

Report about practical training at
Community Inclusive Special School

Kpando-Abanu / Ghana



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Preparation

Working with mentally retarded children on the African continent was my idea since I started my studies for special education in Würzburg. From spring 2002 I took part in several seminars and presentations of organisations that cooperate with special schools in various African countries. That was how I got in touch with the EMH-Ghana-Project. I joined a meeting of the EMH-Project and talked to some of the former volunteers. My main interest was in the “Community Inclusive Special School” Kpando, because this school tries to fulfil the idea of inclusive education. This concept in Kpando is unique and progressive for Ghana. So end of June 2003 the EMH-Project confirmed my practical training and I had about three months left to prepare for a concrete project. From the beginning my idea was to set up a music group at the school, so I gathered some materials, e.g. English songs for children and moreover I took my guitar to Ghana. The weeks before my flight I was stressed with studies and private affairs, so unfortunately I didn’t have a lot of time for a detailed preparation. I booked my flight to Ghana for the 1st of October together with my friend Mareike, who was prepared for voluntary work at Castle Road Special School in Accra, the capital of Ghana.

My first days in Ghana – my first time in Africa – my first impressions

Africa, I don’t know where to begin. Arriving at the international airport in Accra thousands of new impressions streamed to my senses. People in colourful dresses, carrying inconceivable loads on their heads were walking around everywhere. For my European eyes, all cars were completely spoiled, just ready for the scrap yard. Including the one we were driving in with our Ghanaian project coordinator Martin Gozah, who picked us up at the airport. Luckily Claudia, another German volunteer of the EMH Ghana-Project, who arrived three weeks earlier, was also around. She was already quite relaxed towards this extremely chaotic, no, let me call it “African” traffic. With my European eyes many things appeared chaotic and somehow negative to me. All the time I was in Ghana this was one of the biggest challenges: Not to condemn something, just because I have never experienced it that way.

Martin Gozah took us to Three Kings Special School in Battor/Volta Region. In Battor, he taught us basic knowledge about African culture, and the local language Ewe. The orientation week started very well. Two girls from Three Kings Special School prepared delicious Ghanaian food for us and the lessons Mr. Gozah gave, were very interesting.

But it didn’t continue that way; Mr Gozah disappeared on the third day of our introduction week without informing us. The very day he came back, we all had to leave to our schools. So, instead of one week, we only had three days of real introduction. Later I asked Mr. Gozah on this issue. According to him, living in a small town like Battor gives us orientation anyway and he stopped the lessons after three days because we learned very fast. Ironically this was a good way for me to get known to the Ghanaian Culture, and the Ghanaian interpretation of time planning. Things like that happened several times, in the beginning it made me angry, after some time, I knew that time in Ghana is not counted in minutes like here in Germany.

Martin Gozah took me to Kpando on October, 11th, 2003. Luckily this was a Saturday, so I had two days to arrange my room and to get known to the Mr. Agbele, the Headmaster of Community Inclusive Special School and his family, where I stayed for my time in Ghana. They were already waiting for me and welcomed me very friendly. By chance the very day I arrived, Mr. Agbele’s niece married in our house. The next day, we went to Tsrukpe, a small village, where Mr. Agbele was born. In Tsrukpe I got the chance to try palm wine, a delicious natural drink, which comes directly from the palm tree. I was introduced to some traditional African Rituals; Mr. Agbele’s relatives in Tsrukpe treated me like a family member. This really was a great start for my time in Kpando.

Unfortunately my room was not fitted with the furniture promised in the tenancy contract, but my “guest brother” Dela helped me to get a shelf prepared by a local carpenter. But still, I was somehow disappointed, that it was me, who financed the furniture. Both contract partners, the

German coordinators and the Headmaster declared the other one to be responsible. There was no written agreement, but according to my German project partners there was a verbal agreement that the headmaster Mr. Agbele agreed to buy the furniture mentioned on the contract.

Community Inclusive Special School

The Community Inclusive Special School was founded in 1995, initiated by parents of children with mental retardation. Starting in small, old and rented rooms the school developed more and more, in 1999 the German EMH-Ghana-Project started its cooperation with the school. Supported by the EMH-Ghana-Project in cooperation with Ghana Education Service (GES) and the district assembly in Kpando the school managed to build up its own building. Now the school is situated in Kpando-Abanu, a small village in the outskirts of the town. This place has a lot of advantages: It is quiet, safe and spacious. But it is far away from most of the houses the children live in. For some of the children and the teachers it is far to walk (up to one hour). Fortunately, the EMH-Ghana Project was able to release funds to buy a bus for the school, with the condition that all running costs are financed by local sources. Although a contract with GES was signed, payment of the driver, maintenance and fuelling have always been a problem. The headmaster several times used his personal money to fuel and maintains the vehicle. Because of financial reasons on only about 50 % of school days the bus took children to the school and back to their houses. But almost all the children walked to school when the bus was not on the road. Even one boy with cerebral palsy with a way of almost one hour walked to the school every day. There were only two small girls with mental retardation that were not able to walk down by themselves.

1st term: October-December 2004

First I would like to describe my first impression of the school.



School Building

The school building is simple, but totally OK. The classroom walls are not built up to the roof, so you can always hear what the other class is doing. First this was disturbing me but when I got used to it I even enjoyed it.



Mr. Mahama with three students in class one

I was disappointed of the condition of many materials that were donated and prepared by former volunteers. There were nice games, puzzles and teaching materials, but almost everything was broken, incomplete and very chaotic. In my second week I tried to arrange those things but unfortunately many parts were missing. I planned to start a music group at the school, and I was frustrated when I saw, that some of the school's music instruments were gnawed by mice. This encouraged me in my principle, not to donate money for new school materials, but to invest all my energy and ideas for the school.

My job was to teach together with the local teacher **Florence**. She was teaching in class two. In Class two there were ten students:

Agbeli was a small boy of about 10 years. He was introduced to me as a deaf child with a mental retardation. But in my first week I made simple exercises to check the auditive perception of the students. Agbeli was able to hear, but his auditive perception was not very precise. This probably was the reason why he did not develop a clear pronunciation. Agbeli is very talented in arts, he was drawing beautiful pictures, so I tried to encourage him in this field and gave him the chance to draw on the board. First I thought Agbeli was lazy and unmotivated, because he often did not fulfil his tasks and always was drawing pictures in his exercise book. But after some time I noticed, that he was totally subchallenged in this class. While the class average was trying to understand additions and subtractions with one-digit numbers Agbeli was able to operate with numbers up to 1000.

Akofa, the oldest student in this class was already 25 years old. She was able to fulfil all important every day life skills and was taking care for the smaller children on the way to school but due to her mental retardation she had problems in learning academic skills. Akofa is attending this school since the beginning, since almost 10 years. Unfortunately until now the school did not manage to systematically teach vocational skills, so Akofa is still studying the ABC and basic mathematical operations without noticeable progress. In my view, things like sexual and reproductive health education and vocational training are much more important for her.

Amenyo was about 12 years. He is the above-mentioned boy walking to school almost one hour despite his cerebral palsy. Generally his motivation was exemplary. Although fine motor skills were hard for him due to his physical condition he was hard-working to improve his academic skills. Sometimes he remained in the classroom during brake time to complete his work. When we fixed poles for the fencing of the school farm he was working hard and carefully with the cutlass.

Elias was about 13 years old. He came to my class about one month after my arrival at Kpando. Elias was very motivated to learn a lot of things, he was independent in every day life skills but he had severe problems with all academic challenges like reading, writing and maths. I tried to teach him to count from one to ten but he mixed up all numbers. Elias emotionally was very sensitive and easily lost control if someone provoked him. He was hard-working in all practical fields, helping to cut the grass and building a new fence. Elias had a beautiful voice. Unfortunately he left school in January because the family moved to Kumasi so he could not support our school choir for the performance at the music festival and for our CD project.

Kosi was about 17, a boy with much energy and humour. His handicap was the Down syndrome. Although Kosi had problems to understand academic issues he was trying hard. He was always celebrating his own progress by dancing and clapping for himself. His positive charisma often made us smile and was an enrichment for the class. Kosi learned to count up to twenty and to learn basic vocabulary in English. For our musical performance at the music festival he was a great dancer.



Kosi dancing at the Music Festival in Sekondi-Takoradi

Mawuse was a girl of about 16 years. She had a severe hearing impairment, and she didn't manage to use her hearing aid regularly. So we often had to shout her name very loud. Like most of the other students she was very independent and helpful towards the smaller children. Mawuse was able to produce nice crochet work. She often took her thread and the crochet needle to school and worked during class hours. On the one hand I liked her motivation doing this work, but on the other hand I saw her potential to improve her academic skills. So I suggested that she can present her work at the Music Festival and we gave her a specific time to do this work.

Robert was about 15 years old and also had hearing problems. He hardly spoke anything. Unfortunately he came very irregularly and I was not able to find the reasons for this.

Stella was a good friend of Mawuse. She was about the same age. She was a fast learner, and understood most of the things, but as she was very shy, so she didn't like to speak out loud. She preferred helping her neighbours Jennifer and Mawuse doing their work. I am sure that Stella is able to improve her academic skills enormously if she gets the necessary attention. She often had the correct solution for an exercise but did not mention it loud. She also was introduced to me as a deaf student, but surely she was not deaf. She was able to pronounce most of the English words but always spoke extremely low.

Vic was a girl of about 9 years. She was attending a regular school before she came to Community Inclusive Special School. I think she has a learning disability but not a real mental retardation. She also sometimes was subchallenged in this class. After some time I suggested to put her in class three, but Sami, their teacher sent her back to my class after some time. She was very vivacious so her behaviour often was too wild and disturbed the classroom work. She was one of my best students, but especially her behaviour often caused trouble. Unfortunately Vic also left our school, I met her in town several times and questioned her, but she did not come again.

Victoria was about 11 years old. She obviously had a problem with her visual perception; she always mixed up similar letters like p and q. But she was motivated and tried hard to improve her academic skills. I am sure she can learn how to read and write if the teachers give her the necessary attention and support. Her pronunciation was not clear, but whenever I demanded her to try hard she was happy to see her own improvements.

Leading and teaching a class with 9-25 years old students is not easy. On the one hand the idea of inclusive education is great to prevent discrimination and stigmatisation of mentally retarded children. On the other hand this wide range in physical and mental development requires more individual attention. While some students need knowledge about sexual transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS and family planning, others are still children and just want to play. At the school there is no concept and hardly any knowledge about this inclusive system. The headmaster and some teachers were asking me, how inclusive education is realised in Germany. I know this problem from German model schools practising the inclusive system. Teaching a very heterogeneous class requires a totally new concept of teaching. Different, individual objectives for the individual child should be worked out of the general objectives, the curriculum gives us. In the beginning I was not happy with my cooperation with Florence, because we did not manage to avoid sub- and overchallenging students. So we started to separate the class, Florence taught the better children, giving them more difficult exercises, while I taught basic skills to the students with more severe problems. This separation improved the situation, Kosi learned to count up to twenty and Elias also improved his idea of numbers. Victoria learned to distinguish better between similar letters. In my view one problem was that some of the teachers are not trained for teaching children with special needs. Probably the fact that there is no fast progress is frustrating them. Especially the inclusive system is hardly known in Ghana, the school in Kpando is the only school in Ghana practicing it. Different Ideas of inclusive education are mixed, but there is no systematic concept. As far as the cooperation between the German project and the School in Kpando is concerned I think it is much more important to work out a concept and to train the teachers, than financing more infrastructure, materials and buildings.

After some time I saw other fields I wanted to work in. According to the Ghanaian syllabus schools should provide prevocational training for students in the last years of school. At the school in Kpando there was no prevocational training organized so far. The headmaster was

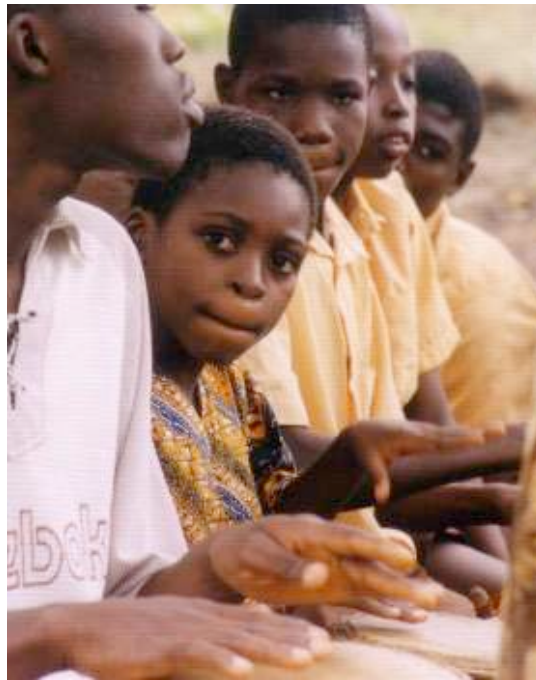
working on this and thinking about building a workshop for Kente weaving. I liked his Idea, but the costs were too high so I suggested starting small. I bought a saw, a hammer and some nails and repaired our broken furniture at the school together with the students. Kosi, Foster and Nelson helped me a lot doing this work. So we saved money and the students had the chance to improve their vocational skills.

In November Mr. Buamah a special school teacher from Twin City Special School in Sekondi-Takoradi came to our school and organized a music workshop for teachers and students. He planned a music festival for all special school in Ghana in March 2004. For this event our school should prepare a musical performance but unfortunately we did not have drums. For the music workshop the local drumming group from Abanu released their drums for us to practice and soon we noticed that many students have great talent in this cultural music. We all knew that we needed drums for the school and so the school staff members were asking me, if I could help. I was thinking a lot, because it was my principle not to donate anything. It was not lack of money, although I was not rich I could have asked my parents and friends and I am sure getting the money to buy a set of drums would have been possible. The reason for my point of view was the fact that I saw a lot of things that were donated and not used well. Still I also wanted the school to get their own drums. When I saw our students drumming, singing and dancing during the workshop I knew that we need those drums. I was in a dilemma but I didn't want to break my principles.

2nd term: January-March 2004 – The CD project

During my Christmas holidays I had an idea how to get an own set of drums for the school without donating money. My idea was to record our music and produce a school CD that can be sold at the music festival in Sekondi-Takoradi and after my return in Germany. First it appeared to be a crazy idea but I like crazy ideas, so I didn't give up. During this holiday time the idea became more and more realistic. After introducing the idea to our headmaster I worked out a project plan to present the project to the teachers in January. They all agreed to start the project and two teachers Sami and Rita agreed to lead the music group. A great cooperation started. We all worked together on this project and soon we decided to focus on the local music called Bobobo. We chose 12 songs, some religious, some traditional. I was responsible for coordination and for the technical equipment we needed to record the music. Without the headmaster and the teachers it would not have been possible to manage the project. Especially Sami, who led the music group, did a great job. Every day from twelve to one o'clock we practiced. The teachers knew good vocalists and drummers in the village, who came to support us. Luckily at the same time Kosi, the son of one of the teachers came to the school. He was a perfect drummer. Although generally the CD project was running very well, I had to manage a lot of minor problems. After some time we noticed that the vocalists and drummers from Abanu had high hopes to get a big financial compensation for their help. Of course my white colour was responsible for this. We tried to explain to them, that I am working in Ghana voluntary, trying to help the school and they understood. We promised to compensate their help in a way and they agreed to come and help us. But from this day, they didn't come again. I was disappointed and could not understand why they promised to come again but they didn't come. It happened several times in Ghana that somebody did not do, what he or she promised. For the local teachers it was obvious that the reason was the disappointing information we gave them as far as their compensation is concerned. But why didn't they mention their dissatisfaction? I neither knew where they lived nor were they able to speak English. So I begged the teachers to visit them with me that we could ask them to come again. Luckily they agreed and from this time they at least came once or twice a week. This was fine because we had to practice a lot of things for which we didn't need them necessarily. Practising and recording the songs was a great experience for the students and the teachers. Our cooperation for this project was very good. It was not easy and the cultural

differences were challenging me a lot, but I am very happy we reached our aim, the CD is now sold in Germany.



Our drumming group in action



Sami teaching the students under our self-made shed

Vocational training – weaving of doormats

In my view one of the most important issues for the school is the vocational training. Education always needs an objective; a school should not just be a place where children spend their time, a school should prepare children for their life. Some students at Community Inclusive Special School have severe problems learning academic skills like arithmetic, reading and writing. I think, for those students it is waste of time to train them learning ABC until they are 35 years old. To live an independent life they have to learn every day life skills and of course vocational skills. Our drummer Kosi was trained at the rehabilitation centre in

Ho where he learned to prepare doormats and other nice handcrafts. So together with Kosi I decided to train some of the older students weaving doormats. Kosi organized all necessary materials and then we started our small workshop behind the school building with Nelson, Kosi and Robert. They had to dye the ropes and then they started weaving the doormats.



Kosi dying the rope



Kosi(left) teaching our students



Nelson at work

I took some of the doormats back to Germany to sell them and to give the school the chance to continue this workshop by sending the money to buy new materials.

Personal reflection

If I try to draw a conclusion of my stay in Ghana, there are two possible points of view. I can ask “Did I benefit from my work at Community Inclusive Special School?” or I can ask, “Did the school and the Ghanaian people benefit from my stay in Ghana?” I think both questions are important, so I will try to answer them from my position.

For me it was one of the best things I could do, I had the chance to live together with a family in Ghana; it was not always easy, but altogether a great experience. I got in touch very close to the culture in a way I can never experience as a tourist. I will never forget the day I was sick staying at home and all my colleges from school visited me to wish a speedy recreation. And I will not forget the delicious Akple that was prepared for me in the house. I like to think about this time, it became a very important period in my life. It was always a challenge to live so close with people from a completely different culture. Since I am back to Germany often when I see a black person, I smile and try to see him as my brother like I was treated like a brother in Ghana.

The culture is very different. While discussing and arguing is very important in my culture and criticism can be mentioned more directly, this is different in Ghana. For me the exchange with other German volunteers was very important.

Finally, for me I can draw a positive conclusion, that my time in Ghana was worth while.

For this, I would like thank everybody at Community Inclusive Special School, especially the headmaster Mr. Agbele and his family for giving me the chance to live together with them.

Did the school and the people in Ghana benefit from my voluntary work? I cannot answer this question completely and not alone. I hope that the students and the teachers could benefit of my work. At the moment I'm worried how and weather the new developments started with me at the school will be continued after my departure. I don't know how the money made by selling the CDs will be used and I cannot see, if the drums are still used and the vocational training is going on. In Ghana I wanted to set an example, that not only money is important, but ideas and hard work. I am sure this school can develop and become more and more independent if there is a real interest to educate those children, who may appear to be useless, but they all can do something, many of them have the potential to become farmers, carpenters, shoemakers and so on. Commitment is needed to give them the chance to develop their skills.