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ECD – The Gambia – Yvonne Coulson

Placement date was January 18th to February 22nd 2011

To work with Lisong Bah on her early years development project and the Greenie project



Yvonne & Lisong in the new ECD centre

Pre departure I spent time in the reception, year 1 at the school where I am a governor to refresh my memory on teaching at this level. I also visited the nursery at my daughter's school to look at best practise at this age range. I purchased art and craft materials, pencils, crayons etc. I thought might be useful. I also bought a number of wall charts and picture story books suitable for this age range. I obtained a copy of the Leicestershire early years development folder from 0months to 60months which covers all aspects of early child development.

Orientation was good Lisong and Mariama showed me around the local area introducing me to the head of Bijilo nursery school (ages 3-6) and to the heads at Sebec international primary school (ages 3-10). We took a tour of the market and had a traditional style Gambian lunch. We also went out to Gambia college to meet the ECD project head.

Work experience I spent the first few days helping Lisong to pack up her old office in preparation for moving into new much enlarged premises which are next to her home in what had previously been a restaurant and sewing factory. I also helped prepare for a day's course on the "greenie project"

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Then I was more at home working for a week at Bijilo Nursery. I went into the Toddler class, 3-4 year olds and was horrified when they were expected to sit still doing nothing for about half an hour, while the very young teacher called the register. At break we managed to look in what was called the teachers room and dream corner, this was full of equipment that had been donated but was kept safe.

Note from people and places: in virtually all projects, donated equipment is initially treasured and valued by being locked away. With volunteers' repeated encouragement and assistance, projects gain confidence in using donated items and equipment – things are valued by being used, rather than 'kept safe'.

Not safe from me and a big raid on the contents occurred, the head did not seem very upset by my antics and helped me take things to the class. We set up a few things for them to do I gave instructions and the teacher translated when needed. The next day during registration we had 2 tables with books to look at 1 with bricks to build a tower, 1 with large lego for building and 1 with bottle tops to sort into colours or count. Organising them to move on after 15 mins took till the end of the week to accomplish but the teacher got the idea and the little ones soon understood they would all get a go. Trying to make the teacher understand that at this age you learn through play was a bigger learning curve for him than for the children. School finished at 1.30 pm and I was driven to Lisong's old office to pack boxes. The following week I was supposed to spend all day at the office but Lisong could see this was not on, so arranged for me to return to Bijilo, where the head put me with the next year group up, the teacher was more mature and had some idea about teaching this age group but still needed advice and a trip to the store cupboard which we raided for suitable things for the 4-5 year olds and introduced them to activities.

Note from people and places: all volunteers are encouraged to discuss their roles and work before and during their placements. This allows for amendments to be made to placements, when agreed between volunteers and their project co-ordinator / co-workers.

By now the bar staff at the hotel were saving the bottle tops for me and we managed a good few for all sorts of sorting. The head even set the children to collect tops. They were due to go on a walk to the beach in the top year and were set the task of collecting shells, easy job, the beaches here are full of them.

On the Wednesday there was the first of the Greenie teaching days and we went to the Guide Head quarters to use their big hall for our presentation. There were 19 people at the meeting plus Lisong, George and myself. Not all were teachers, 3 were from the local press, one was a local councillor and one a lecturer from the Gambia College. It was a little daunting as after introducing our selves I had to make the opening speech. Then we did presentations on each page of the Greenie book Lisong did the first 2, I did the next 2 and the 5th was mainly by the councillor. I had some little science style experiments for them to do for both

my presentations and everything went well. We grew cress seeds in egg shells, chef had been saving these for me and we had enough to go round. I made water filters from cut in half empty water bottles and tissues. We had a snack in the mid morning and lunch at 1.00pm so there was plenty of time to talk to the teachers. I then had the fun of presenting the certificates to all. It was a shame there was only one of these meetings while I was there and the follow up, a bit like a mini ofsted was scheduled for after my return.

The Thursday and Friday I returned to Bijilo and worked with the older children 6-7 and preparing to go to the primary School next academic year. The teacher was better prepared and the children's English much more advanced. We managed some good lessons. The school has a big garden which the head and all the staff tend with some help from the children we worked out a little plan for the children to help there. The classes are large about 40 in each though there are often absentees.



gardens at Bijilo

The following week I was working 2 days at Sebec this is a high fee paying school and has a mix of nationalities in its children and staff. I was to work with 10 year olds, 2 parallel classes teaching geography , comparing the Gambia and the UK , they then said could I do the same for the 9 year olds . They asked me to do work on money with the same classes on the Tuesday. They work on an English syllabus and the books they use contain quite a lot of money calculations. I found in my case some coins and by asking around at the hotel managed to get one of each coin which I sellotaped to a card. Using these and some maths books which were too old for Lisong to use and were in the pile we had sorted for giving to older schools I put together some work to help them with money especially coin recognition. Here the classes had a maximum of 20 children

The Wednesday was a Bank holiday and Lisong was off to Banjul to the Methodist conference, so I had a day off. School was closed till the following Tuesday for half term, so I arranged a trip up river.

The final Monday I worked a bit at the new office come lecture area and took photos, we also went to the market last minute shopping. On the Tuesday morning I went into Sebec for a quick farewell and then it was time to come home.

Resources

I left behind posters and picture story books at Bijilo also 2 DVD's suitable for 3-6 years.

Art and craft material I had not used

Toys we had acquired and small gardening tools with Lisong.

The Leicestershire development plan with Lisong

What we do well what we could do better.

The work I did was not quite what I was expecting to do but how you could have for seen that I don't know. I was expecting to be working with Lisong on her teacher training sessions but as she was moving and the course was not up and running this was difficult. The only actual teacher training was on the Greenie project and there was only one of those, it was the first one and I hope I helped make it a positive start. Sorting through the office to pack up was not what I expected, but it did give me a chance to see what resources Lisong has. There were hundreds of books and pamphlets which I helped to sort into useful for ECD, pass on to older schools, police, and into the bin.

Finding a home at Bililo was good and then helping to arrange everything in the new office was interesting, but made me determined not to move again, you can go off boxes. We stacked a lot of the boxes of books under the veranda while the painter was white washing the internal walls. When we came to unpack 2 of the big ones at the bottom of the pile we found that the termites had been at them! I would not have believed that in just 3days the little critters could do so much damage and we used 2 big cans of spray to kill them off before we could sort them out. Working in Africa is certainly different. I was glad I had taken rubber gloves for gardening, good for avoiding termites.

Recommendations for future volunteers

Rubber gloves at least one pair of Marigolds should be on the need to take list, you never know when you might need them. As you have stressed before flexibility is the buzz word.

If there are any teachers going out I am sure they would be appreciated at Bijilo to continue to help the teachers and ensure the resources in the store room are used, as in all 3rd world schools they hoard things given. I tried to stress that these things were given to be used not to worry if things got damaged or used up hopefully more would arrive. The local hotels sent groups of people to look at the school and they always made donations of goods or money. I hope by the time the next volunteer goes out that Lisong's teacher training classes will be up and running. I was sorry that I had not had more input in this area.

Note from *people and places*: all returning volunteers are updated about 'their' project from time to time, and also put in touch with future volunteers. This enables continuity in the project as well as keeping returned volunteers 'in the loop' about continued developments.

My leisure Time

The first weekend I spent Saturday exploring near the hotel and taking photos. That Sunday Bev and I went on a local cookery course at Ada's we can recommend it. Dressing up in local costume, going to market to buy the ingredients, then preparing the food and eating it. I have even tried out cooking Chicken Yassa for a party here. On Bev's last weekend we went down to Sandele and stayed there in the new resort set up by

Gerri , It is a beautiful spot and worth visiting if a little expensive. Another sat. I went by Taxi to Banjul and to the Albert market, using the hotel taxi as transport and guide round the town. In the evening I went to Lisong's to her Mother's 98th birthday party very interesting wonderful food music and mix of people. One Sat I went to a wild life area down south of Brikama called Makasutu. Worth the visit but with taxi and entrance not cheap would be better if someone to share taxi cost. I went to trinity Methodist church with Lisong and we met the Bishop who was preaching that Sunday. As the end of my final week was half term and Lisong was at the Methodist Conference I booked a trip up river. Adama helped me organise it but it was advertised on the hotel notice board. It was a great trip by mini bus, solar powered boat and a wooden ship called the Lady Hippo (African Queen style). We stayed in 2 different lodges and had guided walks, canoe trips and bus trips to see an amazing variety of birds and wild life. I would recommend it to any one interested in birds.

Note from people and places: our local partners and project management team can help to arrange a variety of trips and excursions – Yvonne's experiences show this to be the case!

The accommodation was good, the staff friendly and helpful there was an interesting mix of other guests. Lisong looked after me very well and we got on famously, did not see a great deal of Mariama as she was in England for some of the time. It was a good trip and hope to return same time of year in 2013.

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