

EDUCATION IN GHANA

Young Ambassadors' trip diary



George Watts and Emily Pemberton, from Ysgol Gyfun Plasmawr in Cardiff are the 2015 Young Ambassadors for the Send My Friend to School campaign.

In March 2015 the pair, both aged 15, visited Ghana, a country which has made good progress towards the goal of universal primary education: 87% of children are now enrolled in primary school, compared to just 60% in 2004.

Here are extracts from their diary to give you an insight into their trip and the stories behind the statistics.

Day 1 - Arriving in Accra

Emily: Arriving in Africa for the first time felt like being thrown onto another planet. I was slightly apprehensive, but also felt a rush of empathy because even in the capital city, people were begging on the streets.

People were balancing huge bowls and trays on top of their heads, selling everything from food to water. I could smell sweat, dirt, dust and mostly sweet food.



George: What first struck me about Accra was the sheer vibrancy of the capital and the concoction of languages all around me - I couldn't understand a word of what was being said!

There are eleven "official" Ghanaian languages; I could hear French, Ga, English, Dutch, German, Kaasal. The smiling attitude and positive outlook on all situations is something that made me feel so welcome; everyone seemed so relaxed.

Meeting the Ghanaian National Coalition Campaign (GNECC)

Emily: We met Bright Appiah from GNECC, a member of the Global Campaign for Education, who introduced us to the various successes and challenges the Ghanaian education system still faces.

Some of the problems include lack of trained teachers, students dropping out of school due to farming, teenage pregnancy or helping at home, lack of accommodation for teachers, and a bucket load of other issues. Nevertheless, Bright regards the Ghanaian education system as a model for other African countries as enrollment has risen and they are doing well in the area of gender equality.



George: Although basic education is 'free and compulsory' we learnt that there are still 440,000 children out of education in Ghana. One of the main barriers to school is the cost of uniform, so the government is planning to implement a Free Uniform Scheme for children in the poorest communities.

With help from the UK's Department for International Development they have also begun a Complimentary Basic Education project to help a further 120,000 children get to school by the end of 2018.

From Accra to Bawku in the north

George: We then began a long journey with the charity ActionAid to the Upper East region of Ghana. A flight to Tamale and then a five hour car ride to Bawku, which was both thrilling and frightening. The road was obstructed by potholes, and people and animals crossed the streets carelessly.

It felt like I was watching through a TV screen rather than a window and felt light years away from these people and their situation and unable to change anything. We then arrive, with our clean beds and cool rooms. Why do only we get this?



Day 2 – Visiting children in Bansi community

Emily: Most people living in this area are subsistence farmers growing soya beans, peppers and onions from the dry and dusty earth. We travelled to a village where the mud huts were simple; small, round, and infested with flies, and other insects. There were failing crops and animals such as muddy pigs and bony goats further than my eyes could see.

George: The first boy whom we met was 11-year-old Atambilla. I was struck by the huge contrast between the beaming smile on his face and the state of what he proudly called home. The sun was scorching and the heavy smell of sweaty rotten onions thickened the air. I soon found the onions. Atambilla sleeps on the floor in a hut with his mother, next to where the numerous onions are stored, before they are used to make onion soup and to sell at market.

Atambilla does not go to school, and spends his days fishing from sunrise to sunset. I watched his ingenious way of fishing using crickets as bait, standing just centimetres from the strong current.

He regularly returns with no more than one or two fish. It was sad to see how dependent his family is on him, for this. It was also moving to see the strength of his bond with his family. He said: “I want to be a teacher so that I can have a salary and care for my parents and family.”



Emily: We visited Lariba, an 11-year-old girl whose hut with its hard floor and naked walls was a shelter, not a home. Her single, widowed mother of four struggles to feed the family. The costs of school uniform and shoes are out of her reach.

Lariba accompanies her mother every morning to collect cow dung to be sold as fertilizer to local farmers. Her mother, Ayamliya told us she realizes the importance of education as a vital way out of poverty, but she can't afford to send her children to school. Lariba said, "I don't feel happy when my friends Grace and Mafia leave for school and I am left all alone."

I helped her sweep her front yard with a broom made of sticks, and it took a while to see any difference. It was hard and put a strain on my back, and Lariba's.

Lariba told me "I don't know what I want to do in the future, but I know I don't want to do what I'm doing now." Comparing her life to mine, it made me realize that our ambitions are similar, but I've been luckier with my opportunities."



George: The other boy that we spent time with was 13-year-old Ayabil. He has also never been to school despite the local primary being close to home. His older sister Cecilia manages to attend school, because she works to help with school fees. But Ayabil is needed to work on his father's farm. It is simply a catastrophe, yet we found that these stories are common. He was a quiet boy, and what was particularly moving was that he was still able to be supportive of his friends that do go to school. He said that he likes seeing his friends coming home because "they look neat in their uniform and will have a good future".

We had the chance to help him water his onion garden. The main challenge was the journey, which he does in the early morning and in the evening. His onion garden was across the White Volta River, so we removed our shoes and accompanied him across the waters. On the other side we were told we were now in Burkina Faso – I have now visited two African countries! That encapsulates the sheer craziness of this country, and the desperate lengths people go to in order to survive.

Day 3 - Visit to Ninkogo Primary School & Junior High School (JHS)

George: We were told this was a run-of-the-mill school, which would give us the best glimpse into what Upper East Region education is like.

Our first task was to interview Madame Musah Mariama Ariatin, the headmistress of the primary school. There are 888 pupils enrolled there, with at least 100 children in every classroom, and only five teachers. We were shocked to hear that only three teachers are professionally qualified, the others are pupil teachers and community volunteers.

Even the paid teachers can't survive on their salaries and many take up second jobs such as farming on the weekends. The delayed arrival of funding was also concerning; Ninkogo still hadn't received their government grant for the previous year, and they couldn't do anything about it.



The teacher to pupil ratio was challenging not only for the pupils to learn, but also for the teachers who find it difficult to carry out assessments and maintain discipline. Only 75% of enrolled children regularly attend the school, and 70% complete primary school. We heard of many pupils repeating years and ending up in classes with much younger children, resulting in being teased.

Despite these difficulties it is evident that every single child in that school wanted to be there, and knew how it would benefit them in the future, whatever they may decide to do – be that subsistence farming or medicine.

We met 19-year-old Sidu Madima. Initially, Sidu dropped out at 15 due to pregnancy. She stayed at home for a year but has been able to return to her education, with help from her mum. And now her 3-year-old son Marti attends the nursery school, on the same site. She is one of the lucky ones, teenage pregnancy is common and many girls have to drop out. I really admire her because I can't begin to imagine how difficult it must have been to continue with education after having a child.



We also met with the school's PTA (Parent Teacher Association), which is run by ActionAid's local partner BEWDA. It was great to chat with them and see these parents, who were unable to have an education themselves, doing everything in their power to ensure that the communities' children go to school. Amongst other things they act as 'truancy inspectors' and try and discover why children aren't attending and help to alleviate that specific barrier.



Emily: In the classroom, along with the other 100 children, I found it very easy to concentrate as everyone was silent, but what struck me was the lack of posters on the walls, the textbooks being shared sometimes between three children, and the poor conditions of them; ripped, dirty, and some even had pages missing. In my school the books shelves are stacked, and every square inch of the walls are covered in examples and tips. But in this school, it was read and repeat, read and repeat.

I actually did learn in the maths lesson about angles, as the teacher was obviously professionally trained and very clear. It was a shame that the only resources he had were his chalk and blackboard, because some children were getting confused, and had no examples to refer back to.

I feel that every human being should be given the same opportunities as I've had. I wanted to help them forget about those faults in their education.

And so for half an hour at breaktime, they weren't studying on broken furniture, they weren't being restricted by their lack of resources... they were blowing bubbles, with me, and being children; falling over their friends and laughing it off. Let's give these children an education, and a childhood.



In the afternoon we met the girls club, which I found particularly inspirational. ActionAid and the local partner BEWDA helped set up a group of 75 girls who meet up every Friday afternoon to discuss and educate each other on their rights as young women and how to tackle the countless issues within their community, such as teen pregnancy, and child abuse, and also to learn about sexual and reproductive health. They actively go out into their community and target parents who aren't sending their child to school.



George and I spoke with the president, Latifa, 17, and two other members, Falila, 16, and Sheitu, 17. Falila told us about a story where a friend of theirs became pregnant, and got pulled out of school to look after the baby. A few of their members visited her home to stress to her parents how important it is for girls to attend school. Their friend is now back in school.

Latifa said, "Most of the parents listen to us, they are interested and supportive." These girls are totally going against the wind in this patriarchal society and breaking the stereotype. This shows their endless passion for their self worth and fundamental human right to a basic education.



Day 4 - Return to Accra - Urban women's project

Emily & George: Good to be back in the vibrant city of Accra and off to an ActionAid project where 1,000 young women come along to learn practical and vocational skills such as bead making, as well as learning about womens' rights. This was one of the most successful projects we had visited.

Rachael, 21, Abiba, 21 Bernice, 22, and Agnes, 24, said the project has increased their self worth, confidence and improved their communication skills. I learned there is a genuine skill to bead making, to make the necklaces or bracelets seem more attractive to buyers, which leads to a bigger profit.

One young woman we met called Bridget, who was very outgoing and chatty, told us that as a result of this project she had the confidence to leave her previous job, where her boss had taken advantage of her sexually and economically.



It was shocking to hear Abiba say, "This project has been more useful to me than school, it has taught me how to make a living, and how to manage it." Rachael and Bernice said they sometimes sell what they make at the project to help feed their family. Agnes has a young baby that she raises using the skills she has learned from the project. So whilst I sat in the sun and threaded beads onto a string with these four women, I realized that they weren't there because they had nothing else to do, they were there because a project like this is a lifeline to people struggling to make a living in developing countries.



Day 5 - Meeting with the Ministry of Education:

Emily & George: Our meeting with the Ministry of Education confirmed that the political will is there to get every child an education. They do not cover up the fact that there are still 440,000 children out of school, and that this figure isn't going to disappear overnight.

However, they discussed how difficult it is to tackle cultural issues and to convince people to send their children to school. This was different to what I had witnessed: I'd heard how people can be convinced. Also they talked about average class sizes being 35 at primary school. This was very different to what we had seen!

We also saw the lack of communication between the people at the top and the people in remote areas. For example, the Livelihood Empowerment Programme (LEAP) is a policy introduced to give money to very poor families, to help supplement their incomes and enable their children to go to school.

Yet, there was not even the slightest mention of this when we visited the Upper East. Sadly it seems that many of these policies aren't reaching the places where they would really be able to make a difference.



Ghanaian Teachers Union

We also had the pleasure of meeting with Thomas Baafi, at the Ghanaian National Association of Teachers. He confirmed to us that what we had seen in the Upper East is a fair representation of the situation in rural areas.

Children cannot attend school because they are too far away, or cannot afford uniform. Pupils cannot receive a quality education, as there aren't enough qualified teachers. Schools are unable to attract teachers because there is no accommodation for them in remote areas and because the government doesn't have enough funding for infrastructure. It is a ferocious cycle that comes down to a lack of funds and the enormous challenges involved in implementing policy.



He told us that the ideas are there: the Free School Uniform Scheme, LEAP (cash incentives for poor households) and grants, but the government isn't reaching everywhere and therefore the children are the ones who suffer. He also made us aware that teachers aren't sufficiently paid and on average receive 700 Cedis a month (around £140). Quality teachers are attracted to private schools, or other professions; and the rest are left having to take up second jobs in order to survive.

This clearly shows how a lack of a strong education system can affect everyone; pupils, children, families, adults. Everyone. Education affects us all.

Arriving back home

Emily: Strangely, I felt like I'd fallen right back into reality after I walked through my front door, because although I'd spent a week in the most surreal surroundings, nothing had changed since I'd been away.

I feel like Ghana is doing a good job and could reach 100% enrollment in a few years. Their government policies such as the free school shoes and the capitation grants did fill me with confidence, but in a lot of cases, these policies aren't yet being implemented.

I will forever remember the children at Ninkogo primary school. Their smiles touched my heart. They showed me what real hope is, and it's because of them, I'm determined to work at my role as Young Ambassador and for every other child with the slightest trace of hope inside of them for a better education and a better future.



George: I felt rather odd upon returning. I began by feeling guilty – but then I felt a sort of courage, a new determination to make Ayabil and his friends' lives a bit better.

I feel passionate about putting my first hand experiences into use – to educate my peers so that others may be educated as a result. It is impossible for Ghana to meet the 2015 target, but I personally would rather it took another 15 years to make sure all policies are implemented and quality is improved, rather than forcing the extra 440,000 into school this year for the sake of numbers.

My role as a Young Ambassador has really only now begun, I must now strive to make as many people as possible aware of the situation and what they have to do to make a difference.

The one thing that I think that I'll remember forever is the joy on Atambilla's face when I gave him a football. If these children can create several hours of fun from a fifty pence soft football, imagine what they would be able to do if we give them an education.



Photo credits: Nana Kofi Acqah

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