

ART  
MONGERS



ARTMONGERING IN  
**The Gambia**

# Why The Gambia?

We have tried our ideas of engaging communities with art processes to improve public space in various locations including London and a Syrian Refugee Camp. We have seen that they work there and wanted to take them to a new environment, contribute to another community and extend our learning. In the process we would develop our practice and form a more substantial and robust case to apply for larger funding. We also had the opportunity of discounted accommodation so more of the funds raised could go directly to the project.

## Why this school?

Catherine already had a contact with The Dr Ancha Jagne Ceesay Quality Foundation Nursery School in the Babilon Lamin area of The Gambia, south east of the capital, Banjul. So it was relatively easy to agree to come and carry out the project at the school.

The school is a community run pre-school for 75 children aged 3-7. It is in a poor village with low literacy levels among the parents, so children were starting primary school (aged 7) at a disadvantage having not learnt the basics at home. The head was previously working in a primary school and saw this need. Fees are minimal and the school is run on donations. The children speak local languages Wolof and Mandinka and are taught English in the school.

## Objectives

As always, we want to bring moments of joy and connection: through colour, through new significant narratives and through conversation. Our original idea was to make a mural with the children on the outside of the school, and work with the women in the community via Hope Circles - a deep listening and sharing technique we developed in the refugee camp.

However we always travel to a project with an open mind, preferring to situate ourselves in the space and understand something of the local context and the people using it. Our ideas develop as a response to that.

In the end we did paint the outside of the school. And we also painted both the classrooms. And 75 chairs. And 19 tables. And the wall inside and outside the playground. We did this with the teachers, children and former students, all of whom worked joyfully and hard with us for the 6 days of the project.

# Our process

## Before we went

- We did some online research about the school.
- We also advised the head, Lamin Saidykhan, of our plans and he held a meeting with teachers and parents to let them know we were coming and what to expect.
- We crowd-sourced children's books, clothes and a laptop from our community.
- We raised funds and bought footballs, exercise books, pens and pencils to take along.
- We ran a crowd-funding campaign to support the initiative we connected with the UK High Commissioner because of tweeting about the project.
- We created the team: Patricio Forrester, Catherine Shovlin and Neus Gil Cortes.



# In The Gambia



# Day 1

- We contacted the head and visited the school to see it in situ, understand the context of the space and people around it, and explore possibilities.
- We bought paint and other materials for our work from local shops, improvising as always to find solutions from local materials.
- We made a start with clearing the space, taking down the existing educational material (very old and well used!), mixing paint colours and putting on the base coat of green for the classroom 1. Green is the most relaxing and welcoming colour so we felt it was appropriate for children arriving in school and a more formal situation for the first time.
- We got to know lots of the children and the teachers and did some storytelling with the children.



[See Video](#)

# Day 2

- We filled all the holes and did the second coat of paint for classroom 1.
- We filled all the holes and did both coats of blue paint for classroom 2, blue stimulates mental activity so we felt it was appropriate for this stage when the children are consolidating their literacy and numeracy in preparation for starting primary school at age 8.
- We painted the outside wall blue to give the school more presence in the neighbourhood.
- We decided the furniture now looked shabby so we painted the chairs and tables painted orange.
- We ran improvised singing (calling and answering) sessions with the children... SambaKuzamba!



[See Video](#)



# Day 3



- Created a Hope Circle manual.
- Trained local community leader Ami in how to hold a Hope Circle. Ami invited women from the village to join and in the end about 15 came along, between the ages of 20 and 50.
- The idea of being quiet and listening to one person speak seemed to be new to them but in the end they were doing it.
- We also decided to look for a new name - a friendly name or nickname for the School. We worked with the director and some of the children to brainstorm ideas.
- In classroom 1 we experimented with lifting children so they could walk on walls'. Before we started painting we had removed old didactic posters from the walls of both classrooms, so we realised we had to incorporate the required educational content into the artwork or the posters would go straight back up. We came up with the idea of framing the content with clouds. After all, data lives in the cloud(s)!. This was the first creative step.
- Along with the basic AaBbCc and 1 2 3, we added Einstein's Theory of Relativity equation to introduce the high end of physics (and Einstein's idea that Everybody is a Genius) to the teachers and children.

[See Video](#)

# Day 4

- After trying different ideas, including voting with the children and teachers on Day 3, we decided on Sky School (building on the concept of the clouds in classroom 1). Reach for the sky! The sky is the limit.
- Researched and created the  $E=mc^2$  book to explain Einstein to teachers and children and share some of his inspirational sayings e.g. Imagination is more important than knowledge; Read more fairytales;
- Everybody is a genius.
- We painted the name on the newly painted blue wall outside. Meanwhile the inside of the wall running around the entire playground blossomed with large coloured discs, creating a sense of space and rhythm (while at the same time making the most of our limited paint supply).
- Together with the outside wall and the name, the school was taking on a clearer identity. Passers-by were stopping to find out what was going on and we got lots of encouragement from everybody in the community.
- Neus carried out a dance workshop.
- We needed to move all the furniture so we came up with the chair relay race to involve all the children.



[See Video](#)



# Day 5



- We decided to name the classrooms to give the children more sense of identity plus a sense of progress. So we came up with the idea that they spend 1-2 years in 'Pilots' before graduating to 'Astronauts'. It fits well with Sky School and the clouds in the Pilots classroom and planets in the Astronauts.
- Painted planets in classroom 2 and started to fill in the educational content.
- We kept everyone motivated with singing, games and storytelling

[See Video](#)

# Day 6



- A hectic day finishing everything in time for the 4pm opening event  
Painted the all-important astronaut in his eponymous classroom, using children from the school for the face so they could identify with him.
- A last minute decision to paint the end wall of the school and the side outside wall, reinforcing the idea that this is a special place (not just from the front but from all the angles).
- At the end of the day we had the launch party with TV, local press, school founder Dr Ancha, pupils, parents and teachers, Imam and local community. A lively event celebrating the shared achievement of the week and giving new visibility to the school which will help them attract funds (it was featured on the 8pm news that day on the national TV channel).
- The surprise visit from the UK High Commissioner was seen as an honour for the local community and confidence booster for the staff at the project.

[See Video 1](#)

[See Video 2](#)

# Outcome

- A revitalised, re-energised space that will inspire the children to (come to the school and) learn, according to testimonies from the founder, the head, the teachers and the parents.
- A fresher, brighter, cleaner space for the children to be in  
The introduction of a more creative approach to a traditional learning context - modelling to the teachers that learning can be fun and freer than it may have been in the past. That the children are capable of a lot.
- Introducing a higher aspiration. The introduction of Einstein and sharing his views on imagination and genius embedded the idea that anything is possible. That these children too are geniuses, and that there are many ways to be a genius, not just by being a scientist.
- Demonstrating that the children can be controlled / motivated without resorting to corporal punishment.
- Several people in the local community commented to us that they hadn't realised white people did good things. They have met very few, and mostly not for long enough to build a relationship. They saw us come back day after day and work hard, with humour and good grace. As a former British colony, which has recently (Feb 2018) voted in a referendum to rejoin the Commonwealth, positive relationships is important to the future of this country.
- Raising aspirations. The head teacher works hard and is rather alone, although he is supported by the founder from the UK. We discussed options with him such as using his phone or the laptop we left to find people in similar roles in the region and form or join a mutual support group. We also discussed an exchange visit to the UK which he is now looking for ways to realise.

# Lessons learned for next time

- Having a personal connection – in this case with the head teacher – makes things a lot easier.
- Working in this kind of environment has far fewer hurdles than the controlled nature of the refugee camp. The creative freedom we had on this project meant we could get an extraordinary amount done in a very short space of time.
- The Hope Circles are not easy to implement in a poor African context where the women have very little free time (fetching water, pounding cassava, large families, large weddings and funerals etc... it is a very time consuming lifestyle).
- The formal evaluation proved impossible to implement at a meaningful level. When we first arrived we didn't have the connections or interpreters to do a pre-intervention survey in the community and last afternoon was taken up with the TV and VIP presence of the launch event. It is blindingly obvious that this work is a positive intervention and the evaluation process, when we tried it, just generated confusion and suspicion. We will need to use funding sources that respect this.
- We were lucky that we also raised funds after the event, but heading out with only one third of the budget covered was a personal risk.
- This was an ideal opportunity for a Paying Volunteer model. It is safe, friendly, fun. If each volunteer paid their flight (c £500), food (c £100) and made a £1000 contribution to the project in return for the life changing experience, skills transfer and great time, then 3 or 4 volunteers would make the visit viable.
- The videos play a huge role in attracting funds, support and interest/awareness. Creating the daily one minute videos is a useful diary of our work as well as a brilliant communication tool. Having a dedicated film maker on every project is essential.





33 St. Asaph road  
London SE4 2ED  
United Kingdom  
[artmongers.studio@gmail.com](mailto:artmongers.studio@gmail.com)  
[www.artmongers.org](http://www.artmongers.org)