

PRACTICAL TRAINING IN GHANA

under the

**EDUCATION OF THE MENTALLY CHALLENGED
(EMC)-GHANA PROJECT**

at

**GARDEN CITY SPECIAL SCHOOL FOR THE MENTALLY
HANDICAPPED**

in

ASOKORE- MAMPONG, KUMASI

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Written by:

**Melanie Popp
Welkerstr. 81 b
72213 Altensteig
Germany**

melaniepopp4711@yahoo.de

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1. Preparation

Going to an African Country was my idea since I finished school. During my last semester of studies at the university a friend told me about “Africa Action” and I got into contact through their homepage. When I asked them for projects in English-speaking Countries which are working together with special schools, they told me about the EMC-Ghana-Project.

The opportunity this project offered me was exactly what I was looking for: Thus living in Ghana and working for six month in an African Country, which means combining cultural and personal experiences with working in special education which I studied. After the first contact the project organization invited me to a meeting in Wuerzburg. There I met Daniela Gaertner, Klaus Jahn and some of the former volunteers who gave information about the project and their own experiences in Ghana.

I also met Nina, a girl also interested in joining the project. That was very helpful, because from there on we started preparing our stay in Ghana together.

After the project decided to post me to Garden City Special School in Kumasi, I contacted Eva, a previous volunteer at GCSS. I discussed with her how to prepare myself for the work at school. She advised me to prepare for several areas and subjects and to decide on what I will do when I see the school, the students and the teachers. The only information given to me from the project organization was that the school mentioned they were interested in somebody working on language and speech. So I prepared myself for various subjects, including a program for speech and language to be able to decide flexibly in which area I'll work.

2. First days in Ghana

When Nina and I arrived in Accra, a delegation from my school in Kumasi and Kpando, the school Nina spend her time in Ghana, welcomed us to our “new world”.

I still remember our first ride through Accra: a lot of traffic, It seemed like everybody was just driving the way he wants, many people selling things on the street, shops along the roadside, people carrying things on their head and so many unknown kinds of food, etc. Everything was different from what I knew till this day. When most people asked me, “How do you see Ghana?” the only response I could give was “different”.

Getting used to this totally new environment took me at least three to four weeks. For the first time, I was so impressed about all the things I saw and I was not sure if I'll ever be able to walk around on my own without getting lost. Even buying something to eat looked like an adventure to me. But after some excursions to Kumasi town with Philip, my coordinator, and an introduction to the exciting public transport system of Ghana I felt like being able to deal with all this new things.

During the first weekend, we made an excursion to Battor, where the qualifications for the special Olympic Games took place. It was very helpful to meet Nina there so that we could talk about all the impressions streamed to our senses from the day we arrived.

The room given to me had only a bed and a chair. It was not easy for me that the first thing I had to do was to ask for, in my opinion basic and necessary things, like a cupboard or shelves and a table. But when I asked for those things they were given to me and I was allowed to create the room in the way that will make me comfortable. My first day at school, I was shortly introduced to the teaching staff, and also told me, that Philip will be the one responsible for any questions and problems I have. Whenever I contacted him with anything, like for example the furniture problem, he helped me to solve it.

To reduce the difficulties concerning the everyday life it might be helpful for the next volunteer, to spend the first days with some basic introductions. This should include things like information about the organization of the school, introduction to all the people living on the campus and the non teaching staff, the curriculum for the Special Schools, information for the everyday life like how to get to town, important places, where to buy food or other things needed, some prices to prevent being cheated at the market and also, very important, basic knowledge of Twi.

3. Garden City Special School in Asokore- Mampong, Kumasi (GCSS)

GCSS was founded in 1977. During the 90th Klaus Jahn now leader of the EMC-Ghana-Project helped to build some new school buildings which was the beginning of the cooperation.

The school is located in Asokore-Mampong a small suburb of Kumasi. The Campus includes three classroom blocks of which one of them contains the gymnasium and workshops for the vocational classes, two dormitories for boarding students, an administration block, a dinning hall, a kitchen and a small clinic as well as some blocks for staff members accommodation.

The students are between eight and more than 30 years old. Officially there are 120 living on the campus with tree housemothers and 45 day students. But actually about 100 students are attending the school regularly. A bus goes round every school day to collect the day students to school and back.

GCSS works under the special Education Division of Ghana what means it is a governmental school, but also supported by the EMC-Ghana –Project and other organizations.

Most of the teachers in the classes are professional teachers who studied special education at the University of Winneba. In addition to the professionals there are also untrained teachers of which some are currently doing diploma programs at the Teacher Training Colleges. The untrained teachers work in the vocational classes as well as assisting the class teachers of the educational and severe classes. During my stay at GCSS there were also six students from University of Education, Winneba to do a one year practical training in special education.

Every class has a professional teacher who teaches all subjects and a teacher aid.

When children are admitted, they are usually send to one of the 4 beginners classes based on their assessments to learn about basic life skills before they are send to any of the seven educable classes which prepares them for vocational training. The vocational

classes offer carpentry, weaving of doormats, leatherworks, life skills, sawing and tie&dye.

Schooldays start at 8.30 am and closing time is at 1.30pm. The day is structured in three lesson blocks and two break times. After lunch the day students are send home with the school bus.

Beside the teaching staff, GCSS also has office workers, kitchen staff, a nurse, a storekeeper, drivers, day and night watchmen, laborers as well as the housemothers.

4. Social Situation

Apart from the work of the Project, I think the experiences of social and cultural issues are also important. They have a big influence on the work and the ongoing of the project, and I want to mention some of the things I had to deal with.

4.1 Accommodation

For the time of my stay, one of the school clinic rooms was given to me. I was served with the same food the school kitchen prepared for the children and other staff members. In addition to the one hot meal appointed in my contract, I was also served with breakfast and supper which I appreciate very much.

I was also allowed to use the fridge of the nurse and all keys I needed were given to me. This means I could feel free and had a lot of freedom concerning the situation of accommodation. However that also did not make it possible for me to take part in the usual everyday life of a Ghanaian family. For the cultural exchange I think it would be an advantage to stay with a host family which would enables a volunteer to learn a lot about the culture and everyday life of the people in a more natural way, such as cooking, washing, structure of family and the language. I missed that opportunity of exchange and want to recommend that future volunteers should live in a host family if they want it that way. In my opinion that might help to integrate the volunteer in the society and the everyday life as well as making it easier to get into contact with people and enable them to get used and known to the new environment in a natural way.

My recommendation to the people in Germany who are responsible for the preparation of the volunteers is, to discuss the pros and cons of different accommodation types and find a way to make it possible for the volunteers to make their own choice.

4.2 Organization, coordination and support

From the first day, I was given a coordinator, Philip Biyimba, a professional teacher, working in an educable class. He was responsible to me, in areas of questions, support and problems during the stay.

I'm very thankful to the headmaster for the choice, because Philip helped me a lot and did this always in a helpful and understanding way. Whenever I came for something he found time for me.

To enhance the cooperation it might be helpful to appoint a weekly time for a meeting between the coordinator and the volunteer for them to discuss the actual situation regularly and if necessary to solve problems promptly. It would also make it more comfortable for the volunteer by avoiding the issue of always asking for time to meet. Also there should be regular evaluation of the work done by the volunteer and maybe also a feedback from the school which would improve the results and the ongoing of the project. It might also be helpful to have a meeting with the headmaster quarterly to give him a short report so that he is informed about the ongoing of the project.

Addai, Melanie and Philip

4.3 Integration in the school community

First of all I want to say that, most of the time everybody on the campus was friendly and helpful and trying to make me feel comfortable and enjoy my stay.

Anytime I came to the house mothers and children's place, I was welcome. The kitchen staff took care of me very well, especially when I had stomach problems, everybody tried to find out what was the best to do. Also the Assistant headmistress was always helpful when I needed something.

It took some time before I knew most of the people I was living with on the campus. Maybe it would be helpful to introduce the volunteer to the people living on the campus to avoid misidentity.

Whenever I asked for something for my work, like for example the key to the gym, or paper, it was always given to me. When I visited a class I felt welcome all the time. One serious problem I had to face during my time here was the language and communication problem since most of the time the language spoken was Twi. This made it difficult for me to actively take part in conversations concerning personal as well as official.

During official meetings both, English and Twi was used and that made it impossible to actively take part in the discussion. Sometimes I couldn't even get some official information that was announced during the meetings. This made me feel like being cut off for many times.

I discussed this with my coordinator. I know, that nobody wanted to exclude me on purpose but that was how I always felt when I had to ask for translation on several occasions during meetings and all I got was a very short summary of the topic and a laughter.

I'm aware, that some of the staff members, especially the non-teaching staff, are not able to speak English, so they would be excluded if the meeting was held only in English. However I think it is necessary to find a way to include everybody. Sometimes I missed

the will of the school community to work on this. I think it is very difficult to work together when you don't understand what is going on and when you can't take part in discussions and meetings like a full member of staff.

I want to mention that there is a difference between picking up greetings or commonly used words and learning a totally new language so that you can take part in discussions or get detailed information. I think six months is not enough to learn a foreign language and even in my case I was still learning English.

There should be a teacher to take care of translation or remind the others of also using English or maybe something like short translation breaks.

In my opinion it is necessary for everybody to work on this problem to make the volunteers to feel like being full members of the staff.

5. Academic work

When I arrived, the headmaster told me I should take enough time to go round the classes to see what was going on and to find out in which area I wanted to work. I appreciated this because it was helpful to get used to the everyday life in school, the way of teaching at GCSS, the students and the staff. This also means I had enough freedom concerning making a decision on what I want to do during my stay.

After observing various classes for two to three weeks, I decided to work in two areas, speech and mathematics.

5.1 Teaching and learning Material (TLM)

Every classroom contains a cupboard to store the TLM. Many things can be found there, basic things like chalk, paper, exercise books and small chalkboards for the students as well as various games, patterns to draw shapes or puzzles to improve fine motor skills. I was always allowed to look through the TLM and use them when I found something for my lessons. The only problem was that, many of the things were incomplete or spoiled. Most of the time I worked with the chalkboard and materials I made myself like cards or simple games, as I was always given cardboards.

What I brought from Germany was one program for the mouth motor skills including some materials and some dices.

5.2 Speech and language Therapy

Because I studied teaching of children with speech and language problems and Daniela mentioned that something like this is requested by the school, I brought a program for basic motor skills for the mouth, tongue and lips. I chose this because it can be used for different kinds of handicaps and it works on basic skills for every language.

I picked four children to work with in this area after talking to their teachers. They were two girls, Felicia and Ariij with cerebral pareses who are able to speak but without having a clear pronunciation. The language they speak is Twi, but they are able to understand little English.

Ariij

I also picked two boys: Michael, who has speech but without a clear pronunciation and a drawling problem. He uses Twi most of the time but he is also able to understand and speak a little bit English. The other was Toufike, who had no speech and a serious drawling problem.

Michael

At the beginning I went through the diagnosis procedure of the program. For this, two teachers helped me to translate my instructions and explanations to the students. After that I worked alone most of the time. Some teachers occasionally came for short visits to see what I'm doing, but not regularly.

I picked the students anytime they were free necessary going on a fixed timetable to work with them. This was on a one and one basis for about 30 to 45 minutes. For this project, the gym was given to me and I could feel free to use it whenever I wanted, which I appreciated.

After some time I found a way to communicate with them using English, Twi, signs and demonstration for Instructions. Through this I got to know what they were able to do and how to motivate them for the exercises.

I developed various games to train them on exercises for mouth, tongue and lips, based on the program I brought.

After some time I also started to work on phonemes and words like, numbers, colors and parts of the body with the three students who are able to speak. With Toufike I was practicing the exercises to reduce the drawling and instead of the words we started working on pronouncing vowels.

Toufike

All the four students were able to improve. To proof this I went through the diagnosis procedure again. This kind of therapy is typically ongoing in little steps for progress. I also want to mention, that the aim of the program is not to solve the drawling problems completely or make the pronunciation perfect but to improve it as much as possible based on the students condition.

After the vacations I reflected on the progress of my work and I realized that nobody will be able to continue with the program after my departure.

I talked to my coordinator about this worry. After discussion we came to the conclusion that it might be like this because of the way we organized my work. Till now it was not clear which of the two class teachers of the students was going to be in charge to follow up the program, because we didn't discuss this earlier. Another thing was that we didn't make a fixed timetable. After realizing these difficulties, we decided it might be the best to find one interested person who can from then participate in all my lessons with the four students and learn how to continue the program. The person I worked with was Mr. Otu Abankwah. He was interested in the work and not assigned to one class, so that made it possible for him to use his time flexible like I did. We started our cooperation with some theoretic information and discussing about the program and continued with the practical aspect of the lessons.

With this I think it is possible for the program to continue and I really hope it will be. I'm very happy we were able to correct the mistakes we made at the beginning to make the work I did sustainable, otherwise I would have left with the feeling that the time I spent working was somehow wasted. Now I'm leaving with the feeling that the work I started will help some of the children durably as it is continued by a teacher of GCSS.

5.3 Mathematics

From the first time I attended a lesson of math in the class of my coordinator, held by Mr. Francis Addai, one of the out-segment students, the idea of working together with him on this subject was in my mind. He agreed and we started working together.

Four boys are attending the class, Kofi, Samuel, Michael and Isaac. When I came to join the class, Addai was splitting the class in two groups based on their different level of skills.

Michael and Isaac were working with numbers up to 100 while Kofi and Samuel were trying to operate with numbers up to 10. To do additions, all of them used the counters and their only strategy to do the addition was counting. That meant they needed very long time to finish the calculations and this seemed to me that their knowledge about the system of numbers and their concept of numbers and numerals was not that differentiated.

Based on these observations we decided to try to improve upon Michael's and Isaac's way and the strategy of calculation of and enable them to use the decimal structure for calculating.

We made a cardboard, with numerals from 1 to 100, ten in each line to help them to discover the decimal system. Nevertheless it was difficult for them to calculate fast and only in mind.

When later we found a way to symbolize the systems, it seemed that they started getting the system, especially Isaac. That is what they are still practicing.

Beside this we also practiced addition of numbers up to ten off hand. We also started with subtraction which we have to focus again as they were improving in doing the addition.

Samuel and Kofi got different assignments and most of the time I focused working with

them while Addai was looking after Michael and Isaac. But every time we were also following what the other group was doing and when one of us had an idea or needed help, we talked about it and decided together how to continue. We tried various ideas and tried to find out what was helpful for whom, together.

Samuel

To work with Kofi and Samuel, I made some cards with various objects on them, to start with e.g. one cup up to ten cups. To help them to identify the quantity I structured the objects. The aim of the work was to get them an idea of quantity and then matching with the numbers. Now they are able to identify up to five or sometimes six objects without counting and match the right number. Samuel can verbalize the numbers and identify the written number, while Kofi who has no speech used his fingers to show the same quantity again or point on a cardboard where we wrote the numbers from one to ten to help him to express himself. They are still worked on this to enable them identify higher quantity and numerals. We practice that through playing various games like e.g. memory, domino, bingo and using the dices.

The next thing we started to practice was simple addition up to ten.

Kofi

For this area I can say it was like team teaching and I enjoyed the lessons all the time. It was an exchange of ideas from which both of us were able to benefit. Also the students improved their knowledge and skills and were always motivated to work.

The second mathematic project I started was only of short duration, because the little boy, Bismarck, didn't come back to school after vacations. He was in one of the beginners' classes and I started only for a short time before vacation to teach him counting and the concept of numbers and numerals.

5.4 Summery and recommendations

Looking on the way the decision about my work was made, I can say, I had all freedom to choose what I wanted to do. I appreciate this freedom which imposes confidence in me. On the other hand it is also possible that the area I chose to work in was not the same one the school would have chosen. So I think the decision shouldn't be made by the volunteer alone. Maybe it might be better to meet with the volunteer, the coordinator and the headmaster after the first time of orientation and observation and discuss what the best thing to do is. The volunteer can offer some ideas what he or she can do and then the final decision can be made together. This will make sure that the work of the volunteer is useful for the school.

After my decision was made, we did not think about the best way to organize it, especially the speech and language project. For projects like this it is important to draw a plan together with the coordinator and maybe also the headmaster to integrate the work in the organization of the everyday life of the school so it can be made sure that the work or the new project started by the volunteer will be continued after her or his stay. To reflect and improve upon the organization and the ongoing of the work should also be part of the weekly meetings which I recommended earlier. I think through this, problems can be solved promptly and lasting which makes work more effective and satisfactory.

6. Activities beside Teaching

At this point I want to say “me dawase paa” to everybody (meaning, thank you very much in Twi) for all the interesting things I was able to see, enjoy and learn outside the classroom

Whenever there was a special program like invitations for the drumming and dancing group or the choir to perform, the celebration of the 50th anniversary, the Qualification for the Special Olympic Games in Battor, just to mention a few, I was taken there to join the program.

I was also lucky to be part of the cultural and sports Festival we hosted here in Kumasi. Being involved in the Ghanaian way of organization which is completely different from German, preparing an event like this was very exciting, interesting and somehow a nice adventure even though it wasn't always easy to understand how things were done. During the preparation for these events, I was able to learn some traditional dancing and drumming what was a great experience for me.

Practicing the drumming

Another typical Ghanaian thing I learned was how to make tie & dye and batik. Whenever I came to this workshop to join their work I was welcome. The time I spend there was very interesting and I enjoyed it and learned a lot about this great vocation.

Tie & Dye

Here also I want to mention that, whenever I wanted to meet Nina or visit some other interesting places in the country the headmaster made it possible for me and supported me in doing it. These meetings were very important for me and Nina. It gave us in my

opinion the necessary opportunity to discuss our experiences, feelings and problems with a person having the same cultural background and a similar actual situation. The discussions helped us to understand many things better, to get new ideas for our work and solve some of the problems we had to face or even enabled us to improve upon dealing with them.

Therefore I want to recommend to the EMC-Ghana-Project organization in Germany to try to post volunteers to schools closer to each other.

Performance of School choir and Drumming and Dancing group

7. Personal reflections

To summarize all the experiences of six month living alone as an “obroni” in a community with a totally different culture, I think it can be described as a unique adventure, like discovering a new world. That was not always easy but it enriched my live and enabled me to learn a lot, especially about the meaning of the terms “culture” and “socialization” as well as about the importance of language and speech for the social live.

Living and working in a foreign culture for six month is a great opportunity to experience a culture in a very intensive way. Nevertheless it is sometimes hard to stand the feeling where nobody can understand you because nobody knows your culture.

Getting used to Ghanaians habits and the way of life was on one hand a good experience but on the other not easy. For example the different concept of time: dealing with departure times like “anytime from eight” is somehow difficult when you are used to fixed timetables. But after some time I came to the point I started to appreciate this way of dealing with time.

Another thing I realized was that by getting known to a foreign culture I learned also a lot about my own culture.

For all these learning processes the exchange with Nina helped me a lot to deal with all the new things, differences and problems. Also getting closer to some Ghanaians and talking to them about all the culture matters was very helpful.

Looking at the work I did, first I want to say, I enjoyed the opportunity to chose subjects I’m really interested in to work on them. I appreciate the freedom of being able to try out what I wanted to, but at the same time I sometimes wished the teachers would have participated in what I was doing.

The teaching of the children was very joyful. Although it was a challenge to communicate with them, we never gave up and we made up our way to understand each other most of the time.

Being used to having a lot of books, teaching and learning materials as well as copy machines available it was a great experience to depend on basic materials and my on ideas. I enjoyed developing my own teaching and learning materials and to see how much we were able to do and succeed with it.

I hope the speech and language project I started will be continued and some ideas I brought for the mathematics will also be used in the future, so that the learning processes started during my stay will go on.

I also hope I was not the only person who learned and benefited during this six month but also the people around me here at GCSS.

Finally I want to show appreciation to all who made it possible for me to stay and enjoy my period of service. Thanks to all.