

**GIVE REPORT 2015**

**FOLLOWING OUR TRIP TO THE GAMBIA**

**February 2015**

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**Nursery Workshop Report 2015**

The fourth year of workshops for teachers at Nursery Level was conducted over a four week period from February 16th to March 13th this year. The workshops were set up in the first instance in response to requests from teachers, head teachers and the Catholic Education Secretariat (CES) on our initial visit in 2011. GIVE was asked to start its work in Gambian schools at primary level by supporting Early Childhood Education and develop its support from there. At that time there was less training available for teachers working in Early Childhood Education and many employed in the sector were untrained. Today, we find that most teachers are either trained or currently attending the Gambia Teachers’ College. Courses are conducted during school holiday periods and at weekends allowing teachers to continue in employment as they train. Nursery Education is more or less equivalent to Infant Education in primary schools in Ireland. Most children attending nursery schools are aged four to six years, though some attend as young as three. These children are considered pre-nursery. They are often taught in the same room as the older children.

Teachers face many difficulties not least of which are large class numbers and the many different languages spoken by the children. Some classes have as many as 60 pupils. Lack of resources and poor quality furniture in over-crowded rooms makes teaching very challenging.

The workshop programme offered by GIVE has developed over the years in cooperation and conjunction with the Education Officer for Nursery Education at the CES. With the experience of previous years, it was felt that this year we could take on the responsibility of working with a small number of selected teachers with a view to preparing them to conduct workshops for other teachers in the fourth week of our stay and thereafter in their own areas. The selected teachers, ten in number, who attended came from different parts of the country. The CES plans to roll out a series of workshops for teachers across the country facilitated by these participants.

All participants were provided with grammar books and dictionaries which were supplied by donations from GIVE.

The success of the GIVE programme for nursery teachers will be measured by the success of the rollout of the follow-up CES workshops. It is our hope that the programme is now entering a sustainable phase.

The following report was written by Pauline Moran, who was a first time volunteer in 2015. It conjures up the trip as experienced by a person new to the country with immediate images of The Gambia and her experience of the workshops.

‘Having spent many years as a Primary teacher, I retired in 2014 with the intention of trying something new as soon as possible. I had read about GIVE and their projects in education in the Gambia and made enquiries about travelling with the next group of volunteers. Ebola in West Africa left travel arrangements in some doubt until just before Christmas 2014 and I felt it was unlikely that the trip would go ahead.

The 2015 trip was put in place very quickly thanks to all the preparatory work by volunteers who had travelled in previous years and who already had very specific plans in place for continuing work with Nursery School teachers and with three Skills Centres.

We travelled in a group of 12 from Gatwick, London arriving into a hot, bustling Banjul airport on 13/02/15. There were more than 300 passengers on the Monarch Airlines flight, it was difficult to get near the conveyor belt to claim our luggage but many, many porters were eager to help so within a short time everyone had their luggage and we were heading out of the airport to meet our drivers, Pa, Lamin and Mustafa.

I found the drive to our hotel fascinating, it was the first time I had ever travelled outside of Europe or the USA, and it is a very different experience. Some first impressions included women and children carrying buckets and baskets on their heads; long horned cattle and goats ambling along among pedestrians through built up areas of Serrakunda; many houses or buildings under construction but with an abandoned look about them; colourful stalls and stands selling fruit, vegetables and other goods. Driving is a noisy experience here as the car horn is favoured as a means of communication over the sedate indicator commonly used in Europe. We arrived at our accommodation and settled in quickly.

On Monday morning 16/02/15 we all travelled to the Catholic Education Secretariat (CES) to meet Bishop Ellison, Mr. Kujabi, Mr. Gibba and other officials. We were welcomed and met the participants of the Nursery Schools training group for the first time. My role was to be in Nursery Education as most of my experience as a teacher was with 4 – 8 year olds.

Six of the volunteers continued on to three Skills Centres for girls and young women who missed out on their education and are working on basic literacy skills, computer skills and preparation for work. Six of us remained at the CES to work with Nursery School teachers.

Week 1 got off to a good start, each volunteer had prepared their presentations on one of the following topics; Classroom Management, Jolly Phonics, Maths, Oral Language and Songs and Rhymes. Our aim was to share the experiences and methodologies we found most useful during our own careers as Primary school teachers, reflecting on and analysing best practice in the above areas of work with ten Gambian Nursery School teachers. They, in turn, would deliver training to their own colleagues, under the title ‘Trainers of Teachers’, based on the course content, both in their schools and as part of a regional training network being developed by the Gambian CES.

Our Gambian colleagues were actively involved in the courses we delivered. Some were experienced leaders in their own schools, some had already attended extra training in Jolly Phonics, some were still undergoing initial teacher training which takes a long time to complete in The Gambia as teachers need funding for each part of the course. During our first week, we learnt a lot from our colleagues and they were very interested in learning from us. They shared their classroom songs and rhymes with us, they made resources such as charts, friezes and flash cards to take back to their schools and there was in-depth discussion of practices in Irish and Gambian schools.

The Nursery Group volunteers then travelled to visit our ten Gambian teachers in their own classrooms in Barra, Njongun, Bwiam, Farrafenni and six schools in the Combo districts of Banjul and Serrakunda. We spent Week 2 in the schools and returned with a very realistic view of the strengths and challenges faced by teachers and children in crowded, poorly resourced classrooms. It proved the point that the teacher is the most valuable resource the children can have in facilitating their learning.

The third week of our course involved supporting our Gambian colleagues through mentoring and demonstrating how to deliver core information, as Trainers of Teachers, in Classroom Management, Jolly Phonics, Maths, Oral Language and PE lessons. We assisted the teachers to draw from the information they had gathered during weeks 1 and 2 and to prepare their presentations on two or more of these topic areas. They then worked together to deliver their own interpretations with flair drawing on their personal teaching experience to enhance their presentations.

By week 4, our Gambian colleagues delivered a comprehensive set of modules to 16 new participants from the Nursery Education sector. They facilitated a five day course, drawing up their timetable each day, working together as a team, encouraging and inspiring the new group of teachers. The feedback we got from our Gambian colleagues was very positive. They were apprehensive about making their own presentations, but then, so were we when we started on week 1. They spoke of gaining confidence and feeling very satisfied that the time they spent on the course was very worthwhile.

At the end of week 4 it was obvious that all 10 participants were fulfilling the expectation that they will return to their schools as competent teachers in their own classrooms and competent mentors to the staff of their schools.

It is hoped that GIVE will continue to support this group of Nursery teachers with some input again in 2016. It is vital that they are given the opportunity to work with other teachers in a structured way and that the efforts they have made are appreciated and valued officially by the CES and by school principals within the Nursery Education sector.

From a personal point of view the four weeks I spent in the Gambia were very worthwhile. It is great to think that the experiences accumulated over a long teaching career are valuable to others. Apart from the volunteering aspect of the visit there were many opportunities to meet people, to go sightseeing, to enjoy meals out with the GIVE group and to absorb some of the warmth and vibrancy of this country. The ‘Smiling Coast of Africa’ has an awful lot to offer apart from beautiful weather and scenery.

Pauline Moran

During our last week in The Gambia, we met Mrs. Kujabi, the Assistant Head Teacher at St Teresa’s Lower Basic School. This is a primary school of over 3,000 pupils. For some time we have been asked by the CES to develop workshops for teachers at this level. After meeting with Mrs. Kujabi, we conducted sample workshops with eleven teachers, all teaching Grade One. These were well received and would be suitable to develop and offer to teachers at this level in future years.

On our last day in The Gambia, GIVE volunteers attended a meeting at the CES, Bishop Ellison, Emil Kujabi, (Director of the CES), Zono Jammeh, (Assistant Director), Edward Gibba, William Mendy and Dawda Faye (Education Officers) were all present. We discussed the 2015 GIVE programmes and considered a direction for the future. It is hoped that the nursery programme will evolve into a programme for teachers of Grade One in Lower Basic Schools. Some support should also be kept in place for the facilitators of the Nursery Workshops who participated in our training programme this year.

Overall, it was an enriching and worthwhile experience in The Gambia. The retired teachers from Ireland and their colleagues in The Gambia look forward to continuing this connection and forwarding this work in 2016.

**The following GIVE Volunteers were involved in Nursery Education in The Gambia:**

* + Margaret Boucher (Coordinator)
	+ Joan McCann
	+ Margaret Cunningham
	+ Mary Weekes
	+ Pauline Moran
	+ Anne Fitzgerald Giffney

**Skills Centres Report 2015**

GIVE has provided volunteers to mentor and teach in the Skills Centres for the past four years. These Centres provide second chance education for girls who left school early or had never been to school. Practical skills are taught and in some cases secretarial training is also provided. The feedback from the volunteers of previous years has shown that English was the main limiting factor in the progress of the students and should be the target of a more focussed support. Thus, raising the students’ standard of English became the central aim of this year’s project.

It was decided that GIVE should become directly involved in the teaching of English in Skill Centres addressing the following areas:

* English is not timetabled for all the Centres and no syllabus was available.
* Many of the students have little need or opportunity to use English in their everyday life. Feedback had stated that while students could speak English reasonably well, the main difficulties arose around reading and writing.
* The age profile of the students (16 to 23 years) and their previous experience of formal schooling suggested that they would require a sensitive approach.
* In general, these centres have poor facilities and little resources.
* A four week module is a very short one to effect significant progress.

Six volunteer teachers delivered programmes in three selected Centres. GIVE volunteers had worked in these Centres in previous years. They were St Peter’s in Lamin, St. Martha’s in Fajikunda and the Presentation in Banjul. Two volunteers were allocated to each of these Centres.

In January these six volunteer teachers met in Dublin to prepare for their work in The Gambia. The pre-travel meeting set out to design a suitable programme which would address the challenges set out above as well as identifying useful resources the volunteers might take to The Gambia and looking at ways of making an English programme sustainable into the future. A general strategy was agreed:

1. The team of volunteers would employ a policy of positive reinforcement at all times.
2. The focus of the work would be on students in first year, with a special emphasis on the weaker students.
3. An assessment of students would be carried out on the first day in the Centres to determine their ability levels. These results and the facilities available would help determine the overall approach and the content of the programme.
4. A full time teacher of English would be employed for St Martha’s. A suitable candidate, already known to the charity was offered the post. It was intended that the volunteers would mentor her during the four weeks of their stay. However the teacher declined the post.

In The Gambia, a meeting of the volunteers at the end of the second day of school, confirmed that the focus needed to be applied to English. The volunteers agreed to test various approaches and share ideas and resources on an ongoing basis.

The Presentation Skills Centre in Banjul was the only one of the three Centres that employed an English teacher. She was very supportive and had identified thirty students who would benefit from extra tuition. The volunteers assessed these students using ‘The British Abilities Scale Word Reading A Test’. The students were divided into two groups based on their ability levels. The Jolly Phonics Programme was used as part of a reading programme. The English teacher was introduced to the Jolly Phonics Programme and arrangements made for her to attend a workshop with the nursery section. Since returning to Ireland the volunteers have continued their support by forwarding Jolly Phonics teaching materials to her. Overall the volunteers were satisfied with the progress their students made.

A GIVE Volunteer who has continued to reside in The Gambia and work in St Peter’s Skills Centre in Lamin over the past number of years is currently charged with coordinating programmes for the students. He organised that one volunteer would support his teaching of Jolly Phonics and work with weaker students by teaching English and Maths. Themes were based around such areas as the family, the market and some geography. Students were supplied with a folder containing a copy and writing materials which allowed the students to design their own books. A computer-based programme, keyboard techniques and internet skills were taught. The students learned to set up Gmail accounts and send emails to each other. CV preparation and job application procedures were also included. Developing literacy was indirectly a key part of this work. The volunteers were very pleased with the progress made.

The St Martha’s Skills Centre does not have English on the timetable, except for an English programme taught as part of the computer lessons. The volunteers assessed the 23 first year students by interview and rated them for vocabulary, reading, writing and spelling. The interview process facilitated the building of trust between teacher and student and gave the volunteers an insight into the lives of the students. The class was then divided into two groups, based on ability. The more advanced students were taught in groups of four, focusing on reading and writing simple sentences and some grammar. The lessons for the other students were more student-centred focussing on learning simple words and grammar. The third year group were given the opportunity to learn how to prepare CV’s.

As part of the project the resident computer teacher observed and assisted in some lessons. This helped her to understand the challenges faced by the students. She was also supplied with a set of Oxford basic methodology books to help with her lesson preparation. Having to teach outdoors and student absence impacted negatively on the potential of the programme, however, the volunteers felt that the students made good progress and raised their motivation to learn.

At the end of the project, two volunteers met with Bishop Ellison and his Education Team to reflect on their overall experience in the Centres and look at possible future programmes. The team wish to express their thanks to the Bishop for his generous support while in The Gambia.

The GIVE volunteers in all these Centres found their work enjoyable and fulfilling and well worth the effort. The experience gained and the information gathered will help GIVE prepare well for future programmes.

The following volunteers worked in the Skill Centres this year:

* Joe Mulligan (Coordinator)
* Carmel Harrison
* Éilis Fagan-Shiels
* Ken Ryan
* Marie Daly
* Mary Hayes