

Report from St Johns trip, Gambia Feb 2013

The trip was from February 16th to 23rd under the auspices of the Gambia Deaf Children's Support Project (GDCSP) and supported by Malcolm Garner, his energy and his trusty bus. Malcolm is fearless driving in Serrekunda and his quick reactions as a cyclist stand him in good stead to drive on the unmade side roads...he knows all the cut through potholed roads.....my theory is that he drives the bus like he rides a mountain bike!

The Party

It was wonderful to be joined this trip by two Longwill teachers, Helen Cooper and Alison Jackson who came with her husband, John Jackson. John is a science teacher and pastor who had made his own connections with church and school. We were a happy band of five staying at Safari Gardens with a variety of other NGOs in a basic but lovely hotel where at every meeting and conversation one learns something new about a health initiative or a school project.

The Work

We had just five working days this trip...we had to fit into our Longwill half term holiday, and my plan was to do an observation of all the class teaching and introduce Ali and Helen to the school and children and then we would plan a work schedule on priorities....and then get to work. The 'best laid plans' meant that we ended up having to cram five days into three! Monday turned out to be the Independence Day and Tuesday another public holiday because schools were expected to parade in front of invited dignitaries and for the president, His Excellency Sheikh Professor Alhaji Doctor Yaya Jammeh.

The three of us went to the parade and Helen and Alison's first school experience was being crammed into the school bus with a selected group of pupils and teachers in uniform. Their first Gambian experience was standing all day in the hot sun learning Gambian signs and getting to know some children waiting to parade. Parading past the visiting African national congress in full robes to a marching band and especially past the leader smiling in white robes with his tribal spear and wide grin being told by a man with a megaphone to smile and wave to the presidentthis does have to go down as one of life's most unusual days.

He does however create a large group of happy people who think he builds the roads and put the electricity in. Interpreting his speech to the masses to the deaf children I was standing with was also a first! David Cameron can't really compete for drama and high faluting rhetoric.

Day 1

Walk in the parade in Banjul following the St. John's banner...meet the children and staff and renew old acquaintances...stand in line to collect the children's breakfast and water rations..watch the amazing locals bands and cultural dancing and drumming.



St John's school off to the Parade

Day 2

No children or staff in school apart from the Headteacher today...buy cleaning materials and marigolds and clean and repair the audiology room and get it fit to be a clinic again. Remove the encroaching Saharan dust.



Day 3

Introduce Helen and Ali to Gambian deaf education styles and visit each class and meet all the teachers and children. After a quick planning meeting we agree priorities and Ali and Helen set off to work individually with a teacher.

I set the first training session in motion and organised the advert and publicity and important drinks and is units and money for bus fares homes. I have learned over the years that staff are willing to come and train with me but missing a lift home on the school bus is a problem as many cannot easily afford to get taxis.

I set the scene with 'what does good teaching look like?' ...what aspects of that did we see at Johns...what would make it better? Checking understanding of the learning and getting an improved pupil collaboration and participation and pace to lessons was the big issue.

We had a great turn out and about thirty staff were there!

As ever, they were receptive and we did some training on using the new mini blackboards that we had commissioned last June's visit. Each teacher joined in and Alison did a Mental Maths session and expected teachers to respond using the mini blackboards and chalk.

Maths with mini blackboards



Day 4

The body of the day was divided between Ali and Helen working alongside the teachers using the mini blackboards with the children to great effect. We saw some improved pace and particular teachers demonstrating their new learning. The children loved it.

The Starkey Hearing Foundation team, Mike Nolan and Derek Johnson came and started work and it was great to be able to show them around the freshly cleaned audiology room and they were surprised and delighted to see all the equipment and facilities that previous Soundseekers and GDCSP work had created. The mass of piles of stock moulds that they brought was a revelation! It seems to me a really sensible solution to the constant problem of getting good moulds in an African context. Although I'm not an audiologist, I have now seen Arne's work last year and the

HARK work over the years and have watched hundreds of reclaimed hearing aids being fitted and the one big issue is the time lag from testing to aid fitting and the unpredictability of the mould quality. I really enjoyed working with the guys and setting up a system of managing the good aids. (us primary teachers love a good labelled system of drawers!)

The training session again after school was well attended and we covered questioning and getting pupils to engage more fully using the mini blackboards. Alison and Helen showed some ways of using 'snappy maths' and vocab development with a view to the teachers using the techniques straight away with current work.



Day 5

There were further discussions about the Starkey mission prospect and how it could work in the St John's context and with where ENT and HARK services are currently. Mike and Derek refitted the St John's teachers, with the same view as Arne had had last year that if we can change the deaf teachers' attitudes to wearing hearing aids we could change some hearts and minds of the hearing teachers to encourage pupils to wear them if fitted correctly. The maintenance has always proved the hardest factor. There is enormous desire from many of the children to have an aid but getting the consistency and backup services right and the training of staff in the daily maintenance is the tricky bit.



In the school we worked on more 1:1 mentoring work with teachers today followed by a session after school where we worked teachers in groups, showing how working together in collaboration can extend learning. We did a bit of questioning theory and looking at different types of questions following a story. Making a story dramatic and exciting and engaging children in repetitive language... 'we're going on a bear hunt' was well received. One teacher actually got up and shared her changing practice with the 'assessment for learning' techniques with the mini blackboards!

So ..we left commissioning Brendan Jamanka, the woodwork teacher, to make a load more mini blackboards for Grade 3-6 classes. As ever, the welcome we were given and the staff openness to learn and improve their work as teachers of the deaf is a humbling experience that will stay with us all.

Babs Day

1/3/13