very useful in helping me to find my bearings. The provision of a local SIM card for my phone, which already contained the numbers of various key people, was very reassuring - it was immediately clear that, should any problems arise, there were people there who would help.

Work on the placement

My task was to help Lisong to write a training course for people wishing to teach in ECD centres and/or to run centres. During the course of the placement I was taken to meet various key people in ECD in the Gambia, at the Region 1 Basic Education Directorate, at Gambia

College, at some NGOs and in several schools. I was made very welcome in all these places and by the end of my placement I felt I had developed a good working relationship with several of these people. I attended meetings about various aspects on the development of ECD as well as working at the Futures Training Centre. It was immediately clear that ECD is a real priority for the people of The Gambia and that a lot of work has been done to improve the provision of this important area of education. The new Government policy is to increase ECD provision by annexing nursery schools to lower basic schools, beginning in Region 6. Qualified primary school teachers are being given training workshops on ECD issues to enable them to teach at nursery level, and these teachers will be paid as qualified teachers. However those trained only in early child education are not given the status (or salary) of qualified teachers when they are employed in state schools, and their status and salary in the private sector varies hugely depending on the finances and level of operation of the service provider. A national curriculum for ECD has recently been produced which uses international criteria for skills and learning areas, although this is currently still in draft form. In the wider area of ECD I saw many excellent policy documents on aspects such as parenting and health education. It is a real shame that education, particularly at this level, is so dependent on foreign funding, as this seems to me to have led to the creation of many different policy documents that are not quite consistent with each other, which must make it difficult for the people left behind when the consultants leave to use them for training and put them effectively in place. In addition the expense and, in some parts of the country, scarcity of paper makes it difficult to make multiple copies of these documents and although this problem will be overcome when the storage of policy documents electronically becomes standard this is quite a new idea for The Gambia and certainly not yet in place.

The Futures Education Centre has currently been assigned one room in the Institute for Travel and Tourism in The Gambia to be used as a resource centre and office; two classrooms at the Institute will also be available for classes. The room is already in use as a resource centre and will be used for short courses (1 – 5 days) for people already working in ECD as well as becoming the base for the new teacher training courses. Lisong and Joan (the previous volunteer) had organised the room and sorted out the resources in the weeks before I arrived and I brought more resources from the UK, including some books and posters, which added to the stock of resources and were useful as display materials. Although these resources will be useful as examples and certainly brightened the Centre up, much more useful and relevant are the resources Lisong and various teachers have made from local resources such as shells and local fruits, as these can be used to show teachers how to make resources out of locally available materials rather than encouraging them to feel that all resources must come from abroad.

During the course of my placement Lisong and I wrote a brochure for the Centre, a course booklet for two one-year training courses, a detailed work plan which includes teaching methods and resources, and an application form for the course. The first year of the course is for people wishing to teach in ECD schools or centres or to update their training, and will be taught on Fridays and Saturdays for the 40 weeks of the school year, enabling people to

continue working in their current jobs if appropriate. There will also be a three week summer school, and teaching practice will take place in their current schools for those already teaching. The length of the course is equivalent to the training course currently provided by Gambia College and should enable students to acquire a Certificate in Teacher Training. The second year of the course is for those wishing to become leaders/managers of ECD centres and the emphasis is on the roles and responsibilities of the head of a centre as well as leadership skills. The course will be taught in the same way and on the same days as the first year course so it will not be possible for Lisong to offer the two courses concurrently unless she has at least one other permanent teacher to help her deliver it. I have already submitted copies of all of the materials we produced to People and Places, during the course of the placement.

Towards the end of my placement we held a workshop for representatives from various child care agencies, service providers and stakeholders who work together to ensure holistic child development takes place and who therefore will have an interest in the course. The practical difficulties in organising this course really made me appreciate the problems of working in a country where resources are so scarce and the infra-structure so poor – the lack of a fast and reliable postal delivery service and the unreliability of e-mail made it necessary to spend three days driving around delivering the paperwork and invitations by hand, and the expense of paper and printer ink also made printing the required resources time-consuming and difficult. The only photocopier I saw was in the International School, and although we were able to borrow it we needed to take our own paper. However the personal approach (and the regard in which everyone holds Lisong) did lead to an excellent turn-out at the workshop (even though the majority turned up at 10.00 rather than 8.30 as we had planned!). One group worked on year one of the course and the other group on year two, and some helpful comments were made on the structure and content of the modules which have now been amalgamated into the course booklet and work plan. I was interested (though not necessarily surprised) that the second year caused more debate than the first, and in some cases it was clear that the course participants had never had training themselves in some of the issues and so found it hard to understand our intentions. Evaluation comments from the workshop were all extremely positive, and a copy of these has already been submitted along with the other documentation.

I also spent two days working at SBEC, an international school. Resources and facilities here are good and the staff are all very highly motivated, and although it might be said that a school like this requires volunteer help less than the much poorer community schools in many ways it seemed more possible to make a difference here. I also felt more on home territory in these two days as I spent most of my time working with the head of the upper school on management issues, an area of education I am very familiar with. The school currently takes students up to year 8 so a major area of debate for the school is the need to plan for the GCSE and A-Level courses which they will need to resource and plan for in the next few years. I helped them look at many of their policy documents and provided some templates for documents such as staff development and long-term improvement planning which will provide them with a possible structure for their own policies. I was pleased and amazed that, when I e-

mailed them a copy of the UK Professional Standards for Teachers in response to a request for some information on how teachers in the UK are assessed, they had met to discuss this and put it in place as a school policy within four days, those four days being the Friday to Monday of the Easter weekend! I also spent half a day with the History teacher and have been collecting further resources for him since my return to the UK which I will be sending out next week. As well as the documentation I gave them, I feel that what they found really helpful was someone from outside to discuss ideas with and to provide reassurance that much of what they are doing is already on the right lines – they are very isolated as they are so different from the other schools in The Gambia and their relationship with the other international school appears to be competitive rather than co-operative.

Successes and disappointments

I was very pleased with the course structure and course booklets we produced during my placement and feel that the work plan has given Lisong a clear structure for the delivery of the course, although she will inevitably make some changes when the course is actually delivered. The comments from the stakeholders at the workshop were very pleasing and suggest that the course is well structured and will really help to fill the much-needed gap for good teacher training at this level. Lisong's understanding of ECD and the fact that her previous training workshops have all gone down so well mean that a course led by her stands a good chance of success.

However I am disappointed that we were unable to complete all the documentation to get the Futures Training Centre fully accredited as a training provider. I never managed to find out what documentation was needed – my first impression was that there were no clear guidelines or requirements, but it became clear near the end of my placement that there are documents that need to be submitted and I am sorry that we did not complete these during my placement. I did type up some legal documentation and complete one form on accreditation standards, but I discovered on the last morning that there are further registration forms to complete. I am sorry that I did not pursue this aspect of the development of the course more vigorously while I was in The Gambia – I should have investigated the paperwork required when ITTOG was registered as a training provider for tourism courses and made sure we completed the same documentation as they had to complete.

Recommendations for future volunteers

If another volunteer with experience in writing bids for courses or for funding could be found soon this would be helpful in completing the process of getting the Futures Training Centre registered as a training provider.

As soon as the course is registered, volunteers to teach individual modules would be very helpful. The first year of the course focuses on training teachers in ECD, so nursery/primary school experts would be most helpful here. The second year focuses on leadership and management issues so volunteers to help on this course could come from a wider range of

teaching experience, but would need some experience in leadership issues. Lisong would also like help in equipping the resource centre with literature and audio-visual materials to use on the training courses.

I was very impressed by Lisong's focus on teacher training as the way to raise education standards across the country rather than working in an individual school where improvements will affect only a small number of children.

Use of leisure time

I very much appreciated the way in which trips were organised for us on three weekends, in addition to the orientation tour the first weekend. Two of these were excellent weekend trips, one to Jufureh and the other up-country to the stone circles at Wassu and to Janjangbureh (Georgetown). The third was a day trip down the coast to Kartong and Tanji. This enabled us to see a lot of the country with a guide, which made travelling around very easy and was very much appreciated.

Accommodation

My accommodation was in a good location, within ten minutes walk of the beach. I enjoyed staying here and if returning to The Gambia would want to stay in the same accommodation.

In conclusion, I thoroughly enjoyed my placement in The Gambia. Thank you to Lisong, Adama and Tejan who made it such an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. I will certainly be planning to do another volunteer placement next year.

Dianne Ashman