

## Are You Happy? Give A Big Laugh!

When you first approach the Lisa Kent Memorial Nursery School through the sandy, dusty streets and half built houses, you could be forgiven for thinking there is not much behind the gates. But you would be very wrong. Behind the smart new black and white iron gates lies a whole world of possibility for the pupils and staff of this amazing little community.

I was lucky enough to be able to visit the school in April of this year and had the pleasure of being shown all the good work that is going on by the headmaster, Aljuma. He is rightly very proud of the work that has been done here since the school was first set up in 2000. After an uncertain few years with very little help or financial support, the school is now going from strength to strength, thanks mainly to Liz and all the sponsors. Aljuma repeatedly says how pleased he is to have met Liz and how much he, the teachers and the pupils appreciate the support of all the sponsors.

We were first shown into the classrooms, of which there are three. The small rooms are very basic with a chalk board at the front and rows of little benches with narrow desks, each of which seats 3 or 4 pupils. The walls have some posters on them and they have a new roof. Despite these meagre accommodations, what hits you first are all the happy smiley faces and the amount of joy that the pupils are getting from simply being at school. They know, even at 4 or 5 years old, that they are very lucky to have this opportunity as right outside the gates are hundreds of other children who will never get the chance to learn to read or write. All education in The Gambia is private and mothers work 12 hour days in the fields to pay for their children's education.

All three classes have qualified teachers who are doing an amazing job with such basic resources. Each class has up to 40 pupils in and I don't know many teachers in England who could do what they do!

On our arrival, the pupils stopped what they were doing and were asked 'Are you happy?', to which they all shouted 'Yes!' accompanied by the biggest, most beautiful smiles you have ever seen. They were then asked to 'Give a big laugh' to which they responded with the loudest roar of a laugh! This became increasingly funny as this little performance was repeated in each classroom, with the laugh getting louder as the pupils got smaller! Each class also showed us what they were working on, be it

spellings, maths or geography. We were treated to a fantastic rendition of the Gambian National Anthem as well as other songs they knew, which they love to perform and, as a music teacher, I loved to hear!

Most of the teaching is done aurally, with teachers asking questions and pupils repeating the answers, although one class was doing spellings on paper with pencils. We saw spellings, the alphabet, numeracy, geography, religion and music all being taught aurally, with the teacher saying the word and the class spelling it back to her, or the teacher saying the country and the class telling her the capital city. This was a delight to see as all pupils were joining in and engaged in the lesson - a major task when there are so many pupils.

During our visit, we were able to see the building work which is on-going on the new toilet and shower facilities, sewing room complete with water tap, office and store, caretaker's room and library which will eventually benefit the whole community. We were also taken on a tour of the local area and saw the market and cinema!

When we returned to the school, we were asked if we would teach the pupils a song. Eager to give something to the pupils, we taught each class 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' complete with actions! The pupils responded so enthusiastically! As we were in the second and third rooms, we could hear the first class practicing it and finally we had a mass rendition with all three rooms singing at once! It was so rewarding to see the pleasure that the pupils are getting from their schooling and it is a credit to all the hard work done by Aljuma and his three talented teachers. Two of my colleagues and I are now writing to the teachers to develop some professional dialogue and understanding of teaching in the UK for them and to improve all our teaching!

Anyone who visits the school will witness the amazing energy and atmosphere of positive learning that is unmistakable as soon as you enter the gates. Although there are many more children who will benefit from the school in the coming years, those who are currently attending, have had their lives totally enhanced by the experience and knowledge that they have gained. This will undoubtedly brighten their futures and all those who have been involved in this project should feel exceptionally proud of themselves. With so little, you are doing so much good work!

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