Ghana

I arrived in Ghana in January with my two project partners, both of whom I had met only briefly in our previous training in November. Together we got on a flight and travelled to our new home, Akatsi, a small town in the Volta Region of Ghana. All three of us taught in a primary school right next to our home. I taught class four which had around sixty pupils aged between eight and sixteen. The difference in age between my students often made finding engaging tasks difficult and accessible for all. I taught almost all subjects, except for Ewe (the local language) and History. My favourite subject to teach, and luckily most of my pupils agreed with this, was mathematics. Maths is the same no matter what language you speak so even when I found there was a slight miscommunication or language barrier with my students our maths lessons normally ran smoothly. Before I went to Ghana, I had some teaching experience, but this was teaching dance to very young children, so I wasn't fully prepared for a classroom environment. My classroom was equipped with a chalkboard and a textbook for each of the eight subjects. Sometimes this was challenging, especially when teaching more practicals subjects like computer science but it didn't take long for me and the children to find methods that work for us. Teaching has taught me so much- it has improved my patience and willingness to reiterate a point, resourcefulness and resilience. My lesson plans were not always followed which was sometimes my fault, sometimes the children or sometimes something that no one can help such as the loud heavy rainfall in rainy season.

Thinking about my students makes me incredibly emotional. They are all such hard workers. Granted some students took a little longer to take me seriously and focus in class but I can say with full confidence by the end of my time I had a full class of students who were all listening and following instructions to the best of their abilities. Within a class all pupils have different needs and as my class was quite large this was sometimes a struggle. I tried to spend one on one time with my students, especially those who needed extra support, whenever there was time. During the last term of school, my project partners and I set up a ‘Girls’ Club’ for the upper primary girls of the school. After school on Wednesdays, we ran sessions on puberty, sexual assault and harassment, sexual health and women’s empowerment. In our last Girls’ Club session, we made self-empowerment posters to highlight our strengths and then presented these to the group. Over eighty girls attended every week and the sense of community in that classroom was so strong. The girls asked questions freely, answered each other's when they could and some of the older girls gave advice to the younger ones. We made a pact on the first session with the final line ‘girls always support girls’ and every week at the end of the session, we would repeat the phrase. I think it’s important for the girls to all come together and share their thoughts and feelings and offering a safe space to do this is something I am so proud of me and my partners for doing. Girls’ club allowed me to develop some very close friendships, especially with the older girls I didn't have the pleasure of teaching in my class. They would tell me about their families, the jobs they aspire to have and just general gossip and I cherished every second. Upon starting the club, I noticed a change in some of my quieter and shier girls in class four. Pupils who sometimes struggled to volunteer answers or ask for help had suddenly gained a lot of confidence, and I believe this is because they saw me outside of a classroom setting and therefore felt more comfortable with me. This warmed my heart and again just made me so proud of what we managed to create together.

One of my favourite things about my placement was getting to know my project partners. We arrived at Gatwick airport as almost strangers and left as tearful best friends with already so many plans to meet up in a few weeks. In all honesty when I first met my partners on training, I was disappointed that I didn't feel a big spark or connection. But the best friendships are much more subtle. Over time we became very close and comfortable with each other, and I would not have got through my seven months away from home without them. We played so many card games, watched lots of films and did not stop talking in our free time. It is shocking to me that we never ran out of stories to tell each other. Being in an inseparable trio helped me feel supported in a new environment whilst we adjusted to the culture and community and I am so grateful we went through everything together because at no point I felt lonely. I might've been three thousand miles away from my sisters but it felt like I gained two more for seven months.

Another of my favourite things about my time away was my village. Akatsi is a very small town and within it were small villages made up of a couple of streets. During my placement I formed some very close friendships with families in our village. For example, we always bought our eggs from a local family whose children went to our school. Their second youngest daughter was in the kindergarten, and she always had the biggest smile and hug for us whenever we visited their farm, often trying to sneak away to our house with us before being called back by her mother. When we told the family that it was our final week in the village, the mother 'dashed' us a couple of extra eggs and said a lovely goodbye with well wishes for a safe travel home. We also lived next door to a shop ran by our landlady who everyone called Mama. Despite Mama speaking very little English, and us little Ewe, we understood each other well enough and greeted her every morning before school. She was generous enough to give us plantains from her tree whenever they were harvested or some traditional food if she made extra. Staying true to her name she was a strong maternal figure to the three of us, and everyone around us, and I will miss her care and cooking. Unlike a lot of other volunteering placements, we did not have a host family. Instead, we had a Mary. Mary is a lovely woman who became our best friend almost instantly. She taught us to cook local dishes, handwash our clothes and joined us for our first few market trips to show us the best stalls. I have never felt as cared for as I did under Mary's observant eye, she could always tell when one of us wasn't quite ourselves, often before we'd noticed it in each other. She had two children in the school herself aged nine and twelve and treated us just like them, not any different just because we'd come from somewhere else. And honestly, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. She gave us advice whenever we were unsure, answering my constant stream of questions and became someone we trusted greatly. In return we tried to teach her about British culture, including some music she wasn't a massive fan of and some Percy pigs which she was much more of a fan of (and her children even more so). Saying goodbye to Mary was one of the hardest things I had to do. She was someone I saw every day for over seven months and did so much for me and my partners and we already miss her constant concern and big smile.

My time away has been a life-changing experience. My passion for teaching and nurturing children has only grown. From the neighbouring kids knocking on my door to learn a new game (hopscotch and uno were massive hits with all ages) to the other teachers, my project partners and Mary so many close relationships were built. It was these relationships and strong friendships that were the foundation of all my best days in Ghana. My skillset has grown tremendously: patience, independence, resilience, optimism and creativity. I went into Akatsi a stranger to my partners and the village and over time I built a family that I didn't want to leave. My students made teaching with limited resources worth it, seeing Mama smile when we learnt a new Ewe phrase made it worth it, showing Mary the akple I made was worth it and getting to know two amazing girls who now know way too much about my life made it worth it. I am so glad I took this opportunity that was handed to me. I don't think I will ever stop talking about it and encouraging other young people to also take every opportunity and just say yes.
I have had such an amazing seven months and I am so grateful to you for making this possible. Thank you again for your kindness. Yours sincerely,



My beautiful class fours



Us with Mary at her sisters wedding



Witley R.C. Primary staff



My project partners and I enjoying our travels in Kakum National Park



Our last Girls' Club session where we made self empowerment posters



Saying good bye to Mama