

Teija Jallow

# Establishing a School for Disabled Children in Gambia

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<p>Opinnäytetyössäni kuvaan erityiskoulun perustamisprosessia. Koulu on tarkoitettu vammaisille ja erityistä tukea tarvitseville lapsille ja se sijaitsee Gunjurin kylässä, Gambiassa, Afrikassa. Tavoitteenani on parantaa erityisopetuksen tasoa, sekä edistää lasten mahdollisuuksia saada tuettua erityisopetusta. Tasokkaan koulutuksen saaminen vammaisille ja erityistä tukea tarvitseville lapsille on vielä haasteellista Gambiassa, mutta toivon tämän opinnäytetyön avaavan uusia mahdollisuuksia ja tuovan jatkuvuutta laadukkaaseen erityisopetukseen.</p> <p>Teoreettisiksi lähtökohdiksi valitsin koulutukselliset teemat kuten varhaiskasvatuksen, erityispedagogiikan ja kasvatuskumppanuuden. Sosiaalipedagogiset teemat kuten voimaannuttamisen, yhteisöllisyyden ja osallisuuden, edunvalvonnan ja keskustelun. Eco-kulttuurinen lähestyminen ja kansainväliset lasten oikeudet ovat merkittävässä osassa työtäni.</p> <p>Työssäni käsitellään myös eettisyyttä, kestävästä kehitystä sekä työn jatkuvuutta. Edellä mainittuihin kuului tärkeänä osana Smile and Hope for the Disabled Children ry - nimisen yhdistyksen perustaminen. Yhdistys vastaa toiminnan jatkuvuudesta muun muassa rahoittamalla lasten koulunkäyntiä henkilökohtaisten kummien avustuksella sekä rahoittamalla Food Projectia. Food Project:in avulla tarjoamme lounasruoan kaikille yhteistyökoulun oppilaille.</p> <p>Varsinainen koulutyö alkoi 1.4.2014 ja erityisluokalla aloitti yhdeksän oppilasta. Oppilaat ovat iältään 3 - 8-vuotiaita. Heillä kaikilla on erilaisia tuentatarpeita esimerkiksi oppimisen ja keskittymisen osa-alueilla. Opetus tapahtuu pienryhmissä ja jokaiselle oppilaalle tehtiin henkilökohtainen opetussuunnitelma. Loppukevään 2014 aikana luokanopettaja keräsi aineistoa lasten osaamisesta ja tarkemmista tuentatarpeista. Opettajan arvion mukaan pienryhmäluokka, sekä henkilökohtaisempi opetus edesauttoi lasten oppimista ja loi rauhallisemman ja turvallisemman oppimisympäristön, jossa oppilaiden oli myös helpompi keskittyä.</p>	
Avainsanat	vammaisuus, tuettu oppiminen, varhaiskasvatus, erityisopetus

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<p>In this paper I describe the establishing process of a school focusing on special education. The school is meant for the disabled children and children with special needs, and it is located in the village of Gunjur, in Gambia, Africa. My aim was to improve the quality of special education, and improve the pupils' possibilities to receive supportive education. It is still challenging to find high-quality special education in Gambia but I hope this thesis will open up new possibilities and create continuity for special education.</p> <p>The theoretical part consists of educational themes such as early childhood, special education and educational partnership. Social pedagogical themes consists of empowering, sense of community and participation, advocacy and dialogue. Eco-cultural approach and Children's Rights are strongly emphasized. The ideas of ethics, sustainability and continuity are also part of my work. Establishing association 'Smile and Hope for the Disabled Children in Gambia' was big part of the whole process. The association is responsible for the continuity of the work by sponsoring the children's education with individual sponsors, and financing the Food Project. The project offers daily lunch for each pupil in the co-operative school.</p> <p>The actual schoolwork started on 1st April, 2014 with nine special needs students. All of them have different special needs, for instance in the field of learning or concentrating. Teaching is provided in small groups and each pupil has their own individual syllabus.</p> <p>At the end of the spring term 2014 the teacher gathered material about the know-how and specific needs of these pupils. The teacher evaluated that the small group class and more individual teaching improved the learning of the children and created more peaceful and safer environment where it was easier for everyone to concentrate. He also said that for him this environment was more creative.</p>	
Keywords	disabilities, supportive education, early childhood, special education

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## **1 Introduction**

In this paper I will describe my functional thesis work “Establishing a Special Educational School for Disabled Children in Gambia”. The work started in Finland during year 2013 and continued in Gambia January 2014.

The framework of my functional thesis is based on educational themes such as early childhood, special educational and educational partnership. Social pedagogical themes such as empowerment and strengthening, advocacy and dialogue, participation and community work plays significant role in my work. Children´s Rights and eco-cultural approach are strongly emphasized.

I will discuss about the theoretical framework and the social pedagogical base of my functional work in Africa and with children in need of special support. I will also discuss about the background, aims and goals of the work and describe all the preparations that had been done already before I travelled to Gambia and the work that has been done in Gambia so far. I will also explain the importance of establishing the registered association first to support the project and most of all to give sustainability and continuity for the work. The preparation work is also in significant role in this work.

The sustainability and continuity are key issues in this work. The future plans are also emphasized. Raising knowledge and awareness and increasing opportunities also for future students and teachers in special educational field play role in the future plans of this work.

At the end I will discuss and ponder the challenges of this work as well as make my conclusions of the work. I will present how the work proceeded, what kind of impacts the work has on the society and how I succeeded in the objectives and outcomes.

## **2 The background of the aims and the need for Establishing a School for the Disabled Children in Gambia**

The basic background and aim in my work with disabled children in Gambia embarks from the UNICEF Children's Rights Convention. The declaration emphasizes that every child should have the right for education. The Declaration emphasizes also that children with disabilities have the same rights, social needs, interests as other children.

(UNICEF 1.)

Schools in Gambia have a school fee and identical school uniform for every child. These obligatory fees complicate and even prevent many children's participation in early childhood education. Many poor families have to choose between daily subsistence and school fees. Sometimes the children are still needed to help with farming or other tasks.

Gambia is a small African country and it would be very essential to increase the standard of early childhood education for all the children. The more education there is available despite of the family situation the less dependent the nation would be on Europe and other countries. Sharing information and giving the possibility for early childhood education for every child will eventually make a difference in developing countries.

The report of UNICEF emphasizes that raising awareness and involving children with disabilities in integrated processes can eventually bring social change. According to UNICEF, The Convention for Children's Rights applies to all children regardless of their race, religion or abilities, regardless of what they think or say, or whatever type of family they come from. It doesn't matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis. Children have the right to live. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

(UNICEF 2.)

Already in 1981 the Danish Child Welfare Commission set out long-term aims for children's services. For example respecting the child as an individual in the family and in society, giving the child a central position in the life of grown-ups and promoting equal opportunities in the condition of life of children in both material and in a cultural sense. (Anning & Edwards 1999.)

Due to complex professional background and having disabled children myself I have a multifaceted vision of the issues concerning disabilities. I have been working in supportive housing for children and young people with disabilities. Also through the experience with my own disabled twin sons I have learned a lot of the needs and assistance a person with disabilities requires. I understand very well the concern and distress of the families of disabled persons. I have also been acquainted with the power of peer support in the situation. The more information one is able to get of the situation and challenges of their child the easier it is to proceed in helping the child and the family.

The personal awakening of the situation of children with disabilities in developing countries occurred to me some years ago: I met a disabled young man in a wedding ceremony that was held in Gambia for my local relative. During that day he approached me many times and as often one of the family members came to tell me that you do not have to be scared. He has never harmed anyone, "He is just little bit crazy."

I realized that there is not a lot of information of the disabilities in Gambia. People have no awareness of different disabilities and how to help their disabled people. I found the importance of advocacy work that is essential. Of my opinion one of the best ways to help disabled children and their families is to share information of the disabilities and supportive education. By establishing the school for disabled children I could show the society that every child deserves education and in many cases the additional help in education can help the child to proceed in his/her life. By advocacy work the society would get more information and understanding of different disabilities.

Russ Shafer-Landau (2012) expresses in his book “The Fundamentals of Ethics” that our moral thinking should have two complementary goals: getting it right, and being able to back up our views with flawless reasoning. (Shafer-Landau 2012). During this work I have to take it in deep consideration that my truth will not necessarily be the only truth in this multicultural work and it might happen that my plan may not be the best one.

### **3 The Operational Principles of the Establishing work**

In this chapter I will describe the theoretical frameworks of my thesis. This work is strongly based on educational themes such as early childhood, special education and educational partnership. Establishing a school for children with disabilities needs strong theoretical and practical knowledge of early childhood and special educational issues. Early childhood themes are needed as the children in this school are pre-school pupils' ages between three to eight years. Special educational themes are needed as the pupils of this class are all in need of supportive teaching or special education.

#### **3.1 Early Childhood**

The values of early education are based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Starting points for early education are equal treatment of children, the best interests of the child, the child's right to live and develop in a well-balanced manner, consideration of the child's opinion and a ban on discrimination. (UNICEF 2.)

Early childhood work is child-centered work, respecting every child as an individual person as well as respecting and taking account in their differences. (Hujala & Turja 2011). In their book “Promoting Children’s learning from Birth to Five” Anning and Edwards state that Bronfenbrenner argues in his ecological model of child development that societies should place a high value on responding to the needs of children. Bronfenbrenner also argues that this can only be achieved



when members of the society acknowledge the complex interrelationship between children, parents, educators, care takers, community groups and those in responsible for employing and housing. (Anning & Edwards 1999.)

Tina Bruce writes in her book *Early Childhood Education of Vygotsky's zone of actual development*. Vygotsky argues that this zone already shows matured structures. It shows that the child can function alone and without help. Vygotsky emphasizes the zone of proximal or potential development. According to Vygotsky these "buds of development" show that child can only manage to do things with the help of another more advanced child, or an adult. (Bruce 2005.)

Carol Seefeldt (1999) states in her book "The Early Childhood Curriculum" that Vygotsky understood the development to proceed without stages and through a social rather than individual process. Learning happened through the social phenomenon of language and learning leads development instead of the other way around. (Seefeldt 1999.)

Marilyn Segal & all (2006) explains in their book "All About Child Care and Early Education" that Vygotsky recognized that the children learn from experiences that challenge their current understanding and capacities. Segal & all emphasized that Vygotsky stressed that children learn through interaction with peers as well as adults.

In my work "Establishing the School for Disabled Children" I find it very important to have the correct educators working with this class. I was very fortunate to find Mr. Jaffa as a teacher because he is skilled and has a good approach to teaching. With support from Mr. Bojang and myself he will surely be very successful in his educational work. Mr. Bojang is also a member of this society and has already respect as a teacher in this society. The importance of understanding the values and manners of the local community is very essential

### 3.2 Special Needs Education

In her study “Laaja-alainen erityisopetus alaluokilla” Pirjo Laatikainen (2011) states that special needs support is more individual and stronger than general support. Special needs support is meant for those pupils who need more than one way to support the learning process. She states that the support should be very powerful and intensive. The significance of the special education, the methods of using it and the goal-directed way comes more cogent.

According to Laatikainen (2011) pupils are able to concentrate in their studies better in the small-group class. She claims that the special education teachers learn to know their pupils better and the atmosphere in the class room is more relaxed and supporting. As negative aspects she lists the lack of time for every individual, the separation of the original class and possible friends in there. (Laatikainen 2011.)

Every pupil in this school will get personal syllabus based on the needs and challenges they have. The syllabus covers all the challenges and themes where the special education is wished to affect. The child will get help for his/her challenges in very specific way and this empowers him/her to learn more and develop in his/hers studying. The small group work also empowers the child to study more relaxed and concentrated way. Safe and pleasant environment gives the children more means to concentrate in their learning progress and courage them to study more.

By receiving the supportive education children will be able to find their own strengths. Every child has skills that are possibly hidden under the daily life difficulties. In this class we have already observed that one boy is stronger and very skillful in outdoor activities. His problems are more in fine motor readiness and the knowledge of this will help the teacher to improve correct ways to teach him.

Finding the best way to teach these children will empower them to realize their own skills and possibilities. The teacher understands children’s problems better

and is able to find different ways to teach them. Personal syllabus helps the teacher to create a specific plan and program for each child. The teacher has more precision means and ways to help his pupils. Teacher has also possibilities to be more creative and work in more cogent ways.

At the same time this will also influence children's families as they can notice improvement in their children's lives and school situation. As a mother of disabled twin sons I know how much the positive feedback and development in your child's life will have a positive effect for the whole family. Every step forward, however small it is, is always progress. By strengthening the child who is in need of special education the whole family will be empowered.

### 3.3 Educational Partnership

The most important persons and the specialists in children's matters are their parents. The upbringing in the Kindergarten or in this case at the school would not work without communication with parents. The co-operation occurs in daily basis by discussing the daily activities, children's needs and demands. Emphasis on the real encountering is the only way to provide trustful and productive early childhood education for the children. Strong educational partnership impacts on the relationships between teachers and parents. The stronger the partnership is the easier it is to share ideas and issues between parents and workers. Being able to share information and knowledge of different issues can sometimes prevent isolation.

Teija Ekholm and Katariina Korpi cite in their thesis "Mä osasin" study that the aim of the educational partnership is that the child will be seen, heard and understood in a holistic way. The primary aim for the educational partnership is the interest and needs of the child. One of the consequences of the educational partnership is to recognize the possible needs for special support. The aim is to reach mutual respect, good dialogue and trusting relationship between parents and workers so that both sides can share their worries and observations of the child. (Ekholm & Korpi 2011.)

The language barrier and cultural differences prevented me to interview families and their disabled children as I had planned. The interviews would have been done in co-operation with a person who is a member of this society and is familiar of the circumstances and also knows these families. A lot of advocacy work would have been done at this point and my aim was to start to create a way to work in Educational Partnership manners with the parents.

This was probably the only issue that went totally different from what I had planned. Due the cultural issues and language barriers I had to admit that this is not part of my work at all. I was discussing with the teacher Mr. Tijan Jaffa about the partnership with parents and had to admit that I am not the right person to do these discussions.

In this community these kind of issues as special needs of the children have to be handled in very delicate way, in their own language and with the person they trust. And such persons are Mr. Jaffa and Mr. Bojang who will do all that work with the parents. Despite of my working experience, knowledge and education of the field I am not capable to handle educational partnership issues. However, because of these I am able to offer them advice and share my knowledge on this important part of the educational process.

#### 3.4 Social Pedagogical themes

Social pedagogical themes have strong impact on my work. Practices such as Empowering and Strengthening, Community work and Participation, Advocacy and Dialogue as well as Eco-cultural approach are the main implements of this work with special children and their families. In this chapter and later in this paper I will describe the themes and how they impacted the practical level of my work.

Kieron Hatton (2013) described in his book "Social pedagogy in the UK" the approach of the social pedagogy. Hatton expresses Hämäläinen's, an experienced theorist of social pedagogy, theory that social pedagogy concentrates on human

growth and how the process ties people to the systems, institutions and communities. Hämäläinen states that social pedagogy promotes people's social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity and social competence as members of the community. Hatton also outlines the social pedagogical concepts through German notions of Haltung, the meaning of the pedagogical role and the way how social pedagogues utilize head, heart and hands.

Hatton also states Paulo Freire's theory of encouraging people to see the commonality of their situation. That process could give people means to become aware and also act on that awareness. Hatton's thoughts gave some good key points to my work. Hatton's expression of social pedagogical way to work gave me commitment to improve the lives of the children to more positive pedagogical environment and an emphasis on the importance of creativity and imagination in promoting human development.

In their book "Social Work; themes, issues and critical debates" Adams, Dominelli and Payne states the meaning of empowerment being generally about people taking care of their own lives and having a power to shape their own future. In my work the above mentioned social pedagogical approaches play significant role in the working methods. Empowering the society to work also with the children who needs special support or special education may have significant impact to the whole community in the future. By giving education to all the children in the village the society is shaping the future of the whole village.

#### **4 The Practical work in Establishing the School for Disabled Children in Gambia**

The goal of the work was to establish a School for Disabled Children in Gambia, in village called Gunjur. As an early childhood professional as well as having a lot of experience of disability work I started to plan my thesis work and discovered an idea of a school for disabled children. My own son's disabilities and the good quality of special schools in Finland inspired me to continue this work.

Despite of the Children's Convention it is obvious that children in the developmental countries do not have same the possibilities as children in the developing countries. Due to circumstances and cultural facts the children with disabilities do not have the same means and access to professional help than other children. Developmental countries may have a lack of special doctors and other specialists such as occupational or physical therapists. Children who would need special means are not very often diagnosed either. Being diagnosed would sometimes give the children more possibilities to get accurate help.

The combination of poverty and disabilities creates an intense challenge for the families. Families with poor backgrounds do not have possibilities to buy medicine constantly or purchase special means that the child may need. The parents may not have the knowledge or awareness of the support and help they should find for their children.

Liisa Heinämäki presents in her book: "Varhaista tukea koulun arkeen – työvälineenä kehittämisvalikko" the principles of eco-cultural approach. According to eco-cultural approach the neighborhood and daily activities are significant to the children. The most important environments for small students are home and pre-school. The evaluation of special needs support should be done in these significant environments.

According to eco-cultural approach the significance of the school is meaningful in evaluating the necessity of special need, planning of the means of the need and organizing the correct need for children. The special need has to be attached to the everyday life and daily activities. (Heinämäki 2011.)

I have been told by the local teachers and people who work in social field that there are lots of disabled children in the country but most of the families keep these children in their homes or in the worst scenario they have rejected them. Families do not talk about their disabled children and for many families a disabled child or young person is a burden, an extra person who is not a productive family

member.

While visiting in some other pre-schools and the SOS Village for the orphans I also realized that the model of the school that was in my head was unrealistic. The circumstances and the community are rather poor and the school has to fit into this environment. Trendy, western kind of activity center model school would possibly be too strange and frightening to the children as well as their parents.

This establishing work started in January 2014 and was done with the co-operation of the Gunjur society members. My work consisted of finding the space for the school, gathering the children, appointing the teacher, co-operating with the parents and carrying out the personal support program and syllabus for each child. In this Chapter I will describe all the preparatory work that has been done in Finland and in Gambia during year 2013.

#### 4.1 Preparatory work in Finland

The preparatory planning work lead me to establish the association 'Smile and Hope for the Disabled Children in the Gambia registered association'. The primary aim of the association is to discourage the misconceptions and stigma against the disabled, thereby ensuring equal rights, access and opportunities to fully participate to the national development at all levels. The important role of the association is to gain money by memberships, sponsors and other ways in order to establish the school and assure the continuity for the special education pupils in a sustainable way.

The promoting work was done by Facebook page, and networking with people. The web page of the association gave a lot of new visibility to the association and the work itself. The web page also contributes networking with people around the world and makes the advocacy work more efficient. As it is said every child has a right to have the opportunity for education and tolerable life. Smile and Hope for the Disabled Children can manifest the awareness and share knowledge for those ones who are interested to help globally.

Lots of advocacy work has also been done in Finland and elsewhere in Europe and USA in order to raise the awareness of the disabilities and the situation of disabled children in developmental countries. Giving people more information of the holistic situation of disabled children's lives in developmental country, helps people to understand their situation better. By giving people more information, gives them an opportunity to participate and do their share of commonweal. Helping people in their own environment with the right means and ways, gives lots of possibilities to the whole community. The success inspires and empowers not only the disabled child himself but all the people around him.

Adams et al states in their book that advocacy has its roots in legal practice. They state that advocacy refers to activities that are associated with negotiating or representing on behalf of a person. (Adams et al 2009.)

Advocacy work raised one of the most important parts of this work method. My studies of social services also gave me lots of knowledge and understanding and correct means to work in this kind of project. Without this education I would have never been able to start something what is so arduous and meaningful. Generally my studies have given me good ground for working in the social field.

#### 4.2 Preparatory work in Gambia

As I mentioned earlier, I visited in Gambia in June 2013 in order to start the work. I had discussions with a lawyer, some teachers, a headmaster, local "social worker" and few possible sponsors and of course all my friends and family in Finland.

I also visited many different kinds of schools and SOS - Village for orphans in Gambia in order to understand what kind of place will be most suitable in this environment. I realized early that the image of the school for disabled children in Finland would not necessarily work in Gambia. Cultural differences have to be taken into account already while creating the place.



The importance of advocacy work and open dialogue is very essential in my work. Talking to many people in Gambia I have realized that a lot of advocacy work will be needed to raise the awareness of the disabilities, and of the possibilities children and young people with disabilities have in their lives.

Due to open dialogue and information parents would be able to understand and have more knowledge of the necessities their child needs. It would be easier to see his/her child's life as an opportunity more than a bargain. For teachers and other working specialists awareness and knowledge would give better tools and means to evaluate and improve their teaching and approaching the issue of disabilities.

In practice the advocacy work will be done within the community, families, friends and other people who are around the disabled children in the village. The importance of the advocacy work is immense. The advocacy work will raise the awareness of the possibilities and will hopefully bring the children to be as equal members of the community that is possible at the moment and in this circumstance.

Advocacy work has to be done also among the teachers. I have already faced one cultural difference while searching for these children to this school. My own idea of a disabled child may be very different from the teacher's idea. In my conviction the disabled child has more severe difficulties than need of supportive teaching.

At the beginning I was planning to start the school work with children who have more severe problems. After discussing with the teachers I decided to start with a class of nine pupils whose problems are not very severe. Most of them have differing needs for support but only 3 would also benefit from having a medical diagnosis. Open dialogue with teachers and other local people gave me understanding of the situation and the means of how to approach different issues in establishing the school.

Adams, Dominelli and Payne presents the idea of community work as a connection with local people, or among a group of people who share common interests that people experiences being supportive. (Adams & al 2009). During this work the community has been contributing in many levels. By expediting the whole process as well as decreasing my work load. It is hoped that the result of this work will contribute the community as well by giving back the benefits out of the special education.

This part of the planning work is crucial in order to reflect the ideas and issues with the local people and to start networking with people before the work starts. The approval from the community is very important both in Islamic and African cultures. The people I met and discussed about my work were interested on it and grateful of my help. They were also pleased that I am willing to share my knowledge of the disability work.

Many members of the community were also willing to help with the practical issues. The meaning of community work opened out for me when I started to do my work in January 2014. A Gambian friend of mine who has been following my drafts and ideas suggested co-operation with one pre-school in Gunjur village. He introduced me to head teacher of Gunjur Community Pre-School, Mr. Kadubah Bojang. Mr. Bojang is the head-teacher and the owner of this pre-school. The school is private pre-school and the pupils are 3-8 years old. There are four classes, from 1st level to 4th level, 5 teachers and other staff members. The amount of pupils is approximately 85. In Gambia the pupils have to pay the school fee and buy their own school uniform.

After being familiarized with the school and having meetings with Mr. Bojang and my advisers I decided to start the co-operation with the Gunjur Community Pre-School. Mr. Bojang offered a possibility to observe the pupils in their classrooms in order to obtain the children who will need special education.

Mr. Bojang suggested that as the school has one additional teacher I could also appoint one of the teachers to start this special educational work and he also very nicely offered the temporarily class room space for this special needs group. After evaluating the means of working and qualities of educational skills I named Mr. Tijan Jaffa as the first special educational teacher.

Mr. Jaffa was the teacher of the 1st grade and was doing his work very professionally. His class was the biggest one at the school; 32 pupils aged between 3 and 8 years. The own school building will be built on the same school yard with the co-operational school. This help I got from the community and especially from Mr. Bojang contributed and accelerated my work in a way that I will be very grateful for forever.

The people were also happy to hear that I am committed to continue the work myself after the thesis work. This school will need a lot of work during the following years. At this point I was happy to notice that ideas of sustainable work have also started in Gambia and people do understand the importance of long-term work with disabilities. And I am creating more sustainable ways to work with contribution of local people.

#### 4.3 Progress in steps

The first step in this functional thesis work was to gather ideas, information, and critical points of views of the base of the work, its themes and implementation. The ideation part was very significant as it was the base of the rest of the work. The work was done by interviewing people, exploring different schools, and gathering information from the situation of the special education in Gambia.

The second step in this practical work was to find a space for the school. By means of the local society I was able to rent space from a local school building in Gunjur village. By renting the space first instead of starting to build own one helped to start the work a lot quicker. Building the school house would have taken at least two months. With the help of the head teacher of Gunjur Community Pre-

School and other local people made this step to proceed more fluent and rapid.

During the first two steps occurred the best parts of the social pedagogical ways to work. Community work and participation, as well as advocacy and open dialogue were in significant role and accomplished a lot of meaningful outcome.

The connection with local people in Gambia was very important. As well as dialogue with people who shared my interest of increasing the quality of early special education. It was important to get ideas and debates from Gambian but also from European view point. The presentation of Adams et al showed the real base of this community work. They presented the idea of community work as a connection with local people, or among a group of people who share common interests that people experiences being supportive. (Adams & al 2009).

Also the advocacy work started at this point. Sharing information of the possibilities of disability work increased the interest of this work. Advocacy work gives the community opportunity to raise their knowledge of supportive and special education. Adams et al state that advocacy refers to activities that are associated with negotiating or representing on behalf of a person. (Adams et al 2009). The aim of this thesis work was to embark the special education in this Gunjur village and it is hoped to continue and process to other villages as well.

The third step was to find and select the children for the school. With the help of the head teacher Mr. Bojang I was able to search pupils who needed special education from his school. I was observing all the four classes in Gunjur Community Pre-school for several weeks. I spent time in each class approximately two school days. Finally in the co-operation with the teachers of these classes we gathered nine pupils who seemed to be in need of special support. Their ages were between three to eight years old. Some of them have learning difficulties, most of them also anxiety and severe challenges in concentration.

This work emphasized strongly Children's Rights. The possibility to receive early education and equal treatment of children, the best interests of the child, the child's right to live and develop in a well-balanced manner among other issues are the base of this establishing work. (UNICEF 2.)

Hujala & Turja emphasized child centered work as a base of early childhood work. Every child should be respected as an individual and taking account in their differences. (Hujala & Turja 2011.) It is also important to educate the teachers, the members of the community, and parents to understand that disability is not an obstacle for education.

Seefeldt (1999) reminded that Friedrich Froebel was generally considered being the founder of early childhood education as he designed the first curriculum for young children. According to Seefeldt Froebel states that a child arrives on this earth with an impressive repertoire of inborn knowledge and skills. She states that the teacher's role was to bring these capabilities to fruition by making children consciously aware of and able to use all that they know. (Seefeldt 1999.)

The fourth step was to what kind of children we would be working with. The cultural issues and the poverty will bring lots of families to search help from this school. As the knowledge of the disabilities is low many families want help for their children because of the pooriness. It is very essential to tell people that our target is the well-being of the disabled children. Their special needs, nutrition and plans for the future will be our aim. Advocacy work is once again in very important role in this part of the work. By sharing knowledge and understanding it is easier for the people in this community to understand the significance of disability work.

According to Seefeldt (1999) the premise of cultural diversity in adult's beliefs of children's needs and abilities as well as the educational experiences deemed appropriate for optimal development.

Heikkinen (2003) present in his book “Kasvatus eri kulttuureissa” the importance of religiousness in Islamic cultures. The most important book in Islamic history is Koran which is the holy book consisted of suras. In early years the education was only based on teaching and learning the studies of Koran. (Heikkinen 2003.)

Shafer-Landau (2012) states that religion has always been the most popular source of morality and from religion has always been looked for guidance to long standing traditions. He also states that religious beliefs is needed to get the people to do their duty. (Shafer-Landau 2012.)

The fifth step was to start the work with the children. Mr. Jaffa started the work with this class on 2nd of April by observing the pupils and gathering more information of them. This information gathering will give us more information what kind of special support each pupil will need and we are able to make an individual syllabus for each of the. They work in a small group class and in the charge of Mr. Jaffa. Culturally this is almost individual teaching as the classrooms normally are much bigger. Mr. Jaffa´s earlier class was for 32 pupils.

In this class the need of special support is important. Laatikainen (2011) expressed that the special support is meant for those pupils who need more than one way to support the learning process. These pupils need more means and different atmosphere in order to get the best of the education for them.

According to Laatikainen pupils are able to concentrate in their studies better in the small-group class. She claims that the special education teachers learn to know their pupils better and the atmosphere in the class room is more relaxed and supporting. (Laatikainen 2011.)

My part of this supportive and special educational work will start when I arrive to Gambia in November 2014. The methods of working with these particular pupils will improve day by day and the impacts will be seen after this ongoing school term.

## 5 Future Plans

The school work continued in 16<sup>th</sup> of September after the summer holiday. At the moment we are planning the school year and I will travel back to Gambia in November 2014 to continue my part of the work.

Continuity and sustainable way of working is also one of the themes of this work. We will create and start different sustainable ways of working with the children in the school. One of those is The Food Project and another very important one is to sponsor the children's education. Sponsoring gives the children a real opportunity to continue the education regardless of the family situation or the special needs. Every child will get a personal sponsor who will take care of the school fees and will pay the school uniforms.

The Gunjur Community Pre-School started The Food Project during the spring 2014 but because of lack of the money they had to stop the Project. The Food Project will assure free lunch during every school day for the pupils in the whole co-operative school. This kind of free lunch is very uncommon in this society and will help the families a lot. Smile and Hope association will restart the Food Project in November 2014. The association will search lunch sponsors for the school and keep the project going on the whole school year. The amount that Food Project sponsors will pay covers the daily ingredients for lunch for every pupil and also the staff members. Such ingredients are for example rice, seasoning, vegetables, meat and fish. One of the teachers has also started to grow vegetables on the school yard. This opportunity will help them financially but also educationally. At the moment we are looking for more sponsors for this work. The internet pages for the association can be found by name <http://www.smileandhopeingambia.weebly.com>.

One of the aims is also to create a Special School in Africa where Finnish students will have an opportunity to do their exchange period or create their thesis work. Every school needs new ideas and practices and international co-operation is very much welcomed. During winter time 2015-2015 we will already have the

first voluntary worker and the planning with British and Dutch co-operation is starting.

## **6 Challenges**

There are challenges in this work and I have already discussed about some of them. One very big challenge was the electricity breaks that happened every day. The breaks can continue 6-8 hours and had an impact on my writing work and also reminded me that I am definitely working in Africa. This challenge taught me a lesson on how self-evident for instance the electricity is for us. The lack of electricity would also have an influence on normal everyday school life if there would be electricity at the school.

The other challenge was the impossibility for me to do the educational partnership with parents. Lack of trust and language barrier was something that I had expected but I soon understood that my role in this work is impossible. Mr. Jaffa suggested that he will do this part of the work on his own way. Educational partnership and open dialogue between teacher and parents are always significant but what comes to children with disabilities the impact is even more important.

The economical challenge will be one of the biggest challenges in this work. How to raise the money for the education, lunch and finally the own school building? How to assure the continuity of the special education, and how to maintain the good quality of the special education?

The association was established to do the fund-raising but it is extremely challenging and takes a lot of time and effort to gather enough funds to achieve all that has been planned. What comes to sponsoring the association has already succeeded very well. The biggest challenge will be the fund-raising for the new school building. Nevertheless mainly because of networking I have already received fund raising suggestions for example from Great Britain.



The new challenge is the risk of Ebola appearing to Gambia. Gambia is one of the West-African countries which is in high risk to join the list of Ebola affected countries. This would be very catastrophic to this small country. The economic effects are soon visible as the best tourist season is about to start next month and the tour operators have cancelled their productions.

This will mean that many people will be left without work as the tourist industry is the second biggest employment sector. The lack of tourists will effect in many levels as tourists have also family members and friends whom they have always been helping. It is already informed that countries such Liberia and Sierra Leone are starting to have difficulties what comes to imported food items as the air transfers to those countries are closed. Not to mention how this kind of epidemic will affect the population structure. Hundreds of people have caught the disease and the consequence on the structure of the population can be significant. The international aid has started but how quickly and how cogent will it be?

## **7 onclusions and evaluation**

During the year 2013 I did a lot of preparatory work such as established the association to work with the economic issues. The aim was to gather individual sponsors to assure the continuity of pupils' special education. The other sponsoring opportunity rose from the Food Project. The opportunity to offer free lunch for the pupils in sustainable way was something that I additionally decided to work with.

From the beginning of year 2014 I started the establishing work of the school. As I have mentioned earlier I was very fortunate to find this co-operational school. Nine children were elected to the first Special Education class and the teacher was nominated. The school work was able to start already in the beginning of April and that gave us more time to plan the needed support and individual needs for each pupil. I visited in Gambia briefly in June 2014 for two weeks to gather

the information what was the situation at that moment.

The teacher Mr. Jaffa had already seen the difference in the excitement of the pupils and the benefit for them and for his teaching. While visiting the school in June 2014 Mr. Jaffa mentioned that the small group is excellent choice for these pupils. The educational environment is more peaceful and the pupils can concentrate better than in the big class rooms.

The lack of co-operation with Mr. Jaffa was one of the disappointments. I was expecting more educational co-operation with him. The fact that I was in Finland the meantime is self-evidently affecting but when I return to Gambia in November I have to examine this situation.

Mr. Jaffa also mentioned that he himself is more relaxed and gets more and creative ideas how to work with the kids in order to support them. Mr. Jaffa has been gathering the information of the children and their needs. The summer holiday will end in 16<sup>th</sup> of September and gradually we can start to prepare the individual syllabus for each of them.

The head teacher Mr. Bojang evaluated the special class as follows:

“The evaluation I observe the 9 children in our disability class is good because it helps them to write and recognize letters and number. Must [sic] importantly for them to work in small group.” (Mr. Bojang 2014.)

The latest news is that three pupils of this special class has been proceed to the next level education. The message from the teacher is:

“The report about 3 children was very good and has being a success too what they have being able to achieve was due entirely to your disability class was significance. Because they are special children that require special need and care, child to teacher ratio is small and spacious and this help them more to be in line with other children in other classes, they just move them to primary like that but base on

merits.” (Mr. Jaffa 2014.)

The association has been able to find individual sponsors for all the pupils and we have been able to inform the families that the school fees are paid and the school uniforms will be bought soon. Also the Food Project is starting apparently in the beginning of November as we have already been able to find some sponsors for that work also. The importance of the Food Project will be even more significant during this winter as the Ebola situation makes the economic situation in Gambia worse than ever. The lack of tourists will be crucial.

The only thing that has not yet started is gathering money for the school building. However I already have blueprints and quotation for that. That work will probably start during the winter season 2015. So far we can borrow the additional class room at Gunjur Community Pre-School. The new school building will be two classroom building and that will give us an opportunity to start another class hopefully at latest in fall 2015.

I will personally return to Gambia in the beginning of the November and will stay there several months. During that time I will help with the children and their issues and making syllabus. I will also continue the advocacy and promoting work. Co-operation with some British and Dutch people will also starting during my next visit.

The Special School for disabled children will also have the first Finnish voluntary worker Mrs. Naski working with us during the winter season 2014-2015. I would also be happy to offer this opportunity in the future for the students of Metropolia Applied University to accomplish their training period.

My friends all over the world have been giving me good advices. One of the best one was “Teija, if you start a project like this make sure that you will continue the work later on,” This person has been working abroad many years in international peacekeeper forces and has seen a lot of projects coming and going without sustainability and continuity.

During this project I have done a lot of planning work and did not get so many surprises in my way. It shows that the work was well prepared and I have good connections and networks in the country and also worldwide. All in all there is still lot to do but the work is going on fluently. The future of the association and School Project seems optimistic and fascinating.

At this point I also want to express my gratitude to Mr. Musa Babou, Mr. Farax Manjang and Ms. Karoliina Niskala. Their contribution in guiding me during this work has been very essential. They have given me good advices and kept me in my real path.

Mr. Kadubah Bojang offered me outstanding opportunity to establish and create my dream, my thesis work "Establish a School for the Disabled Children in Gambia" in effective manner. The way he supplied me his help in so many levels made my work lot lighter and easier.

Educationally Metropolia gave me lot of means to grow as an individual person as well as a professional person. Without this Bachelor thesis I would have never started this kind of project. During this project I have learn a lot of new skills such as dialogical networking, negotiating with people in multicultural ways, establishing an association and making fundraising. Very meaningful issues have been going through ethical thinking while doing advocacy and empowering work.

Ultimately I have to draw a conclusion that this project was very arduous but I achieved something very meaningful. I did not face many problems or challenges on my way. The continuity will show the real efforts of the work for the Special Education in Gambia and especially for those pupils that are in the need of supportive teaching. This work also started a lot of multicultural co-operation between different countries.

It is hoped that the awareness of the Special Education and the situation of the children with disabilities will grow in Gambia. It is also hoped that this work will start the improvement of the quality of the Special Education as well as increases the education and work opportunities for the teachers who are interested of the field.

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## Interviews

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