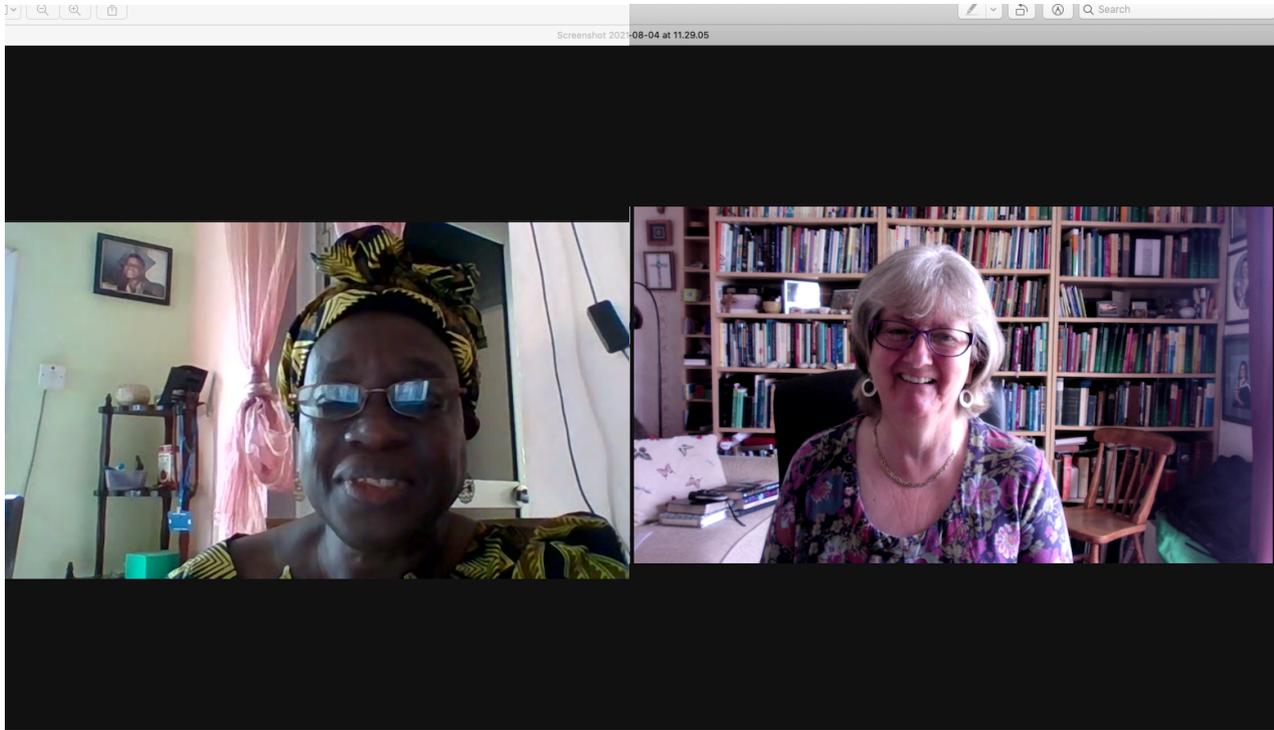


Our Project:

Preparing a Training Programme for Parents of Children 24-36 months in The Gambia ~ Lisong and Mary. April-August 2021



Lisong: Kiloli, The Gambia

Mary: Huddersfield, UK

I first learned of *people and places* through a friend who had volunteered with the organisation and spoke very highly of the opportunity for both travel and experience of partnership work with an overseas organisation. In fact, it was the same friend who shared with me the opportunity to work on a project in The Gambia. I was not in a position to travel overseas, nor would I have been able to given the travel restrictions 2020-21, but the opportunity to become an e-volunteer had immediate appeal as I consider myself a global citizen with so much to learn about people and places in other parts of the world. I have worked in early childhood education – as a practitioner, lecturer, consultant – for my whole career and this was opportunity to share practice with a fellow educator in another cultural setting.

Having little idea what to expect as an e-volunteer, I was delighted how quickly Lisong and I established rapport at our weekly Zoom meetings and were able to clarify the work entailed in our project. We had planned the work to be completed over 12 sessions and, although in the end, we needed one additional week, we both managed to complete our shared work. Occasionally, there was an issue of power outage in The Gambia but we were able to work round this with some flexibility and this only served to remind me of the challenges faced and resilience shown by Lisong and others.

Lisong owns and runs a nursery /pre-school and lower basic school in Kiloili but also works with the Government Education Department of The Gambia. Her current work at national level is to prepare a training programme for parents of children from birth to three years. The aim is to run the programme across the country in order to help parents understand the key role they have in supporting their young child's learning and development. The programme has three phases/levels and Lisong had already completed and submitted the first two phases of the training programme: children from birth to 12 months; and children from 12-24 months. It was the third phase: supporting children from 24-26 months for which Lisong had requested support. We worked on three cycles to the programme: Cycle 1: Child Health and Well-being; Cycle 2: Supporting Children's Physical, Social and Emotional Development; and Cycle 3: Supporting Early Learning and Preparing for Pre-School. Our regular weekly work involved agreeing the content and shape of the 12 sessions covering each cycle (36 sessions in all). I responded to Lisong's requests for background notes on some of the topics. Lisong would then prepare the session plans and, in turn, I then provided feedback. There was much diligence here from both sides!

The preparation for the placement provided by *people and places* was excellent. I was a little frustrated that the obtaining of references etc. took some time when I was itching to get started but – on reflection – feel that, by carrying out such a rigorous selection process, *people and places* are protecting not only their own reputation but also the volunteers and overseas' partners. My initial Zoom meeting with Dianne was highly informative and reassuring about what would be involved and the support that would continue to be available to me. Once accepted as an e-volunteer, Dianne sent copies of reports from previous *people and places* who had worked with Lisong. Although the focus of their projects was different from my own, these reports gave me such good insights into early childhood practice in The Gambia and were probably the single most helpful preparation for my own work. Dianne was helpfulness itself throughout the project: arranging and hosting the initial meeting with Lisong and her husband, Adama, and ensuring we were all at ease; setting up a WhatsApp group for us which was really useful especially when Zoom wasn't operational. Dianne's availability throughout the project and her 'checking in' with regular reviews (including Adama) were also extremely helpful,

As noted above, at Lisong's request, I prepared a number of short papers as background notes to the session contents. Copies of these have already been sent to *people and places* (and can be re-sent if requested) but they included:

- **Cycle 1:** childhood allergies; fussy eaters; headlice; sleep patterns
- **Cycle 2:** brain development 24-36 months; sensory play; the importance of talking to your child; communication through story-telling; social and emotional development; managing children's behaviour
- **Cycle 3:** foundations of... writing, reading, mathematical development; equality and equity in opportunities for learning; children with additional (special) needs; heuristic play; managing transitions from home to pre-school.

Generally, as I have outlined, we completed our work almost within the allotted timescale and that in itself was very satisfying. Given the issues with power outages, I needed to be flexible about short-term changes of day for our weekly Zoom meetings so future volunteers would need to take such flexibility into account. The technical quality of our meetings was generally good but there

were occasions with frozen screens, loss of sound etc. Good humour and patience were the order of the day!

The highlight of my e-volunteering experience was establishing strong rapport very quickly with Lisong. I always looked forward to seeing the session plans from Lisong after she had digested my background notes. She was able to contextualise the material so well for the parents who are the target group for this programme, and, in turn, I learned SO much about family life and early learning in The Gambia. As the sessions progressed, Lisong and I engaged in deep shared reflections on matters relating to early childhood in our respective cultures. I found this extremely stimulating, and – again - I learned so much. I would recommend e-volunteering to other people as it provides wonderful first-hand experience of cultural enrichment – even at a distance.

I have no objection to the following responses being shared:

From my experience, there were no significant omissions or changes needed in the information *people and places* shared with me during my preparation for this placement?

I have no concerns about the support you received from *people and places* and/or the local partner during my placement. On the contrary, the support I received throughout was excellent.

I have outlined the challenges presented by power outages in The Gambia. I believe these were overcome to the best of everyone's ability and it's hard to know what else could have been done. Having our WhatsApp group as back-up was really important for communication

With hindsight, I might have discussed with Lisong where or how she sees the work we have done developing. It is not easy, therefore, to say how our work could be continued by others – although there is scope for an evaluation of the parents' training programme when it is rolled out (This is in the hands of the Government). There may be many more opportunities to work in partnership with early childhood education providers in other low-income or economically newly emerging countries.

As I have outlined in the main body of my report, I believe you did all things well! (Sorry not to be more critical!)

Mary Whalley
29th August 2021