

Somerville-Ghana Library Project Report July 2016

I would like to thank College, the contributors to the Undergraduate Travel Award for enabling me to visit Molly's Library in the Cape Coast region of Ghana this July and to all the generous crowdfunding donors who supported this inspiring project. I spent two and a half weeks with Molly in her home and another volunteer and I visited the library Monday to Friday.

The library plot lies about twenty minutes by car outside Cape Coast. The current library building used to be a school room and the school agreed to turn it into a temporary library. It is one room, has no electricity and no plumbing. It sits atop a hill, next to the main coastal road. For this reason, Molly embarked on her project to build a new library, with better facilities and easy access.

Molly is a very passionate and loving woman. She was involved in the creation of the kindergarten, which stands opposite the new library building. Having lived with Molly, I have seen first hand her love of children and learning. Molly reads with Solange, her four-year old granddaughter, in the evenings and cares immensely about helping children learn through books. She wants to give the opportunity to read and enjoy reading to other children in the community and visits the library as often as she can.

A successful crowdfunding campaign in Somerville has allowed her to build the new library building in a far better location, with a sturdy roof (which has been a persistent problem in the temporary building), hygienic plumbing and a brightly decorated pleasant environment for children and adults to enjoy. When I visited the building, the project had suffered from an extended period of heavy rain, which had prohibited the contractors from working. Nevertheless, they have achieved an impressive amount. The roof is completed and so the plasterers have been able to finish work on the building. The plumber has started work and so all is left is to build the entrance steps and paint the exterior. Molly hopes that by the end of August the library will be complete.

Somerville's crowdfunding was essential for the construction of the library as Molly was unable to fund the new building without the generous support of donors. The temporary building is relatively small and classes of up to thirty children will use the library at one time. This means it can be cramped. Moreover, the books are stacked two books deep and two books high at the moment and the greater space in the new building will be a great improvement, allowing every book to be on display.

We left the construction to the professionals and spent most of our time with the librarians, looking at the organisation within the library and how best the children might use it. It seemed to us that there is still quite a lot of improvement in this respect. The primary concern to us was the type of books in the library. There are many books, more than they can fit, but a lot of these books are at a level which is above that of the children. Additionally, many of the books contained young content but small type-face. By the time the children can access the appearance of the book, the content is no longer enjoyable. The children in the school are the main users of the library and their level of English is generally not quite high enough to read what we perceive as 'Classic Children's Literature', authors

such as C.S Lewis or Anna Sewell. The library would certainly benefit from more books aiming to teach and improve a child's reading, before learning to read for pleasure.

When we arrived, there was no up-to-date catalogue of the books in the library. Many of the books are taken out by children and not noted down and as such, the librarians cannot be sure of what they have, which they can offer to the children. The teachers mentioned that it would be beneficial to have multiple copies of a book. There are few teachers in the school and so it is easier to teach a class beneficial to all, when all the children focus on the same book.

As previously mentioned, many of the books are of a less suitable standard for the children. We focussed on categorising the books by ease of reading. Age is a less helpful indicator than it is in the U.K., as the school year group normally ranged massively in age groups. One class we helped with had students from 12-18. For this reason, we began to categorise the children's books in levels, from simplest to most advanced. This hopefully will help both the teachers and students select appropriate books. When we observed a library session we saw that some of the children were reading A-Level textbooks or legal handbooks. By categorising the books and putting similar standards of books together, we hope that children will more easily find the book which is most useful to them.

Unfortunately, we were unable to finish this task and would love for further volunteers to continue our project of categorising the books and creating an electronic catalogue. What is certain is the relationship with Somerville is valued very highly and beyond the completion of the building of the library, I feel that Somerville could have a role in developing a structure and plan for the library lessons and the use of the library for education purpose.

Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to the College for allowing me this experience. The purpose of my trip was to visit the library and see how I could help best. My time in Ghana has taught me so much about what is constructive international development and how we can best help, creating long lasting improvement, without creating dependency. I feel that Somerville's support has facilitated the further improvement of the education of those in the community of the library.

If you would like more information about the library, I would be happy to answer any questions.

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