

Report
about my practical semester
at the
“Garden City Special School” in Kumasi
(for the mentally handicapped)

12.4. – 5.08.2005

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1. Description of the institution

I observed my practical semester from the 12th of april until the 5th of august in 2005 at the "Garden City Special School for the mentally handicapped" (GCSS). The GCSS is a governmental special school for children with a mental retardation.

The school is located in a town called "Asokore-Mampong" with about 2000 citizen. Mampong belongs to Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti-Region. The distance from Mampong to the center of Kumasi takes about 10 kilometers.

The GCSS is one of the ten governmental special schools for the mentally handicapped in Ghana. The Compulsory Basic Education for all Children is nine years. The new Curriculum, which was published in the year 2005, contains that until the year 2015, all children with a mental retardation should go to school. It is one important purpose of GCSS to support the condition to realize the plan of "Special Education". The Special Schools shall guarantee every child an adequate training, as well as to give them the possibility of making use of their rights of education for nine years.

The GCSS has fifteen classes orientated on five different focal points. There is one nursery class, six educable classes, one trainable class, seven vocational classes and one severe class.

In my 84 days of trainee, I was working mainly with my Co-Operator Mr. John Boakye and with the assistant Co-Operator Mr. Otu Abankwah. Mr. Boakye was working for three years at the GCSS before he started to apply for an additional qualification. He graduated from the course of ergo therapy for three years, until the 1st march 2004. Since then he was working again at the Special school in Mampong, practicing his new centre of gravity.

1.1 Conditions and aims

"Headquarters of Special Education" prescribes the target group for special schools in an age from six to eighteen years. For an application at a school, a medical or psychological report is needed. This is done most often in an "Attachment Centre" of a public hospital. The report certifies a mental retardation. The doctor will also recommend the child to a special school. But only a few times is a diagnosis referring to the mental retardation done.

Theoretically, the child should have the possibility to go to school after he /she has applied. Though a law on "Compulsory Education" also exists, the realisation is sometimes critical. The counted school-places "1.300" are in no relation to the numbers of school-aged children with a mental retardation (130.727). Following is the practice of the GCSS also influenced by this fact.

In the year 2005 the school counted about 400 children on the waiting list. The target group is expanded from age four to age forty-six years. But it is important to say that most of these students are in the age from ten to twenty years.

Special Education also realized the situation and published a new agreement about the age when a child is to be put to school. The schools have to start from next year

(2006) to take only children up till the age twelve. If a student is in this age, the school can guarantee him/her a sufficient education without blocking the entry for new students. Only if a student is finishing and leaving the school another one is able to start and enter the school. On the other hand, the new agreement will support a dynamic change of many children who enter and who leave the school. More children probably will be able to realise their right of education. On the other hand, many children, who probably are still in school-age but already above twelve years, will not be able to go to school.

This change is a reaction from Special Education based on the lack of Special Schools and Special Education Teachers.

In the year 2005 the GCSS was estimated 150 boys and girls.

The school is a boarding school with about 80 students. This type of school is very common in Ghana because of the often long distances and bad connection of public transports to the homes of many students.

Because there are only a few boarding places, the school also operates as a day school. This is guaranteed by the school-bus. One of the two drivers drive every morning and afternoon within a radius of about 40 kilometers to bring about 70 day Students from their homes.

Another effect of the condition on the institution GCSS, as well as of the students is based on their position in the system of Psychological and Social Provision. The position is, like in many other countries in this world, not always positive, which can be the result of different causes. To explain these different causes guarantees an extensive statement.

One explanation is found in the observation of the society, to see how the relationship and position of people with a Mental or Physical Retardation are to the society. In the view of these types of disabilities, are already two big differences to be realised. People with a Physical Disability are, if they were able to conquer the barriers in their environment, integrated into the society.

I had different experiences about the social interactions of people with a Mental Retardation. In general, I think it is more difficult for people with a Mental Retardation to be integrated in the society. The causes of a Physical Disability is even often known and understood to an amateur. But the causes of a Mental Retardation are often not known and are not transparent to the society. Sometimes there are prejudices about the cause of the retardation of a child. For example, it is said that it happens when the parents of the child have to atone for their sins, in the form of a curse. Due to this prejudice, the people in the environment do not want to be in contact with the child or even not with the family. Following that, prejudices and generalisations exist. Many people do not have any experiences with people with a Mental Retardation. The importance of the influence of the esthetical refusal in the social interactions is also to be mentioned. Many people can only see the disability, but any other kinds of skills of the personality are not seen.

And even less understanding is for people who have a Psychological Sickness. In most cases, people laugh at them or call them "crazy". But most often amateurs do not know about any difference between a Mental Retardation and Psychological Sickness. It seems to be easier to label them all "crazy".

Of course there are also people with different opinion against this general view. I was able to observe a very intimate relationship of some students to their parents.

Another explanation is found in the scrutinisation of the acceptance and the support of the Government for the Special Schools, as well as for their students. All expenses for the students of the boarding school, besides the procurement of a school uniform, some hygienical items, as well as some few items for school, are paid by the Government. But the day students also do not have to pay for the daily transport and they also get a warm meal in the afternoon. The support from the Government works against an often spread opinion in the society and tries to create rights also for people with Retardation

After the explanation of two different statements, the beginning and development of the GCSS is worth mentioning.

In the year 1977, a centre to take care for mentally retarded children was organized on a private property by affected parents, the "Society for the Mentally Handicapped". Some years later, the center got accepted by the government and it was rebuilt as a school. In the year 1993, a new plan for the school was made and the school moved to a different private plot. Three years after the opening, the school had to close because of a high danger for students and teachers based on bad conditions of the buildings. In the same year, 1996, the school was re-opened in a scanty condition at the same place the school is located today. The construction was finished in 2001.

1.2 General equipment

There are two separated buildings for the boys and girls in the boarding school. Both buildings have Sanitary Facilities and Bedrooms for the children. In each house, there is also a room for one Housemother. All together, there are three Housemothers taking care of the 80 boys and girls. The supervision of 24 hours is guaranteed because all housemothers are living on the school compound. The boarding students get three meals a day, as well as drinking water as much as needed. The GCSS has its own water source. With the support of "World Vision", a 100 feet deep water pump was installed, which guarantees the daily supply of water. Further buildings of the GCSS are the Dining-Hall and the Kitchen with rooms for items to be stored. There are four more buildings .One is for the First Aid Health-Care, the other for offices and Administrative works, as well as two buildings for accomodation for the Headmaster and some other Staff Members.

The school itself is distributed over three buildings and two locations on the school's compound. In the biggest of the three buildings is a Gym, as well as five vocational classes. The Gym has different items, like benches, balls and other apparatus for Gymnastics, to support the physical education of the students. In other parts of the big building, vocations like Leatherwork, knotting mats, Home Economics and Sewing are taught. One of the other two vocational classes is the "Tye and Dye" class. Another attractive place on the compound, also for the freetime, is the play ground, as well as a field used for sport and other playing activities. The GCSS also has a small maize, chicken and rabbit farms, which are meant for the seventh, the Agricultural class. The whole school compound has a size of about 160.000 m².

The GCSS is a governmental school and is organized as will be explained in the following part:

The school has a Headmaster who administrates all other Staff Members, just like the Teachers, the Housemothers, the Nurses, and Cooks etc. Though the school is represented by the "Head", the regular General Staff meetings still takes place. In

those meetings, there is on the one hand the Headmaster giving information about the school. On the other hand, other members are also drawing the attention to different topics, which can be debated with each other.

All together, there are 22 Teachers and 25 Members of the General Staff in the GCSS. According to the 22 Teachers and the 150 Students, there is a Student-Teacher ratio of 9 to 1.

1.4 Theories, Methods, Concepts and Forms of the GCSS

At this place I like to quote the Headmaster, because I think it matches well as an introduction for this topic.

“A human being shall have the possibility to find his skills and interests. One purpose of the special education is to promote these skills. If a human being is supported to realise a Disposing Capacity he will be able to satisfy his needs, as well as to build up his Highest Performance.”

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

The form of documentation is adapted to an internal standard. The teacher of every class shall have a file for each student. The file shall first of all contain the medical report of the Attachment Centre, the Name and Address of the contact person and the Individual Educational Program (IEP). The Individual Program needs to state the target of the long and the short term, as well as a statement about different skills. The documents also need to present an explanation of the used methods.

Though the Headmaster has a positive opinion about Special Education and a fixed and agreed standard for the IEP exists, the realisation of the work is mainly based on the decision and attitude of every teacher.

At this point, I like to mention that I am not able to write about different kinds of working attitudes or to present explanations “why a work is done in *that way*” about other members of the teaching staff. I left the GCSS earlier than the scheduled contract time, I was planning and I was allowed to ask the teachers about these points, but as a matter of time, I was not able to realise this project.

2. Description of procedures of my training

My practical semester lasted 84 days from the 12th of April up till the 5th of August. I was working from Monday to Friday from 8.30 a.m. until 1.30 p.m. Every day is based on a Stable Scope.

After the School Bus arrives with the day Students at 8.30 p.m., the Students and the Teachers welcome each other, and one Student who is on duty starts to beat the drum. He is calling all Students to the Daily Assembly. The Students have to stand in **queues**, which is most often located in front of their respective class. The Students are looking towards the Teacher, who is on duty, who guides the Assembly. The Assembly lasts about 30 minutes and the Students and the Teachers talk, sing and pray together. Last but not least a student can choose his song of interest. Some selected students are beating the drum, while the singing and marching to the classes are started simultaneously.

One school day contains three teaching periods of each 50 minutes and two breaks of each 30 minutes.

Once in a week, all Classes “Worship” together. The Official school Choir, as well as Solo Students present songs to the rest of the School. They dance, if they hear the sound of the drums and they try to listen, if a teacher is talking with them about topics from the Bible.

As a suggestion of the Headmaster and in an agreement with myself, I was trying to get a general idea of the Institution during the first two weeks. This means that I run errands through different classrooms to orientate myself. Just on the last day of my orientation, I took part in the ergotherapy with Mr. John Boakye. On this day, I realised directly that this should be my further working area.

In the beginning of my training I was working with Mr. Boakye and Mr. Otu Abankwah, a graduated teacher of Special Education with the focal point on Physical Education. We were working according to a plan, which has already been set up by the two.

The plan contained one unit weekly with a group of teenagers with overweight to fitness, games and physical education. Another unit was a group with children with Cerebral Palsy with the main interest on exercising the coordination of the body and body-parts. Two other units with children from the severe class were planned for doing passive as well as active physical exercises. The last type of unit was done with four different boys separately in an interval of two weeks. The work with only one child was also based on the individual program with exercises for example to support the concentration, the fine motoric skills or the memory. The different units were done from Monday to Thursday. The location for practicing with the students was sometimes changing. It depended on the topic whether we were working in the Gym, in the room for ergo therapy, on the play ground or on the field. Every Friday is meant for playing, drum and dancing, sports or entertainment for all students. For this day, a new program was planned every week.

I have been working since three weeks with Mr. Boakye and Mr. Abakwah, when I started to add some other programs to my working plan. I expanded the weekly unit for the “overweight” group on two other units with about 30 minutes, as well as the group with Cerebral Palsy on two new groups.

One month later, five teachers: Mr. Boakye, Mr. Otu, Mrs. Grace Yeboa and Mrs Florence, one Housemother called Diana, and I took part in a Workshop for Musical

Education. Following to that, we started to build up a music group, which was planned to perform daily. During the first training, we spent time to distribute the different instruments to eleven students. The teenagers took an active part to choose the instruments and they were obviously positively excited. We created eleven different rhythms, one for each student. After some lessons of introduction, I mainly guided the music group for their performance. More often I was also supported by Diana, as well as the other teachers.

Another project I will describe more detailed in chapter 3. "Description of the course with a typical Unit with Richmond", which I was doing weekly for one unit. After some further one or two months passed by, I got the chance to get experiences on how to practice massages for children with Spastic. During the last two weeks of my practical semester, I massaged the hands and the fingers of two children daily.

I cannot report about a lot critical situations. But I remeber one situation, when I had been to the Gym during the break time with only two members of the Overweight-group. One of the two boys was very tall and heavy, he was glad to see me. In this situation, the student kept on coming closer to me, even though I was telling him to keep distance. I was also telling Mr. Abakwah about the occurence, and he advised me not to work alone with this student.

The only thing, which I could describe as a little cumbersome was the barrier of language. Though I started to learn the local language already some time before I started my training at the GCSS, I was still not able to speak the language fluently. I think I was able to express myself in the basics and I was able to access situations and statements.

But definitely, I was not able to communicate thoughtfully.

What I would rather like to mention is a natural progress to acquaint myself with the new work.

I needed about a month for my orientation, and then did I have the exact idea about what I would like to do and about how to integrate these ideas into the every day life conditions of the GCSS.

3. Description of the course of a typical Unit with Richmond

In this chapter, I like to present next to the description of a typical unit with Richmond, the description of the development of the meetings.

A precise overview of the Units:

In the first meeting with Richmond, I was actively supported by Mr. Boakye and Mr. Abakwah. In the beginning, we asked Richmond questions or asked him to do an exercise. Through this method, we were devising a better idea about Richmonds` understanding, his action capacity and his willingness to communicate with us. After he reacted to our questions and acted on our request, we started with the prepared part of the Unit.

We were all sitting on the floor while I placed different natural materials, like sand, stones, leaves from a palmtree and soft leaves from another tree, in front of him. Richmond did not create any impression on discovering his response to stimuli. Mr. Boakye took one of the long and hard palm leaves and got closer to Richmonds` body. He (Richmond) was frightened and he took a little distance. After that Mr. Boakye and I demonstrated to each other a touch by the leaves softly. The next try was to involve Richmond again into the interaction and the touches were welcomed with a kind smile.

We chose another object, the massaging ball.

That was for the stimulation of the Tactile Sense Perception. After demonstrating with the ball on my own body, I was allowed to start touching Richmond with the ball. At first, I had the impression that he did not like the feeling of the little naps, but every time I stopped massaging him, he requested that the massage continues. After a while, we closed the first meeting.

I established my priority especially on regularity. Richmond and I met every Monday from 9.30 a.m. to 10.20 a.m. Whenever we entered the Gym, I made sure that the course was based on the same conditions. The windows on the opposite side to the entrance for example, were closed every time. Out of this familiarity and known conditions, I tried to create a regularity that shall open a transparency to the Client about the Contents of the meeting. For being able to establish an active part in the social interactions, I think it is necessary to be able to assess a situation in general.

He learnt through actions that when entering the Gym, he had to take his shoes and socks off. In the beginning and in the end of every meeting, we closed the windows according to the same order.

Another focal point for the work together with Richmond was to prevent any kind of stress or hectic atmosphere. When the irritation in his environment was reduced, it was maybe easier for him to concentrate on *a thing*. The same method was very useful for the massage, because the calmness supported Richmond to realise the selection of the Tactile Sense Perception.

After we took off our shoes and socks, after we finished opening the windows and laying a mat at its usual place, I started directly with the massage. In this part of the meeting, I also had the possibility to observe and to experience different situations. I realised the different effects of variations of the massage.

In the beginning I was massaging Richmond with a massaging-ball. As I was describing in the beginning, Richmond did like the ball, but it did not seem to calm him. After some meetings, I even got the impression that the stimulation was rather

stirring him up, instead of creating a balance inside himself. Due to that observation, I continued massaging him only with my hands. I paid my attention on practicing calm touches in only one direction, from up to down. I realized that he became more calm while I was massaging him. After some further meetings I massaged him according to a special method. I touched his body with both palms and tried to press the whole circumference of certain body parts, like the arm, in the same moment. I was pressing my palms progressively from his hands over his arms, from his shoulders over the upper part of his body and his back up to his feet. I was able to interpret from Richmonds` facial expression, as well as from his behaviour, that he was concentrated to perceive his own body. He lied on his back calmly and his eyes reflected the new experiences of his own body perception. This could be the first step to get a better awareness and relation to his own body.

If Richmond was able to build up an awareness of his own body, it is maybe the beginning of his relation to his own body, and through this, a support for the conditions of his social interaction would be created.

We did the massage in three intervals interrupted by two breaks. In this time, we played with a big ball, or we tried to find balance sitting together on the ball. I believe that the massaging demands an intensive concentration for Richmond and that it is very important to allow him times for reflection. But it is also very difficult to be able find the right method as well as the correct balance of "demand" and "relief".

If we had a situation which did not support the realisation of the massage, we developed a consciousness on how to react. For example, when he was biting his palm, I tried to react in a calm, consequential and transparent way. In those situations, I stopped the massage directly and I told him that he should not bite himself. I realized that Richmond understood the coherence of both actions, because he stopped the biting in the next moment.

In our meetings, I tried to expand Richmonds` capacity to act. Until the end of my training, Richmond took an active part for the realisation of the procedures and the two of us worked in a team. He was leading my hand, to calm him on his chest and tried to start some playing, by taking my hands to his armpits. Sometimes, I also asked him to massage me, but he was demonstrating this through some fast and short touches that he rather liked to be massaged.

In my last week at the GCSS, I experienced a situation with Richmond, which was worth mentioning. While I was standing close to the Gym, Richmond came to me and took my hand. He was guiding me to the entrance of the Gym and opened the door. After he was looking at me, as if he was waiting to see whether I had something against his idea. As I was trying to act neutral, he took off his socks and his shoes and entered the Gym. I felt excited and touched, that he was able to tell me that right now in this moment, he liked to have or even that he was in need of a massage. Of course, I did not disappoint such kind of consciousness and independent behaviour and we practiced the massage again.

3.1 Reflexion

When I reflect the work with Richmond, I am very grateful as well as very satisfied and happy.

The work together with Richmond gave me joy and motivation. During the work, I was able to discover a versatile perspective about the client as well as about my methods. Richmond was able to call attention to his need through his actions, mimic and sounds. I also think that Richmond has a big capacity to learn. He was conscious about the course and the contents of the meeting in a period of about two or three months. He took an active part to arrange the conditions for our meetings. In the time of massaging ,he seemed to be concentrated and well balanced. After I started to massage him according to our special method, explained in chapter 3, I observed that he was able to relax his mind and body gradually earlier then before. Through the massage, we discovered a suitable method, with which I was able to support him to perceive his body with consciousness.

Richmond supported and inspired the meetings with his joyfull and ambitious co-operation.

4. Evaluation

In this chapter, I like to present my expectations in comparison to my experience of my practical semester at the GCSS.

As I was applying at a school for children with a mental retardation, I expected to work with children and teenagers with a mental retardation. One of my main interests was to get to know more about different kinds of disabilities and to make practical experiences in a new working area.

I hoped to experience through the daily work with the children, situations of which I can perceive different perspectives, to make me sensitive for a work orientated on the needs, interests, skills and fears of an individual (client).

But I also did not want to have too high expectations for my training, I prepared myself not to get disappointed. I was not aware about which kind of work I should do. Whether it would be teaching in a class, or assisting or guiding of other projects.

When I reflect the time at the GCSS, I feel very grateful, as well as satisfied and happy. I was able to attend my training in a special school for children with a mental retardation in Ghana. The Headmaster and the Teachers left the decision for me, of which area I would like to choose as my area of interest. Further more, I was free to decide whether I like to work with someone in a team, or whether I like to work on my own. As I decided to do also some projects on my own, I was always given support by the whole Teaching Staff.

Due to the frequency of different disabilities, like epilepsy and spastic at the GCSS, I did make special experiences about those specific diagnoses. But I also got to know many other children with different kinds of disabilities. For being able to work with the children, it is necessary to realise their individuality and their personality and also to have an orientation about their general stages of development.

The experiences at the GCSS has influenced my further working perspective. When I began to study Therapeutic Pedagogies, my main interest was on the methods and the didactics of Therapeutic Pedagogies, but rather less a special target group like people with a mental retardation. It means that I did not choose this course for working with people with any kind of disability.

But the work gave me so much joy, inspiration and motivation that I will choose as one center of my gravity the work with “children with retardation”.