

Having visited The Gambia previously through involvement in another project I was excited to be returning. Communication with Sallie and Diane was good prior to the placement with advice and supporting information via emails and phone calls, including some useful words and phrases in the local language but future volunteers would benefit from direct contact with the placement prior to going and photos or short videos to help them prepare would also be very beneficial. I was fortunate enough to meet Lisong (Owner of Mary's Little Lambs) in August whilst she was visiting the UK and this really helped me in my preparation. We got along instantly and appeared to be very likeminded. It was a pleasure to be able to show her my children's nursery so she could see first hand my background and work and I think this gave her some idea of how I may be able to contribute to her setting as a volunteer. We were already working in partnership.



Flying there was a long trek due to having to catch 2 flights, one from Manchester to Barcelona then a 7 hour wait there until my next flight to Banjul. Once in Gambia I was met by the lovely Lisong and her husband Adama at the airport. This was not my first experience of Banjul airport and was no surprise to me when I arrived in the middle of a power cut and was met with airport officials carrying torches ! Aside from the powercut to negotiate, the first thing that hit me was the heat. It was getting late (about 8.30pm) but the heat was still intense and very humid I wasn't prepared for that and soon felt that my jeans and shirt were not the best items of clothing to arrive in !

I was staying at Riyan Apartments and check in was quick and easy. Lisong and Adama remained with me for a short while then we arranged for Lisong to come to the apartment on Monday morning (I arrived Saturday) to walk with me to the school. The apartment was basic but clean and had everything I needed. I felt at home very quickly. There is a well stocked shop and a modern restaurant beneath the apartments and a lovely small private pool with bar at the back of the apartments. Pool towels provided, daily cleaning and change of towels and a huge plus for D300 and a box of washing powder, you can have all your laundry done. I took advantage of this every Friday, my clothes came back washed, dried and ironed an absolute godsend being as I was there for 4 weeks. I would highly recommend the apartments and would most definitely stay there again. The main road outside is extremely busy but it really didn't bother me, I quite enjoyed sitting on the balcony for breakfast and in the evening watching the world go by and there were some interesting modes of transport ! WiFi is a little hit and miss and TV channels limited (although I did find Formula 1 😊)but I didn't mind that. The beach is literally 5 minutes stroll across the road.



Monday morning soon arrived and as planned Lisong came to meet me at 8.30am. The road to the school is just at the side of the apartments and is about a 10-15 minute straight walk. It was very easy to find. You meet a number of people along the way who were all very pleasant and friendly. Some may want to engage you in more conversation than you wish for but just being polite to them and carrying on your way is all that was necessary. The road is sandy and has a VERY uneven surface so good shoes are advisable ! Random sheep and chickens wander around and there is a lovely local bar/restaurant 'Bloggers' along this road with a couple of small shops (blink and you will miss them). The walk there and back was very pleasant and much more satisfying than walking along the busy roads where I live. In fact it was something to look forward to.



On my first day I had a meeting with Lisong and Adama, who discussed aspects and essentials of my placement and the area, this was informative, helpful and made me feel extremely welcome. Lisong and Adama were extremely supportive and assisted me in several ways during my stay, not least to purchase a cheap phone to make calls and texts cheaper and also a visit to the chemist for antibiotics ! I was given an informative tour of the nursery and school and introduced to all the teachers, who were also very welcoming.



My placement plan was clear but despite this I did find settling in a little difficult for the first week due to the intense heat and more mosquito bites than I cared to count. However, the energy and atmosphere of the nursery school carried me through and I was fascinated by the way in which they worked and the methods they use, coming from an early years background in the UK it was a little like going back in time. Early years in the UK is far more advanced and you immediately begin to appreciate how many resources, materials and how much money we have at our disposal. I was unprepared for the daily morning teaching routine and had I only spent a week there, I do feel I would have left thinking this had very little value for any of the children. However, as the placement progressed I quickly realised I could use the morning routine as a tool enabling me to introduce other ways of teaching the things they wanted the children to learn and a way in which to encourage the children to use and transfer their knowledge. My placement plan was to really focus on promoting learning through play and I identified that the outdoor area really was a great place to start. Lisong had particularly liked my own settings outdoor area so I really wanted to try and recreate some things for her. The outdoor area is lovely and had a trampoline, 2 seesaws and some swings but little that challenged the children's imaginative play. I had taken some resources with me such as playdough tools, paintbrushes, flashcards (suggested by Lisong) and some small wooden sticks and discs with letters and numbers on. There is a list of other resources I would have taken and found equally if not more significant for use, having now experienced what they need to support learning through play.



I spent the first week working in each of the 3 nursery school classes, hands on but also observing practice, starting at 8.30am and finishing when the children did at 1pm. Whilst these may seem short hours, working in the intense heat really did make you feel like you had completed a 10 hour shift. What I also found difficult was knowing what resources they had available and where these were kept. The nursery rooms are quite small and just about fit the tables, chairs and children in, with little room for cupboards displaying resources and materials. The rooms are most definitely not set out as you would find in a nursery in the UK. I was however introduced to

a store cupboard that once I had dragged everything out and re-organised it and had some help cleaning the resources, I found some useful items for the outdoors. A little trip to Serekunda market (what an experience, especially the bush taxi ride) completed all the resources I needed to reinvent the outdoor area.



Working closely with Aunty Elsie (Lambs group) I was able to create several areas of play outside;

- a den out of material and a disused swing complete with an old suitcase filled with books, a floor mat and a couple of small logs to sit on
- a car/bus from old crates and a steering wheel
- sand and water play using large bowls available and resourcing with spoons, bottles, plates, shells and containers
- a large log for children to sit on in front of the painted blackboard whilst they played at being teacher
- a role play kitchen area with various plates, bowls, pots, plastic food and a traditional stove bought at the market set into rocks and stones
- large boxes provide endless imaginative fun mainly used by the boys
- colour sticks hanging from the tree and letters and number wooden discs hanging in the den





In addition to these physical resources, I subtly introduced other small changes that would demonstrate teaching numbers and letters in particular, in a less formal manner than the morning routine. The teachers would bring out small plastic balls for the children to use at playtime so I used a marker pen to put numbers on these. We played games finding balls by number and also colour, rather than just throwing them around. Similarly they had some plastic container lids, so they got numbered too ! The children themselves began to place these out in order creating their own number line and also finding the ball with corresponding numbers to match to the lids. What was lovely and heart-warming to see was Aunty Fina (Little Lambs) starting to adjust her teaching approach with the younger children by using a variety of numbered items for the children to sort and match, as opposed to standing in front of the group and holding up a number flashcard.



The changes to the outdoor area were a huge success, the children loved the new additions and explored everything to the full. They pretended to be teacher at the blackboard, they looked at books and listened to the teachers read stories. They spent long periods of time pretending to cook and drive or ride on the bus to Serekunda. The water bowl and sand bowl were busy areas with some lovely pouring and measuring taking place. One child in particular spent a very long time filling every bottle (about 6) using a cup and then lining them up on the pavement. I took this to be their own experience of collecting water to take to their home. Water was mixed into the sand to make some really sloppy pies, the children thoroughly enjoyed this.



Playdough day was exciting. I bought the ingredients needed and had taken a range of food colourings with me. I spent the morning moving from class to class demonstrating to the teachers and encouraging hands on interaction from the children how to make playdough. Children touched the raw ingredients, they named it and tasted it (I like children to fully appreciate and experience each element when making something like this), they mixed and poured and watched closely as physical changes took place to the ingredients. Once the playdough was made they spent so much time exploring what they could do with it. They used the tools or just their hands and both the teachers and children had a great deal of fun. In the older classes particularly Aunty Haddy's (Big Lambs) the playdough quickly became a fun teaching method, exactly as I had hoped. Children initially explored and did their own thing but from observing the teacher rolling small balls of playdough, they identified this as 'Bulet' a fish ball dish and the children began to make their own, which led to a lovely counting activity as they counted how much Bulet they each had. This could have extended into 'more or less' rather than simply counting but it was a good start to show an alternative way to learn number value.



On my final week and following a quick discussion with Lisong to gain approval, I introduced the biggest change. The large room at the front of the school is underused whilst children are in small rooms with little space. Lisong wanted to see the children play more so I had suggested better use of space and teacher deployment. Freeflow indoor outdoor was about to be introduced ! I suggested we try placing some floor toys in the large front room, plus one table and some chairs. Aunty Elsie (Lambs) would work at this table with small numbers of children from her group completing formal work for short periods of time (10/15 minutes) rotating, whilst the remaining children joined Aunty Fina and Aunty Mariama playing either inside with the toys available or outside. The children were to be allowed to move freely between these spaces. This worked fabulous, the children were very happy and played very nicely and I think the teachers also saw the benefits of working this way. I hope they continue and develop it further.



During my 3rd week the school was closed for 3 days but 2 of these days we used for training. Part of my placement plan was to deliver a workshop to the teachers, both nursery and primary, focusing on play. I do wish I had been more prepared in this prior to leaving the UK but it hadn't been very clear what was required or at what level. Despite this I drew on all my experience of children and of teaching and managed to put together a fairly comprehensive training session. I was extremely relieved to find that I had the use of a projector and screen so could deliver a power point presentation to support the practical aspects of the training. It was actually good to prepare the training towards the end of the placement as I was able to use photos I had taken of the things I had been doing with/for the children and this made the whole session far more personal and effective. During my time there I had been collecting recyclable materials such as loo rolls, cartons, boxes and bottles at my apartment, that I was originally to take in for a junk modelling activity with the children, however I decided to take the teachers back to childhood and they did the activity instead and made some fabulous items. The workshop was a great day with every teacher fully engaged in the activities planned and really focused on the information that I delivered, even if they didn't learn anything from it they certainly had fun ! The training days both ended with a lovely lunch provided by Lisong (Domoda one day and Benechin the other), sat outside in the school grounds, it was a great opportunity to relax and chat casually with the teachers.





At the end of my placement I met with Lisong and Abdourahman (Operations Manager) to discuss my placement and suggestions that could further develop and enhance practice in the nursery school. I found discussing things with them extremely easy as they are very open minded and eager for positive input but I too had gone with no intention of imposing a western approach as the best way forward. It is important to embrace their culture and understand the challenges faced by educators in The Gambia. Life is very different and opportunities are limited, any future volunteers need to appreciate it is not about imposing our methods on them but more about looking at ways they can take elements of our teaching methods and incorporate them into what they already do so well. My suggestions received a positive response and again we were very much thinking on the same wave length. During this discussion I looked at the plans Lisong had for a training programme for nursery teachers and would very much like to work on this with her in the future, so hopefully we can continue to communicate and make plans. But for now my suggestions to keep improving and developing were as follows.....

- Increase support for teachers making more purposeful use of the nannies
- Organise shelves in each room to give clear spaces for the different resources (use boxes / baskets where possible). Label the spaces to encourage children (and teachers) to recognise where toys and resources belong
- Combine Little Lambs and Lambs during the morning making more use of available spaces (the big room) and allowing for freeflow indoor outdoor play and smaller working groups that will have more attention from the teacher working with them
- Use practical activities more in class that link to and then lead into more formal teaching on worksheets
- Continue to add to the resources outdoors and maintain current provisions. Construct a shady area, place a bench for sitting, gather small logs and other natural materials such as rocks for a construction area etc.
- Move round table in big room from current place to under the television to free up space and protect children from catching the trailing wires and cables
- Create a pictorial timeline of the days activities for the children, place at child level maybe use as part of the morning routine.
- Consider introducing teacher rota for certain tasks, such as; daily routine, setting up playground etc.
- Ensure constant supervision of the children

- Invest in storage containers to hold the morning (arrival) toys to help children learn to organise (categorise) resources and take care of them.
- Don't use toys that are not complete ie: don't put a toy car garage out to play with if there are no cars, there is no purpose for this and it will not be played with appropriately, therefore of no benefit to the children.
- Consider introducing child self-registration (in addition to the official register being taken). Each child has a name card they stick on their classroom door when they arrive at nursery school.
- Discourage/ban the use of Mobile phones whilst working with the children.
- Consider the nursery school having their own area for storage of resources and materials. One suggestion could be Little Lambs classroom. Use this as a teachers only area and use the front room as the play area and classroom for Little Lambs (Lunch may be difficult).
- Consider cost effective ways to install display boards in each class. One for the teachers information such as planning and timetable and others to display children's work.
- Review setting timetable to ensure play is identified and included everyday, especially outdoor play.

Things I should have considered...

- Sticky labels to write the children's names on for them to wear each day to make building relationships and communication better.
- Preparation of a new practical activity each week that could have maybe related to the weeks theme.
- More contribution to planning meetings to ensure I understand the system and available resources. Plus be able to add activities in that perhaps I could have led on to help with teaching and managing the children.

Some suitable resources to take....

- Story books, chinks, worksheets (numbers, letters), practical items to support the themes the teachers introduce each week.

Myself and Lisong shared a number of resources, not least the planning books used, the early years curriculum for Gambia and I had taken over our L3 EYP training specification, training resources, books to support learning through play and other paperwork from my own setting that supports the daily operation of the nursery. I think all had taken was a little overwhelming but will be a good source to reference as and when needed. Or simply to gain some ideas from.

Whilst working at the nursery school was the focus of my time in The Gambia, my own time was precious and gave a great opportunity for reflection and relaxation. I would spend time by the pool or take the short stroll down to the beach. I was fortunate to have the company of another volunteer and this really did help to make the whole volunteer experience fabulous, we formed a great friendship and really enjoyed each others company. We visited different restaurants in the evenings and took trips to Tanji museum, the snake park and crocodile park and we have kept in touch on our return home, hopefully we will return to The Gambia again one day together.



We had an evening out with Lisong to a church fundraising event which was a lovely evening and as with everything in The Gambia, very different to an evening out in the UK. Lisong was a lovely host and prepared lunch for us in her home on several occasions, tasty pasties and pancakes and Adama treated us to lunch at Mama Africas one day, near Tanji and this again was a lovely experience in an exceptionally tranquil and cultural setting, we were truly spoilt. I tasted Ataya (slowly brewed very sweet green tea) delicious, as is the local beer Julbrew and traditional dishes of Domoda, Benechin and Yassa (all can be made with beef, chicken or fish).



The whole experience (I was there for 4 weeks) was amazing and I will most definitely return. Future volunteers should consider the length of time they can afford to the project, to gain the best experience and to be the most beneficial for everyone, I would recommend a minimum of 3 weeks but be prepared to work hard, take each day as it comes and to do anything. You need to be prepared to communicate in a very basic way because the language is quite difficult and whilst all teachers speak good English and teach in English, at nursery school age they are just learning so teaching is reinforced using multiple languages, for future visits I would definitely make sure I know a few basic sentences to use with the children. I have kept in touch with 2 of the nursery teachers in a WhatsApp group and they post photos regularly of the things they have been doing with the children. I absolutely love these updates. In addition I have also had printed large photos of my time there with the children and these will be sent to Lisong so she can display them around the nursery school. The children and parents will benefit from this as it will show children engaged and learning through play.

A few more favourite photos from the 318 I took not including videos !!!



