

Report about practical training at the Community Inclusive Special School

Kpando – Abanu



15.09.2008 - 27.03.2009

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1. Introduction

Going abroad to live and collect practical experiences in a different culture has been a dream since my second year of University. I am studying Special Education in Germany and so I wanted to know how students with Special Needs elsewhere are taught and learning. I wanted to know how they are seen and integrated in their society and what it means teaching those children. I wanted to open my horizon, learn from a different culture and share my own knowledge and thoughts. This dream became true in the beginning of 2008 when I got to know that the “weltwärts-program” was willing to send me through the EMH-Ghana Project to Ghana. More detailed: to the Community Inclusive Special School in Kpando Abanu. After a good preparation by our organization bezev, the EMH-Project itself and the exchange with other volunteers, I felt well prepared and ready to go. So it happened!

In the middle of August Michael, my boyfriend, and I came to Ghana. Although the headmaster, he is also our host father, did not know about our arrival at this exact day he and his family welcomed us friendly. The Family took good care of us and the fact that everything was new to us: the people, the town, the language, the food, the hot weather and so on. We got to know our mentor and he took us around town in the first week to introduce us to certain places, people and cultural aspects. I appreciated that a lot. Together with the open-minded, friendly and happy being of the people I soon felt welcome and I enjoyed being in Kpando. Before school started we traveled through Ghana and got to know the beautiful country with its interesting people more and more. With a lot of pictures, new experiences and a lot of ideas what I could do in the school I looked forward to the reopening of the school.

Time was flying...now I am in my last week here in Kpando. There are only a few school days left before Michael and I leave Ghana again. To give a picture about my experiences, achievements, challenges and failures here a few lines concerning my social life, the school, my working fields and projects as well as my teaching and learning experiences.

2. My social life

1. The life in Kpando

Kpando is a town in the Volta Region located at the Volta Lake. It has about 16000 inhabitants and mostly all important services like shopping possibilities, a hospital, a post office and an Internet Café are available. Living here was a good experience. It is a nice place. The fact that the nature of the people is so welcoming and open-minded helped me a lot to feel not too strange in the beginning although everything was different and new to me. By the time many people knew our names, greeted us

and enjoyed our company. Somehow that made me feel at home...most of the time. I felt welcome, free and safe. I liked the busy market days, sitting in a spot and drinking a cold coke running away from the sun and meeting different people. Fortunately Kpando has an Internet Café where I spent quite some time to stay in contact with family and friends at home.

2. My host family

Michael and I stayed with the family of the headmaster of our school we were working in. We shared a nice room that became more and more comfortable with pictures and decorations ... a place we called our own.

The family took good care of us. In the beginning our host father took us to Hohoe, he introduced his family in his village to us and he went with us to different funerals. Grace, our host mother, took very good care of us. In the beginning she explained us to everything in the house for example how to wash. She asked us what we do and don't like to eat and introduced us step by step to the ghanain food. She prepared delicious food. If we had any question we could ask and she helped. I thank her for that! Especially to my host sister Milly I build up a closed relationship. We had a lot of fun together. Milly my friend, I will miss her! I liked being surrounded by the family members, talking and learning from them. Here I learned a lot about the ghanain family life and their culture.

3. Our coordinator and the cooperation with Germany

Much appreciation goes to our coordinator Mrs. Kwadade. She is living in Accra where we met her 3 times during our stay. Together with the two other volunteers from our EMH-project group we discussed our projects, feelings, achievements and further plans. It was always motivating and encouraged me to keep on trying hard. She was always there for us if we had any question. She was open to new ideas. I thank her for her time. When we arrived in Ghana and did not know where to go she met us and directed us to Kpando. When I was sick she called. That gave me good feeling!

In Addition to the good contact with her also our EMH-project group kept good contact with us. They called us regularly and we exchanged by writing e-mails.

4. Other volunteers

I really enjoyed seeing and spending time with Sarah and Nathalie. We got to know each other in Germany at the preparation meeting of the EMH-Project group. In Ghana we went together to our meetings with Mrs.Kwadade and the 5 day midterm camp we had in Kumasi. We also met at the Cultural Festival of all the Special Schools in Nkoranza and spent a few days together. Furthermore we visited Sarah in Kumasi and went one day to her school. We all had a great time together, discussed

a lot about our projects and work, about Ghana and us living in the ghanain culture. It was good to have this exchange and sometimes it felt good to be together with “your own people”. I am very happy that I had Michael on my side. He always gave me support and we used our chance to talk a lot about our impressions, feelings and ideas. Together we worked well in the school and we complemented one another. Especially during the hard times I was glad that I had the possibility to talk to him. He really understands me. In Kpando also have been many other volunteers. It was nice to talk to and exchange our experiences with them every once in a while.

5. Our mentor in school

Mr. Stone, one of the teachers from school was our mentor for the first week. He showed us around Kpando and introduced us to the ghanain culture and language. He also went with us to the school and showed us the compound. He did a good job! When the school started we talked with him about our plans and although he was not our mentor any longer, for me he somehow was. For him I became his “daughter” and so I felt free to talk to him. He became a good friend. He was the first one in school I talked to about my ideas, concerns and feelings. He always asked us about our well-being and wanted that we feel integrated in the community. One time he took us to a traditional celebration of a Fetish Priest in a nearby village. This was an amazing experience. Thanks to him!

Unfortunately the fixed meetings with the headmaster each Friday couldn't be realized. But the headmaster promised us always to have time for us if there is any problem we want to discuss. So when I saw the need for a meeting I asked for it. For me this was not always easy because when the meeting took place, my question or concern was not that important anymore. In these challenging situations I often felt left alone with the work I was doing.

3. The CISS Kpando

The school is located in the Volta Region which is known for farming and fishing. In 1993 the CISS was established by parents of children with an intellectual disability. It used to be a pilot school for inclusion, but since the beginning of last year it runs completely as a special school under the Special Education Department. 40 students with special needs are enrolled at the school. The students are between 6 and 30 years old. Key points of the education are written down in the curriculum for the education of children with mentally handicap. Those are next to fine and gross motor skills, reading, writing and arithmetic skills, daily living and social skills and also pre-vocational and vocational skills.

The school is run by the headmaster Mr. Isaac King Agbele. Six teachers and a non teaching staff formed of a matron, two kitchen women, a storekeeper and a secretary

are working in the school. The school is a day school and starts at 8.30 AM and closes at 1:00 PM. Since the beginning of this school year the CISS is taking part in the school feeding program. The students get breakfast and lunch. At the moment the school is getting connected to running water and electricity. With the help of the Danish government new toilets were build in the end of last year. The broken bus is a major problem. Since November last year the number of students decreased to 18 students who are able to walk to school everyday. The school is has a big, clean and child friendly compound with a playground and a lot space to move around freely. Also a school farm exists. It has been established by the former volunteer Moritz Reckling.

4. The first term

The school started in the middle of September. Everything was really new, exciting and interesting to me. I wanted to observe the daily school life, the children and their performance, how the teachers are teaching and so on. I soon understood, school here is so much different to school in Germany. I appreciated that no fixed tasks were assigned to us and we had the chance to look for areas we would like to work in. So we decided in the frame of all the clean up that was done in the first week of school to prepare one more of the classrooms, which was only used for the storage of farming tools and supplies, as a room for teaching. We set up benches, Michael built a shelf and together with some of the students we cleaned all the teaching and learning materials from the headmaster's office and put them in. We decided in agreement with the teachers that this shelf should be accessible for all, students and teachers. My goal was that the students learn to take care of their learning materials, learn how to keep things in order and organized. They should also have the possibility to choose playing and learning materials on their own, take it out and put it back. Now I can say: the students learnt to be responsible. At the end of each day we cleaned together and put the materials back on in the shelf.

We did a lot of art. Together with the students we made wooden stamps of the alphabet and the numbers. We printed our names, ages. With the smaller children I printed with our hands and fingers. We used a sponge or a marble to paint and collected experiences in using a paint brush. We also practiced using scissors.



Kosi cutting shapes and coloring



Raymond and Josef discover the numbers



Christian is drawing himself



coloring fun



Mawusie and Akplotsie making bracelets



time to play

I enjoyed it very much to do art with the children because this is a field I have already been working in at home. I felt that many of the students need to practice and improve their fine motor skills before they actually can learn to write with a pencil numbers and letters. When we finished our art works we presented them and put them up on the wall. After a while the classroom was decorated with many individual

artworks, the students are really proud of. The children had fun! I think I could have intensified this with more help and support of the teachers. Because of the fact that I didn't understand the EWE and the students only a few or no English I had a hard time teaching them alone.

A typical day looked like this. In the morning we started in a circle, greeted each other and sang songs. After this we started the classroom work. Around 9.30 we had our breakfast. I was helping Richard and Wisdom to eat. Before the classroom work went on we brushed our teeth. Toothbrushes already existed in school. I organized some more, also new tooth paste and cups. It was not always easy to get all the students together but it worked. From time to time I explained them how important it is to brush the teeth. Julius, the little trouble maker of the school, found his job. He showed big interest in getting the brushes, preparing them with paste and handing them over to each student. First he needed a lot of help. Now he is always calling: "Sister Claudia, time for pasting!" I am proud of him. During the break times we went out to the playground, moved around, played ball, Frisbee and so on. The children like to swing and to have a ride on the merry-go-round.

Two weeks before the Christmas break the school concentrated on their farm work. We harvested the maize, dried the corn and peeled it of the cob. We also harvested the yam and built a shed for it. From Germany we brought seeds for watermelons, sweet pepper and zucchini. Unfortunately we planted them at the end of the raining seasons and so it came that after the Christmas break all the plants were gone. Nobody watered them.

5. Two new students - the integration of Richard and Wisdom

Before the school started I got to know two young boys in the school going age that were not going to school – Richard and Wisdom. Both boys are living in Kpando and have a disability. Wisdom is living just behind the house of our host family and Richard in the Missahoe Childrens Home. Wisdom is eight and Richard nine years old. I talked to their parents and care takers and offered my help to assist them to send their child to school. I met the headmaster and discussed the situation with him and he fortunately decided to enroll the two boys. Both were picked by the school bus every morning.

For both boys it was important to train and improve their fine and gross motor skills. With Wisdom I worked on picking and releasing objects, sorting and string objects. We played ball and moved a lot around. He didn't like riding on the merry-go-round but he liked to spin it. He liked dancing and he picked up really fast by imitating the other students. It did not take long and he liked being in school, moving around freely and playing with the others. He made friends easily.

Richard was on his way to learn how to walk on his own. He was walking on one hand and at the time he came to the school he could do some steps on his own. I trained walking with him every day. He wasn't able to lift him self up to stand at this

time so he needed much help. Even in the afternoons I liked to visit him in his home. He was improving day by day. He liked to swing and walked after some time up and down the school building without any help. That was a great achievement!

Another area I worked in with them was to assist them with eating. Both could not eat on their own. So I was feeding them and trying to build up their skills to make some steps towards eating on their own. It worked well! Richard was in love with food. Everywhere food was, Richard was.

Unfortunately I felt that Michael and I were alone taking care of them, “our children”! Since the bus is not working both of them didn’t come to school anymore. I hope if the bus is working again they will be part of the others going to school everyday.

6. The second term

The second term started and the bus was still not working. With the few students coming to school we played a lot of memory, bingo and other games like hide and seek outside. During the classroom work we assisted the teachers. The main idea we concentrated on was the establishment of the batik workshop.

7. A new vocational training – the batik workshop

The school has many older students who are ready to take part in a vocational training. Next to the vocational training at the farm and some tools for carpentry work no other vocational training exists at the school. A possibility for a vocational training of female students was missing. So we decided to establish a batik workshop and train the students from the vocational class in making batik and tie and dye. During our first months of volunteering in the school we got to know Mr. Louis Agbee. He has an NGO and trains the youth, women groups, church organizations and especially the poor vulnerable like persons with disabilities in the batik and tie and dye making. He was going to help us. We applied for financial support to our project group in Germany and were supported with 200 Euros. After discussing all the ideas and plans concerning the establishment of the batik workshop with all the staff members and the headmaster we went to Accra in the first week of February and bought all the supplies we needed. Thanks to Louis for accompanying us. He was a great help to find all those things on the market. We took everything to the school and built together with the students a big table with foam and leather on top and a shed that we can work outside. Because you have to make a fire for melting the wax and dewaxing the work outside is necessary and a shady place with a nice breeze keeps up the good mood. We explained all the supplies to the students. What is used, how it is called and how to use it. In February we produced a new school uniform for the students and our first order from the school in Wa of 65 T-Shirts. So we had plenty of work. The students showed much interest in the batik workshop and wanted to try themselves. Prosper, the teacher in charge, showed his commitment to the work. Some days after school we stayed longer and continued the work to reach

our goal, to finish the uniforms for the 6th of March, the Independence Day. On this day we wanted to march in a new school uniform.



explaining the batik supplies

Although we were working against the time and things had to get done fast for me it was always important to involve the students as much as possible that they learn the procedure and benefit from it. For the T-Shirts: Mawusie and Asor got to dye them, others tied the Shirts for the tie and dye design and stamped the bottom of the T-Shirts. They helped rinsing them out, hanging them up on the drying line, counting and folding the T-Shirts. So everybody was involved at the end not only by watching. The students really liked the T-Shirts and rather would have kept them for themselves than giving them away. At the end of February we met Nathalie, the volunteer from Wa, in Accra and gave the T-Shirts.



For the school uniform we dyed 84 yards of calico light blue, stamped it and created a design before we dyed it again with blue-black. We got a stamp of the school logo made in Fesi. In addition to this we got a screen of the school logo made to print it on the material. After all the other steps we applied the screen with a special paste on the material. We invited a seamstress to take the measurements of the students. She did a great job in sewing all those uniforms in such a short time.



the 6th of March!

Everything was ready at the sixth of March. So at the sixth of March the students met at the headmasters house, the matron prepared gari and beans for them, everybody dressed up and the headmaster chartered taxis to bring the students to the Kpando Technical School where the celebration was. We had a good time! A lot of people looked at the new uniforms, gave their praises. We also marched. It was fun,

although it was a strange feeling to hear the whole crowd laughing at our performance. Oh well, we gave our best and practiced hard.

In the next weeks I had the wish to produce some more materials for the market to sell. I have seen Prosper cooperating well with Louis who came almost every day to assist and give tips. But somehow the production stopped. We only made two more pieces where the students tried themselves. Either the workshop supplies were locked up, the teachers not around or there was no time. I approached to the teacher again how important it is to go on and take time for each student to teach them in detail and let them try the different steps of the batik in a larger extent. I want that they learn how to take good care of all the things, keep them in order and use them responsible. There should be time to explain the batik process step by step and combine the theory with the practical experience. Today the students tried themselves in stamping. And they did a great job! They perform well! In my last days I want to make a poster with some of the students that presents their work at the workshop for people from the community coming to visit the school or later get trained in batik at the school.

8. Teaching and learning experiences

At the end of the first term the headmaster, teachers and us decided that the volunteers assist the teachers in their teaching and are not responsible for their own class anymore. I had experienced that without any support the teaching is not effective and it expected too much from me. I tried hard to handle the situation with all those children but it didn't make me happy.

Having to do so much on my own was often frustrating and practiced my patience a big time. Each little support of the teachers I appreciated. Especially the students showed me that the work was worth it. I got to know the students better and better and I really got attached to them. Through playing a lot with the students children like Kodjo and Patience opened themselves and started to socialize more with the others. They listened more to what somebody said, laughed, danced and were happy. The students came and ask for help, materials and games to play with. For me it was great to see the inner urge of each child to play and learn. That kept my motivation high to do my best. I saw the students improving in different ways, step by step; even of they are only small, small.

I learned that school in Ghana is so much different to school in Germany: the conditions and resources, the teaching methods as well as the attitudes towards children and their education. For me and my cultural background this was really interesting but also hard to understand. I experienced that so many things are seen and done different and problems cannot always be solved.

9. Reflection and recommendations

My eight months in Ghana have been a great experience in all aspects of life. I learned a lot about the ghanain culture and also about my own, the german one. I got to know many new people and beautiful places. Ghana is a country that welcomes strangers always friendly and is very hospitable. It was very interesting to talk to people that have a different point of view and also learn from them. Through this I got new perspectives and interesting ideas, even though some views are still obscure to me. I experienced how teaching in a special school in Ghana is like and what problems schools here are facing. Although I had times that were hard and especially in school challenging for me all in all I had an awesome time. For myself I want to take home a little bit of the ghanain way of being relaxed, not stressing oneself too much. I hope that I can manage it better now not always to force myself to do everything right for everybody. I learned to treasure the small, small steps forward. I think that will help me as a teacher in my future.

I enjoyed getting to know all those precious students. I am glad that I had the possibility to work with them and accompany them in their learning and development. It is encouraging to see how all of them give their best. I was impressed how independent and social they are. This is different in a german special school. Seeing them laughing, dancing, singing, talking and playing with each other always made me happy. Also the days where all teachers taught in their classrooms I especially liked. I was surprised how persistent I was to ring a bell and motivate the teachers to educate their students well. I have seen that they can do it and I hope they will remember me for this. In some way I think I developed more strength to express if something is worrying me. It was not always easy to express myself in a way that everybody understands it right. So sometimes this caused misunderstandings. But also those were later on mostly solved.

Before I end my report I want to state a few recommendations for the school. I highly wish that the batik workshop continues with the production of new beautiful materials. All of you have done a good job and you are able to develop this more and more. For the selling of the materials as well as the establishment of a training center for the community I wish you all the best. Keep in mind that you have to reinvest the income of the workshop and use the calico, colors, chemicals and the wax sparingly to have a sustainable workshop. Please, also keep up with the teeth brushing everyday. Julius is taking good care of this.

For further volunteers I wish that you show them the best the school can perform and involve them active in your school activities. Don't leave them alone in a culture that is new and different to them.

Much thanks to all of you! I spent eight great months in Ghana that enriched my life with plenty experiences. Something I don't want to miss.