

FINAL REPORT

ABOUT MY PRACTICAL TRAINING

UNDER THE

EDUCATION OF THE MENTALLY CHALLENGED

(EMC-) GHANA-PROJECT

AT

GARDEN CITY SPECIAL SCHOOL

FOR THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED

IN

ASOKORE-MAMPONG, KUMASI/ GHANA

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1. Introduction / Preparation

When I completed my triennial apprenticeship at the “Vocational School for Caring of the Disabled/Handicapped” in Germany I decided to gain some more practical working experiences.

During the last few years I fulfilled several internships at different institutions for physically and mentally disabled people, e.g. residential accommodation, daycare center, workshops. Those internships enforced my decision to work with the Handicapped.

During my one-month-long stay in Kenya in 2005 I began to develop interest in the field of “International Special Education”. While searching in the internet for adequate working possibility abroad I found information on the “EMC Ghana-Project” which I was immediately interested in. This project seemed to afford a suitable opportunity for me to gain intercultural and professional experiences because it combines both.

As I have gained already several working experiences with handicapped people in Germany, I wanted to get to know how other countries; especially African countries work in this field.

As part of my preparation, I participated in a few seminars organized by members of the “EMC Ghana-Project” and “bezev” (Disability and Development Cooperation). At these meetings I got some useful as well as interesting information about the Ghanaian Culture, Special Education in Ghana, GCSS, just to mention a few. Additionally former volunteers reported on their experiences they gained during their stay abroad. Altogether the seminars were very helpful in preparing for me for my stay.

I arrived in Ghana on January 17th 2008, from this day on my theoretical knowledge and my expectations changed into reality. In the following seven months I had the opportunity gain an intensive insight into the Ghanaian way of life.

2. Description of the Garden City Special School (G.C.S.S.)

The “Garden City Special School for the mentally Challenged” is a governmental special school for children with a mental retarded.

The school is located in Asokore-Mampong which is small suburb of Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti-Region. The distance from Asokore Mampong to the center of Kumasi is about 10 km.

The GCSS is one out of the twenty-four special schools under the Special Education Division of Ghana. These types of school under this division are Schools for the Mentally Challenged, for the Deaf and for the Visually Impaired/Blind.

Altogether there are eight fulltime schools for the Mentally Challenged and three Units for this target group at other schools.

The Special Schools are to guarantee every child with adequate training as well as to give them the possibility of making use for their rights of education for nine years.

Integration of people with disabilities in community life can only be meaningful if opportunities are created early enough for them. This is one important purpose of GCSS to support the condition to realize the plan of “Special Education”.

- Beginning and Development

In 1966 a group of people formed the “Association of friends of the Mentally Retarded” organized a centre to take care of children concerned on a private property. The project started with ten children. In 1977 the centre was taken over by the government and it was rebuilt as a school. A few years later a new plan for the school was made and the school moved to a different private plot. Then, in 1996 the school was relocated at present.

- Facts and Data

For an application at Special School a medical or psychological report is needed. This is done most often at “Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital” at the Department of Behavioral Sciences. The report certifies a mental retardation and the doctor will recommend the child to a Special School. Theoretically the child should have the possibility to go to school after this procedure but the realization is sometimes critical. The counted school-places are in no relation to the numbers of school-aged children with a mental retardation. At this time there are about 400 children on the waiting list at GCSS.

The total enrollment at the School is 165 for 2008.

The school is a boarding school with about 120 (boarder) students (88 boys, 32 girls). But there are not enough boarding places so the school also operates as a day school for 45 students (15 boys, 32 girls). This is male possible the school bus conveying them every morning and afternoon.

Presently there are 25 teachers at GCSS. 16 of them are professional teachers who studied Special Education at University of Winneba (14 teachers) or went through psychology studies at Department of Special Education at University of Cape Coast (2 teachers).

In addition to the Professionals there are 8 teachers and some of them are currently doing their diploma programs at the Teacher Training Colleges.

From September till July there were 5 trainees doing their practical training as part of their Special Education studies from the University of Education, Winneba.

The non-teaching staff consists of 26 members including housemothers, drivers, day and night watchmen, nurse, cooks, accountant, storekeeper, computer-man, secretary, ground officers, cleaner and pantry boy.

- General Equipments

There are two separated buildings for the boys and girls in the boarding school. Both have sanitary facilities and bedrooms for the children. In each house there is also a room for a housemother. Three housemothers and four teachers are in residence on campus to take care of the children at day and night.

During my stay a new Dormitory was constructed. The handing-over was in July. At the beginning of the next term 48 (day-) students are expected to move to this place. With this, of the transportation problems with the school bus (long distances, breakdowns, costs of repairs, and rise in fuel prices) would be reduced.

Other buildings are the dining hall and the kitchen with rooms for items to be stored.

There are also four more buildings: the clinic, offices for administrative works as well as two buildings for accommodation for the headmaster and some other staff members.

Three blocks are used as classes. The biggest one contains the gym and five vocational classes. Vocations like leatherworks, knotting/weaving doormats, envelop making, home economics and “tie and dye” are taught here.

The playground and a field used for sports and other playing activities are also attractively places on the compound.

- Concepts and Methods

Altogether GCSS has fifteen classes orientated on for different focal points: severe and classes, educable classes, trainable and vocational classes.

The concept of the school is based on the published Curriculum. It contains the imparting of twelve areas of basic skills: reading, writing, arithmetic, self-help skills, verbal communication, interpersonal skills, gross and fine motor skills, health care, household management and prevocational skills.

The form of documentation is adapted to an internal standard. Every class teacher shall have a file for each student containing the medical report and the Individual Educational Program (IEP). Nevertheless the realization of the work is mainly based on the decision and attitude of the class teachers.

At this point I would like to quote the headmaster of GCSS, Mr George Yamoah Manu: “What is needed is time, patience, dedication, understanding and love to the cause of the children to whatever you decide to teach them.”

- **Financial Situation**

All expenses for the students of the boarding school are paid by the Ghana Government. The parents just have to pay for things for their child's personal needs, e.g. hygienic items and school uniform. The day students also do not have to pay for their daily transport and they get a warm meal at lunch for free.

In addition to the government support, some other organizations are supporting to the school, especially the "Naja David Company" which gives a weekly food subsidy, built a girls dormitory Block in 1997 as well as the new dormitory, just to mention a few of the numerous services this Company has done to GCSS.

The "Catholic Relief Service" (CRS) and the "Kristo Asarfo Church" give food donations to the school. The "Royal Lions Club of Kumasi" and the "EMC Ghana-Project" as well as some other Individuals have given support for the construction of the school blocks.

- **Structure of the Week**

The school week is from Monday to Friday from 8:30 am until 1 pm.

Every class has a fixed timetable. After the school bus arrives with the day students, all the students and teachers welcome each other. Around 8:30 am one of the students starts to beat the drum calling everybody to the daily Assembly. The students have to stand in queues which are located in front of their respective class. The students face towards the teacher who is on duty, who guides the Assembly. The Assembly lasts about 30 Minutes. During this time students and teachers talk sing and pray together. After the assembly some selected student's beats the drum while the others singing and march to the classrooms.

A school day is structured in three teaching periods and two break times.

Every Monday morning a regular staff meeting for teaching and non-teaching staff takes place. At those meetings the headmaster gives information for the following days or weeks. On the other hand staff members also draw the attention the Headmaster to different topics which can be debated upon.

On Wednesday mornings, all classes worship together the students start dancing if they hear the sound of the drums and they try to listen if a teacher is talking to them about topics from the Bible. In addition to this program the school choirs as well as some solo students present religious songs to the rest of the school. There is always a cheerful atmosphere during the worship.

Every Friday is meant for playing, sports, drumming and dancing or entertainments for all students lead by the school coach.

3. **Integration in the School Community**

Right from the beginning the teachers and other staff members were very friendly and open-minded. This behavior made it easier for me to acclimatize into the team.

Many teachers were interested in getting to know something about the culture, traditions, habits, school system in Germany. Due to this cultural exchange we discovered things in common and some differences in comparison with the Ghanaian and the German culture. After a short time I felt comfortable at school and I was on friendly terms to some staff members even in private area. Especially the exchange with the five trainees was very interesting.

In my opinion it was a significant advantage that Katharina and I worked together at GCSS at the same time. Because of the same cultural background we felt associated with each other and it was helpful to have somebody around to whom I could communicate in my mother tongue. Most of the time we had the same opinions as well as similar feelings and thoughts. In pairs it was easier to realize some projects or activities at school.

On the other hand there is probably also a disadvantage if two volunteers work at school at the same time. Automatically they move closer together, in consequence they are not as open minded and sociable as they would (probably) be if they would have been the only one volunteer at school.

Most of the staff members tried to include us in the team. The staff meetings were mainly held in English. But sometimes there was still the barrier of language which caused a few communication problems.

Nevertheless I think that we had been well integrated into school community.

- **Cooperation with my Mentor**

For the time of my practical training Philip Biyimba, a professional teacher, was my mentor. In the beginning we were of different opinion about the field of responsibility of a mentor because of different expectations. I took the view that Philip was my first contact person at school so I supposed that this was his only responsibility. But Philip had a different view because of his experiences with former volunteers. In the past volunteers was living in a room on the school campus. So they contacted their mentor for school affairs as well as in private area (for example how to orientate in town).

But my situation could not be compared with this because for the time of my stay in Ghana I lived together with a local family and the family members took care of me, explained and showed me everything I needed in the private domain. Consequently I did not ask Philip for help outside of school. After a few weeks the two of us had a conversation including an exchange of our views. This was very helpful to eliminate some misunderstandings. Since that time we came to an agreement with regard to our ideas of the cooperation at school. In my opinion Philip was a competent and helpful mentor. I was allowed to contact him at any time. But my recommendation for future volunteers is to appoint a day for a meeting between mentor and volunteer weekly or

within two weeks. With this discussions and reflections can take place regularly and not in between.

Furthermore I would like to recommend that it might be helpful if volunteer and mentor have a dialog in the beginning about their expectations concerning the cooperation.

- Cooperation with Headmaster and Assistant Headmistress

Mr. George Yamoah Manu and Mrs. Roseline Adjepong had been competent and understanding contact persons for Katharina and me. They spent time for us whenever we contacted them. Both of them showed great understanding for difficulties which appeared as a result of cultural differences.

The headmaster complied with our wishes and made many things possible for us.

As soon as he got informed of my malaria sickness he was immediately on the spot with his car to take me to hospital and pharmacy, to which I am deeply grateful.

- Supervision with Mrs. Kwadade

As a result of the distance our meetings could unfortunately not take place regularly. Altogether we met three times at Mrs. Kwadade's office in Accra. These meetings had been very helpful to reflect some experiences I gained in my Ghanaian environment. She was also a very competent and empathetic contact person.

In June there was a meeting at GCSS in which Mrs. Kwadade, Mr. Ottah, the Headmaster, our mentor teachers, Katharina and I were present in. Our situation as volunteers at GCSS was discussed in general. This meeting gave me the feeling that I have been taken seriously as a volunteer. All participants seemed to be anxious to improve the cooperation between Volunteers and Special School as well as to work on the ongoing of the project.

I hope this will be continued and further developed in future to guarantee a successful and satisfying cooperation.

4. **My Field of Work**

- **The First Weeks at GCSS**

Two days after my arrival in Asokore-Mampong I had my first working day at GCSS. The school is situated very close to my accommodation so every day I walk to school and back. Students, headmaster, teachers and other staff members welcomed me very friendly. At the first staff meeting the headmaster introduced me to the staff.

During the first weeks it was not easy for me to get an overview of the school structure. There were so many new impressions that streamed through my mind. Only a few students attended school during the first week. Some were still staying at home because of the previous Christmas holidays. So I had the opportunity to know some students and teachers outside everyday life at school.

I was not aware about which kind of work I should do. Whether I would be teaching at a class or assisting or guiding some other projects. The Headmaster and teachers left the decision for me of which area I like to work, with someone in a team or whether I would like to work on my own.

For the first two to three weeks, I took time to go around the classes. Because of the preparation of the Independence Day Celebration of Ghana (on March 6th), lesson did not take place regularly as the school was practicing for the celebration. This made it hard for me to get use to the way of teaching at GCSS.

I also took some time to observe several students closely. This was necessary to realize their individuality and their personality and to have an orientation about their general stages of development. In my opinion this is a condition for being able to work with the children. From this it means that you become sensitive for a work orientated on the needs, interests and skills of an individual student.

During my observations I noticed that some of the students have restrictions on their movements, e.g. as a result of cerebral palsy or overweight.

Every Friday there are physical exercises and entertainments at school but some of the students are not able to take part in these activities because of their physically disability. Consequently I decided to work with some of these students.

In the beginning of my practical training I was working together with the school coach, Mr. Otu Abankwah once a while. He is a graduated teacher of Special Education with the focal point on Physical Education. We were working according to a plan which was already set up by him. The plan contained one unit weekly with a group of students with overweight to fitness, games and other physical exercises. During the last months Katharina and I continued working with this group while the coach went to the University of Winneba again for his second degree in Special Education.

- Individual Physiotherapy with Gifty

The main focus of my work was the Individual Physiotherapy with Gifty, a spastic tetraplegic girl.

Gifty is 16 years old and she is a student of group 3A at GCSS. She is physically and mentally disabled. In infancy Gifty suffered from Polio and Jaundice. As a result of her spastical tetraplegy her moving coordination is tremendously restricted. Her arms and legs are hardly movable. Nevertheless Gifty started walking at the age of nine years. Her gait looks unsafe and shaky because she is not able to angle her legs in the knee bend and often falls down. The movement of her hands and fingers are also heavily restricted. Most of the times her hands are clenched into a fist. This makes it difficult to grasp something or to handle some objects like pen or cutlery. Consequently Gifty is depended on help in many fields of everyday life.

Gifty's Speech is not clear so it is not easy to understand her pronunciation well. But she is able to communicate verbally most of her basic needs. Besides her mother tongue Twi she is also able to understand and speak a bit English. This was very helpful for our exercises.

The Physiotherapy contained several units with the main interest on exercising the coordination of body parts, especially moving of hands and fingers for stimulating of the tactile sense perception including massages for relaxing of muscles.

During our 40 minutes-units, I stimulated Gifty's hands and fingers through massages and special grasps so that these parts of her body became a bit more flexible and relaxed. Usually I used a bowl filled with water for our exercises. Water can have a stimulating effect and some parts of the body are easier to move in water. So I dip her hands separately and gently into the bowl and start to move every single finger carefully.

Due to this procedure Gifty was able to unclench her fist for a short period. Sometimes I used only my hands for massage or with a massaging ball.

I had the opportunity to observe and to experience different situations. I realized the different effects of variations in massaging.

After a few weeks I kept a sponge into the bowl and Gifty's was to grasp it and squeeze the sponge. This way made it possible to change the fixed position of her fingers. On some days this exercises seemed to be hard and laborious for Gifty, but sometimes she looked somehow relaxed. I believe that the units demanded an intensive concentration for Gifty so I allowed her times for relaxation and reflection in between.

It was also not easy to find out the right method according to the students' need.

Sometimes Gifty started to reverse the exercises while she was trying to massage my hands.

When I reflected on the work with Gifty, I was very satisfied. Our units gave me joy and motivation. In the time of massaging she seemed to be concentrated and well balanced. I observed that she was able to relax her mind and hands earlier than before.

But unfortunately our Physiotherapy exercises could not take place regularly because Gifty is a day student and sometimes she was not present at school. Consequently the effectiveness of our units was reduced. But even with daily Physiotherapy it will not be possible for Gifty to move her hands and fingers without difficulties.

I think this is a realistic supposition with regard to her physical condition. Nevertheless Physiotherapy is never in vain for a person with cerebral palsy.

- **Other Projects and Activities**

Additionally I carried out some other projects and activities for the students together with Katharina.

With Felicia and Ariij, two students with cerebral palsy we organized some exercises to improve their fine motor skills. We used little colored wooden sticks and grasp these sticks and put it down after a pattern. Through this exercise we could combine training of fine motor skills and some other areas of training like chromatics. As the wooden sticks had different colours we included some exercises topic such as “Matching of colours”. We created a placard with the alphabet. This was helpful for Felicia and Ariij to form some letters with the sticks. Through to this we could also practice the ABC. As at now both of them are able to form their names without or just with little help. Both girls enjoyed the participation in these units.

Occasionally Katharina and I organized some projects in the classes.

One school day we arranged a project with the topic “At the airport”. We designed a poster with several pictures which were connected with this topic and explained it to the students, e.g. airport, airplane, flight ticket, passport, just to mention a few. After that we drew different types of airplanes on paper and the students took pleasure in painting it. Katharina and I showed the class how to create an airplane out of paper.

A few days before Easter we arranged a German Easter tradition at school. As part of preparation for the Easter weekend children in Germany blow out some eggs to paint the shell with watercolor. Later they fix a thread onto the shell and use the painted shells for decoration.

After we explained this German habit to the teachers at a staff meeting we went through the classes where the teachers blew out some eggs so that the students could paint the shells. Out of the contents of the eggs the Life-skill-class prepared delicious “omelet” for all teachers and students.

The next day we decorated the classrooms with the coloured shells.

It was not always easy to put this project into action but altogether it was a new, interesting and funny experience for everyone. Students and teachers got in touch with a foreign cultural tradition.

5. My accommodation

For the time of my stay I had the fortune to live together with a Ghanaian family. The family helped me to settle down in my new temporary home quickly. Most of the time, I lived together with six of the family members. I have really enjoyed living in a big family because one does not feel lonely as there is always somebody around. Any time I needed help or I had questions on issues concerning life habits in Ghana, I was always free to ask and somebody explained it to me patiently. In the beginning my host mother Aunte Esther and my sisters did not expect me to participate in the daily chores. They treated me like a special guest, but after a short time I tried to become part of the family with equal duties as others. Sometimes I went to the water pump with my sisters to fetch filtered water and I carried the filled bucket like a Ghanaian woman on my head to the house. My mother took care of me very well. Occasionally she feared something bad could happen to me. When we had our meals she often meant a lot to me. One of her favorite sentences was: "Eat more, I want you to become fat!" My family taught me a lot about Ghanaian culture. I had the opportunity to experience several events like funeral, naming-ceremony, marriage and churchgoings. My mother and sisters also showed me how to prepare some delicious local dishes. Living together with a domestic family gave me the opportunity to get an intensive and naturally insight into the Ghanaian way of life. I had my own room at home with all things I needed. I have been very happy and satisfied with my family. My well-being has been as a result of their daily love and care for me. I am so grateful to all my family members for their great hospitality. I will never forget these months at "my home" in Asokore-Mampong and I really hope we can stay in contact in future.

6. General Reflection / Evaluation / Closing Words

During my stay in Ghana a lot of Ghanaians asked me about my mission here. Some people were astonished when I told them about my voluntary work at a Special School for the Mentally Challenged. Frequently they asked me: "But how do you teach those children?" Many people have the view that handicapped people can not do anything to themselves or society. This question gave me the opportunity to explain to them some of the schools guidelines: Everyone is educable! I really hope this conversation change their thinking about the difficult situation of people with disabilities in societies.

So a little part of my mission in Ghana was also giving people information to achieve more tolerance, sympathy and solidarity for the Handicapped.

Working at GCSS and living with a Ghanaian family made possible for me to know a completely different social structure as well as educational methods.

It was not only that I experienced a foreign culture; simultaneously I got to know my home culture more closely. The cultural exchange was very interesting and instructive.

At the same time I was confronted with a big challenges, thus not to condemn something just because I would have done it in another way because of a different cultural background.

I noticed that European thoughts and African acts are not always easy to unite.

Another valuable experience for me was how to live under different living conditions where I learned how to manage without electricity and running water, without all these conveniences that are regarded indispensable in my home country.

The Ghanaians taught me waiting and patience. Terms like 'Time' is interpreted in another way. Getting used to the Ghanaian time management was at first not easy.

Most of the activities and meetings do not start at a fixed point of time but rather during a period of time.

The seven months I spent in Ghana enriched my life and gave me another point of view concerning some areas of my life in Germany by now.

I really hope it was not my last stay in Ghana. One day I would like to come back to this amazing place.

Written by:

Karin Becker

Asokore-Mampong, Kumasi on July 18th, 2008