

# **Report about Voluntary Service in Kumasi – Garden City Special School 2008-2009**

## **1. Preface**

During my studies in Special Education in Germany, I had the wish to go abroad to work for some time in a Special School. I followed this idea, because I wanted to get new experiences and enlarge my practical knowledge. Doing practical training in a foreign country included my wish to learn something about Special Education in another country and I was also interested to live for a longer time outside Germany and get to know about a different culture. This was beside my professional interest, the interest in the cultural exchange and the thinking that this experience would enrich me in a personal way.

Since my childhood I was fascinated by the African continent. That's the reason why I had this special interest for Africa and wished to go into an African country.

We have one professor at our university, who is specialized in intercultural and international Special Education. So I went to her, told her about my idea and asked her if she could help me find a project or if she knows a contact address. She told me about 'Bezev e.V.'. This is a small NGO specially working with people with handicaps. After writing to them about my motivation of going abroad and my curriculum vitae, they invited me to an interview. A few days later Stephanie, the organizer of the volunteers informed me that I could go to do my practical training with their organization.

We had five days workshop-meeting in February 2008, where all the volunteers came together. There we got some general information about cultural differences, disability and its concepts and the program of our stay. During these five days, I also had the chance to meet Stefan and Moritz from the EMC- Ghana project. They told me a lot about the project and about their time in Ghana. I wrote a second motivation writing to the EMC- Ghana project. Later they invited me to a meeting. We met on one weekend and there I also saw the other volunteers Claudi, Nathalie and Micha for the first time. We got a lot of information and we talked about our motivation, our expectations, our sorrows, our wishes and they showed us a lot of pictures from Ghana. After these three days Stefan and Moritz told us that also from their side, we were chosen to go to schools in Ghana. The next step was to wait for an acknowledgement from the headmaster of the Garden City Special School (GCSS). From this moment my idea became a concrete vision.

Going through a last meeting with 'Bezev e.V.' and doing the last organizing things, I flew to Ghana on the 30<sup>th</sup> August.

## **2. Arrival In Ghana And The First Weeks**

I arrived together with Nahalie in Accra. We were picked up by Mr. Yamoah, the headmaster of the GCSS, and Philip, a teacher at that school.

The first night we stayed in a hotel in Accra. On the following day we drove together with Philip to Kumasi. I was happy that there was somebody, who managed everything for us and escorted us because everything seemed so strange to me on the beginning. So many people were at the bus station and everybody spoke to us and wanted us to join their bus. I think I would have felt lost alone.

Philip brought us to my host family. They welcomed us and there we also met Katharina, the former volunteer at the GCSS. The first days she told us a lot about her experiences and she showed and explained to us so many necessary things. This introduction with somebody, who had already gone through the same experience I was about to, made it easier for me to find into the new life and it was a good chance to ask so many open questions.

I remember that the first weeks everything seemed so strange and different and easy things became a challenge.

After one week in Kumasi the headmaster of the GCSS welcomed Nathalie and me again official in a meeting. We also had a meeting with Mrs. Kwadade right at the beginning. She welcomed us and introduced us in our practical work.

After all that I was really excited and I looked forward that school reopens after vacation.

### **3. The Garden City Special School (GCSS)**

The GCSS is a school especially for children with a mental handicap. It is with 160 students one of the biggest schools within the 11 governmental school for mental handicapped children in Ghana. The school works under the Special Education Division and it is located in a suburb of Kumasi, called Asokore-Mampong.

In 1966 it started with a group of people, who formed the ' Association of friends of the Mentally Retarded'. Eleven years later, in 1977, it was taken over by the government.

Since 1996 it is placed on the present campus. This area includes three classroom blocks, one block for the administration, a dining hall and kitchen, a clinic, three dormitories blocks and also two blocks the staff and the headmaster.

The GCSS is a boarding school. Most of the students live at the campus. Some day students are picked up by the school bus every day.

The school starts on Monday to Friday at 8.30 am and closes at 1.00pm. Apart from Friday, which is the sports day, the students stay and learn in 15 classrooms.

The school is organized in the class teacher system so that teachers teach all the subjects. There are 25 teachers and 4 practical students from university working at the GCSS and apart from the teaching staff there are a lot of other workers and staff members with different professions.

#### 4. Social Situation

In this section I want to mention my life in the host family, the cooperation with my coordinator and the integration in the school community. All those things helped me to find into the new environment and to feel integrated into the new culture and society.

##### 4.1 The Host Family

I lived in the same family like Katharina lived with. That means that the family members were used to volunteers staying with them. I think this made it in many cases easier for all of us, because so many issues were already discussed and clarified. For example was it normal that I helped in the house chores from the beginning or that I was also in other ways naturally integrated in the family life.

The family welcomed me very well. My family included my host mother, who is the nurse of the GCSS, my host father, Junior and James, the host brothers and Nana, my host sister. Since November there was also Akwasi, a cousin of my host siblings, living in our house.

Right from the beginning they were all open-minded, interested and helped me a lot whenever I had a question or a problem.

The village I lived is called Ejisu-Krapa and it is about twenty kilometers outside of Kumasi. I enjoyed that Krapa is small and not so noisy and stressful like it is in the city itself. I also liked it because after a while I got to know most of the people there.

The house of my host family is very comfortable. We have a garden and there was enough space for all of us. I had my own room with a big bed, a cupboard, a chair and an armchair. We also had running water so that I can say it was a very comfortable and nice living place.

To live in a host family was a great experience. Through that I learned a lot about the Ghanaian culture, for example how to prepare Ghanaian dishes. I enjoyed helping my mum in the kitchen and she taught me a lot. Through the life in a family I could also get an impression about the family structure and organization here in Ghana. It was not always easy to see that things are done in such a different way like I was used to, but I think I succeeded in adapting myself to the cultural differences in the family.

They also explained to me a lot about the way things are seen and done in Ghana. Whenever I wasn't sure about something or I didn't understand a situation or behavior I could ask them so I could understand and handle things better.

Another thing I appreciated a lot was that they really took good care of me. Whenever I needed them, for example when I was sick, they were around and helped me. Especially my mum was always looking that I have enough to eat and that I feel fine. She did a really good job and I want to thank her for that.

The family was very important to me to feel at home in Ghana.

I think it is necessary to have a place where you feel welcome and good. Especially here in Ghana I enjoyed the silence in my room and to have such a place to rest and relax. Sometimes it was hard dealing with all those new impressions and differences, so my living place was a good place for me to get new energy and have a timeout.

Concerning to my experience I have to say that it is good to give new volunteers also the opportunity to live in a host family.

## **4.2 The Cooperation With My Coordinator**

Within the first week in school Philip Biyimba became my mentor. He is a professional teacher at the GCSS and he was already coordinating the work of former volunteers. So he knew his job as a coordinator, about his tasks and his responsibilities.

I already knew Philip from the airport. He came together with the headmaster to pick us up.

During the whole time he was my first contact person. Whenever I had a question or needed something, he was around and helped me. In doing those things he was really fast and reliable. I thank him for that. It was a good feeling to have a reliable and constant contact person.

Owing to the fact that I was working in his class we met everyday and we were always corresponding. I think that made the cooperation easier for both of us.

We had one official meeting at the beginning of my stay. There we discussed what I would like to do and decided that I will work constantly in one class.

Apart from that our meetings were not fixed on a special time. It was more like if there was a reason to meet, we met. For me this form of cooperation was fine. I didn't miss regular meetings. But if the coordinator and the volunteer are not working in one class or the coordinator is not seriously interested in his job, I think it would be a good solution to fix a meeting every week.

## **4.3 Integration Into The School Community**

First of all I have to say that the staff members of the GCSS welcomed me very well and they were all very friendly to me.

On the first day in school the headmaster introduced me to all of them and also to the parents at a staff and parents meeting.

At the beginning I found it difficult to get an overview of the team, because there were so many people around. Maybe it would have been helpful to me

when the staff would have also introduced themselves to me. But they were all so open-minded that after a short time I got to know most of them.

Many of the teachers were interested in cultural exchange. They asked me a lot about the way we are working in Special Schools in Germany and how we handle certain problems. And they also explained to me a lot about the Special Education in Ghana. I enjoyed this discussions and this exchange enriched me and my time here in Ghana.

Whenever I had a question, problem or request they were around to support me.

The only difficulty I had sometimes was the language. I couldn't learn enough of the local language to follow the meetings. Although one of the teachers was trying to teach me in the first weeks, the language barrier still existed and I always needed somebody to translate the things for me. But I think it was a good thing to have Twi lessons and I see it as a great effort from the school to provide this for me.

## **5. Academic Work**

Now I will describe the things I have done during my six months working at the GCSS. First I will explain my field of work and give reasons for the decision to work that way. Then I will go in detail and give a short overview of the things I did in class. In the end I will write about my project.

### **5.1 My Field Of Work**

After I observed the school the first two weeks, I met Philip and we discussed our ideas. Our thinking, wishes and position towards my work and our cooperation went into the same direction. We both focused the exchange and wanted that, next to the work with the students, there is also a cooperation with the teachers. To realize that we decided that I stay in one class for the whole time. That corresponds to my wish to work continuously on something and to teach in a team.

From that day on I taught in Philips class together with him and Enoch, a practical student from university.

There were four students in the class. Three of them were physically handicapped and they all understood a little bit English so that I was able to communicate with them. Most of the time when I was teaching somebody was around and helped me to translate if it was necessary.

When I look back, I'm really happy about this decision to work in one class. I got into a close contact with the students, I could see the success of my work, I was in a cooperation with the teachers and I also had the chance to observe the lessons from teachers here in Ghana.

### **5.2 Teaching Activities**

Within the six months we taught a lot of different things. And mostly the lessons were planned and prepared in cooperation with Enoch. While one of us was teaching, the other one was observing the lesson and assisted. This teaching cooperation was successful and interesting. I think I benefited a lot from sharing our ideas and discussing about professional things.

I want to name some special things we did with the students. In November we had a longer section about fruits. After a theoretical part, I brought different types of fruits and we prepared fruit salad with the students. At the end we all enjoyed the nice fruit salad.

In December we had a special activity. We have a tradition in Germany that the children get a calendar before Christmas. It goes from the 1st to the 24<sup>th</sup> December. So everyday the children get something small and they count how many days are left till Christmas Eve. I prepared such a calendar with the students. They cut material into small pieces and then they sewed small bags, which I filled with small things for them. We hung them up in the classroom and everyday one of the students was allowed to open one bag. At first the students didn't understand the 'Adventskalender' and it was something very different for them. After one week they began to understand the system and also the connection between the calendar and Christmas.

Another bigger topic was teaching the alphabet. The last two months I was trying to teach them the letters of the alphabet. I spent a lot of time on this and now I can see some success of my work.

During the whole time I always kept on preparing learning material and introduced it to the students and the teachers.

The first time it was difficult for me to teach, because of the language barrier and also the big differences in the teaching methods and the learning contents. When I tried to work in the way I do this in Germany, I was lost, because the students didn't understand what I want them to do. So I tried to adapt my teaching somehow. I chose topics they teach in Ghana and I used easy learning methods. After a while I developed a new style of teaching.

### **5.3 The Integration Project**

When I came to this class and started teaching, I recognized that one of the students, Isaac, is very good in mathematics. Isaac is physically handicapped. He uses crutches and his speech is not easy to understand, but he is fast learning, especially in mathematic.

After one month I asked Philip, the class teacher, what he thinks about a subject integration for Isaac. I thought Isaac could benefit from such a program. He always seemed to be bored in the class because the teaching is often below his level. Philip was sceptical and told me that this is not that easy. So I focused my work on other things. I felt unsure, because I didn't want to put too much pressure on the teacher and I thought that he is knowing Isaac and the situation better than me.

When we had our meeting with Mrs Kwadade I told her about my idea and she encouraged me to bring this idea out again. What she was saying

motivated me and showed me that this is also an issue in Ghana and not just a German idea.

Back in school I talked to Philip again. I think I was now more convinced about my own idea, so that also Philip agreed with me. Together with him I went to the headmaster. I was explaining my idea to him and he told me that this is something we should try and that he would support this integration. He told me to put down a paper where all the steps we have to take are written down and that we will contact the headmaster of the regular school after the vacations.

When I came with this paper, Philip had already written a letter for the headmaster of the regular school, describing our idea and mission. So we went to see him, brought him this letter and talked to him. This meeting was very nice and he corresponded immediately that we can do this. After we discussed all the organization things, we started going to the regular school daily for the mathematic classes. Most of the times also Philip or Enoch escorted Isaac and me. I thank them for that. Especially Philip was supporting this project a lot and his help and support was great.

The first time we went to the regular school I think I was as much nervous as Isaac. But when I look back, it was really successful. Isaac could follow the lessons, he was actively taking part in the lesson and he was proud going to that school.

Also his parents gave the feedback, that they are happy about this program.

All in all it is good, but there are certain things which are not perfect. This school is a shifting school. There are two school, they are every two weeks shifting from morning to afternoon. Isaac is just in the morning in school, because he is a day student. The poor solution is now, that he is attending two weeks the lessons in the one school and the next two weeks in the other school. That makes it difficult to work continuously on one topic. I think this is really a big problem, but we have to try it that way.

Another challenge was means of transport to the regular school and to provide a desk for the student. The headmaster provided regular transport and Philip bought a desk for Isaac which facilitated the success of the program. I'm very grateful to them.

I hope that it will continue in a successful way and that this is just the first step into integration. The school is motivated to increase this program for the students. But integration is not easy and there are still a lot of open questions.

## **6. Reflections**

When I look back and think about the past six months I spend here in Ghana, so many experiences, thoughts and memories come to my head.

I have experienced a lot and for me it was a great thing to live in such a friendly, hospitable and helpful society. I experienced Ghana as a country in which a foreigner gets a lot of support and is treated as a friend. Everybody welcomes you and this makes it easy to feel a little bit at home.

On the other side are there so many differences to Germany. Dealing with all this cultural differences was not always easy for me, but all in all I saw it as a challenge and it was interesting to learn new perspectives and other points of views. My time here enriched me in a personal way. I learned a lot about myself, about my own culture, about the Ghanaian culture and about the importance and the extent of culture. Before that I didn't know how much we are all influenced by our culture. When I come back to Germany I will see many things different like I saw it before. One thing I also learned in Ghana is to take time for the things and not to rush all the time. I hope that I can keep this also in Germany.

It was also very interesting to see a Special School in Ghana. It is different and I was impressed by some of the students. I saw that they can do more like I always thought. For example children with a spastic who are walking, dancing and living with less help and support unlike most of our children in Germany. I learned that so many things are possible and that the children can do so much if they just have to do it. Another thing I saw is that they are so helpful to each other and they have more interaction between themselves like the students in Germany.

Also the discussions with the teachers and the teaching in the class gave me so many new thinking, ideas and views. For my professional development this practical work was helpful.

I hope that also the people here and the school take something along from my stay and my work.

Before I close my report, I want to thank all the people in school, especially Mr. Yamoah, Philip and Enoch for their support, my host family, especially my host mother for their hospitality and the good care and I also want to thank Mrs. Kwadade for her support, time, effort and her motivating words.

Next week I will leave Ghana. I'm now looking forward to go home and meet all my friends and my family, but I'm also sad to say 'Bye-Bye' to the people here and to Ghana. I had a good time here and I will never forget this six months.