

Edited by Tony Shah

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Making up for Lost Time

Help For Children Facing Their Final Exams

Ashanti children come from a background of extreme poverty. Just getting to the end of the term is a major challenge, requiring sacrifices and resilience. Schools are basic, desks are broken, rooms have no electricity, roofs leak, textbooks are in short supply. Resources are limited to a blackboard. Many teachers have no training and children are required to speak English, their second language, at school.

On top of this, children in Ghana missed twice as much school as children in the UK because of covid. To compensate for some of the loss, the government of Ghana changed the school year for junior high schools and so the 2021 leavers' exams, equivalent to GCSEs, took place last month.

The outcome of these exams, not yet available, will be all important. It determines whether a child can go on to senior high school, thereby accessing major learning, employment and life chances, or whether they must return to work on the family farm.

Ashanti Development is a volunteer charity, paying no wages or salaries in the UK. It was set up by London-based Ashantis who were concerned at the quality of life of people in their home villages.



Children sitting the mock

For this reason, Ashanti Development and the local education authority together ran courses for teachers on revision and exam preparation. They started in early September and included a mock exam under proper exam conditions. Teaching the final parts of the syllabus and revision for final exams continued through to mid-November.

The courses centred on a few simple, inexpensive and timed revision exercises. For these, students worked in pairs or small groups, talking about what they had learnt rather than just listening to a teacher.

Here are three revision exercises:

1. Children read to each other and then the text is removed. They write down all they can remember and when the text is returned to them fill in what they've missed. All the time they talk – an unfamiliar exercise for Ghanaian schoolchildren who typically sit silent for long periods listening to the teacher.
2. Pupils take it in turns to read to each other from a textbook they are revising. Then they have up to thirty minutes to write out five to ten simple questions and answers. They then work with another pair in the class and each pair tests each other. They score for each correct answer and see who wins!
3. The teacher writes ten statements on the board in random order. Working in pairs, the pupils have to work out the correct order.

The local education authority employs twelve circuit supervisors who are responsible for the schools in the area. At the outset, these twelve received a day's training on how best to deliver the programme to teachers and how best the teachers could integrate it with normal classroom work. They then visited all fifty junior high schools, training over five hundred teachers and observing them deliver lessons.

The supervisors were required to send video and photographic evidence of the training and lessons

and in turn were monitored by senior staff from the local education authority. Teachers of core subjects including English and maths were given extra training on best practice and common mistakes made during exams.



Children sitting the mock

We hope that this work will make a difference and focus pupils' minds on their exams. We wish everyone involved good luck and extend our heartfelt thanks to supervisors and teachers for their hard work.

Hygiene Without Tears

Nicholas Aboagye, our Ghana Director, delivers sanitation to Ashanti communities

Ashanti Development provides communities with clean water and sanitation enabling them to construct a latrine for each household and teaching them hygiene. We've done this now for 46,000 people in seventy villages and know how dramatically their health improves as a result.

Teaching hygiene is a sophisticated and protracted procedure which normally takes place during and after latrine construction. At the outset, Nicholas Aboagye, who's responsible for the work, speaks to the community leaders of the chosen village. These include the Committee of Chief and Elders, elected Unit Committee, local authority assemblyman, Water and Sanitation Committee, Women's and Youth Groups and religious leaders. Then, with their permission, he makes a record of the state of the village in all important respects so he can measure improvements against this baseline.

He takes the results back to the community leaders and their committees and tells them what his findings are, strong and weak points alike. Then he asks their opinion on what to do next. At this

point he believes he commands their wholehearted support whereas if he missed any groups they would probably become antagonistic. He says it's important constantly to ask people's opinion.

He also talks to the whole community, asking what their worst problems are. Some replies are unexpected. In Mpantuase, for example, the women said their problem was that the men were wife beaters. In another village, people bewailed the fact that not all parents sent their children to school.

Once a short list of the village's principal problems has been drawn up, the idea is to enlist everyone to help work out solutions. In this way, the village will feel they own the solutions rather than having them imposed on them.

As for latrine construction, Nicholas offers the village a bargain. Ashanti Development will provide the raw materials and skilled labour to enable each householder to construct their own latrine provided they carry out the unskilled work.

In the early days the offer wasn't often well received. People would say, for example, "Couldn't you give us something useful instead, like a car or money". And digging 14 foot into the hard African soil is no spring holiday. Nowadays, the benefits are much better understood in our area. They include an end to the diarrhoea the whole community suffers for perhaps five days



Tippy taps are operated by the foot lever, and the user only touches the soap.

in every seven, leading to better health and more energy. So nowadays the typical reaction of the community leaders to such a proposal is "We've been waiting for this for ages. What kept you?"

Even from the rest of these deeply conservative communities, it is today unusual to hear outright objections though some people still query the need for latrines, pointing out that they already have communal – and deeply unhygienic – ones. Similarly, before the health benefits became apparent, drilling boreholes used once to be seen as a mixed blessing. We know of a group of ladies who claim to dislike borehole water because it has "no taste." They prefer water from the highly polluted stream, which they feel is full of nourishment. Some people fear if they stop drinking stream water the gods of the stream will stop protecting the village. We know of one village with a sacred fish in its shallow stream. The fish churns up the floor of the stream as it swims and makes it impossible to collect sand-free water, but the legend is that a curse will come on the village if it were killed, so nothing to be done.

While latrine construction gets underway, Nicholas goes from house to house, discussing the hygiene situation with each householder and – as always – asking for their recommendations. He takes a district nurse to explain about germs, personal hygiene and particularly handwashing and he

encourages people to construct a tippy tap, a hands-free way to wash your hands without running water. He says it's important not to dress smartly at these meetings but to be humble, and that a joke can help a lot. After that, a lot becomes clearer to the villagers. Before, for example, they may have believed that throwing their rubbish away near the house would help fertilise their plantains. Nicholas explains that it may well do so in the long-term but in the short term it will cause disease and sickness.



Digging a latrine pit

They also visit the schools and talk to the children. The children are important as they can reinforce and explain the health and hygiene training their parents have received.

The final meetings are to agree communal strategies, not just on hygiene but also on the other problems raised by the community. For example, if one of the problems is that the communal dump is too dirty, or the path is overgrown and shelters snakes, the village may decide that every two weeks the women will tidy the dump and the men will clean the traditional latrines. Or the men will do the weeding of the common areas and the women will sweep every fortnight.

Latrine building may be long over before the hygiene training is complete and Nicholas visits the village for months after the formal work is over. He may find standards slip with time, and will tell people "You used to be one of the best villages, but not any more," chivvying them back to good practice. We've even started a popular Best Kept Latrine Competition to keep people up to the mark.

Even if in the short term standards slip, later they will rise again as people become more educated and the health benefits become apparent. Every new village we work starts a Wish List, and nowadays clean water and sanitation at almost always the very top.

Ashanti Legend

This legend comes from our home village of Gyetiase in Ashanti. Two extended families share the village. Rose, the young girl in the legend, is the mother of one of our founders, Martha Boadu.

Once Upon A Time in the village of Gyetiase there lived an old man. No-one knew how old he was but people said it was at least two hundred years. He was so old that he could do nothing but lie in front of the fire all day and all night, and the women had to wash him and feed him and take him to the toilet.

Then a famine came on the land. No one had enough to eat and the children were especially hungry. People began to ask themselves why they gave food to this old man who did nothing but lie in front of the fire all day and all night. Why not give it to their children instead? The muttering grew louder and louder and finally some of the young men decided to act.

One night when everyone was asleep five of them came quietly to the old man. They shook him awake and he didn't understand what was happening, so he smiled and thanked them. Then they lifted him onto a pallet and ran with him out into the bush. They ran by the light of the moon

until they were a long way from the village. Then they put down the pallet under a tree and turned to run home.

At that moment, the old man realised that the young men intended to leave him all alone in the middle of the bush, where he would have no food or drink and no protection from wild animals. So he uttered the most terrible curse he could think of. Since you do not like old men, none of you will ever grow old, he screamed.

And from that day on, when a young man of around thirty sneezed or coughed likely as not he'd immediately drop down dead. This would happen even if the young man was in perfect health, had never had a day's illness in his life. He had no warning of what was going to happen. He was alive and well one moment and the next he was dead. From then on no sensible woman would ever marry a man from Gyetiase, as she knew she'd be a widow before long. The village began to get smaller and smaller, and the inhabitants were all old women.

No-one could think of a way to lift the curse. Even the witchdoctor couldn't help. All that anyone could do was to pray to God – and God finally decided to come to their aid.

In Gyetiase lived a young woman called Rose.

When she was quite young she had been given to the witchdoctor for special protection, and the witchdoctor made her wear a chain with bells on it round her ankles. He said that although it was only the men who dropped dead, Rose needed this chain to protect her from evil.

One night Rose dreamed that God called her to go to church. This didn't please the witchdoctor, who told her to stay at home, but Rose insisted. When she arrived and was sitting quietly waiting, God spoke to her and told her how to lift the curse. He said she must put a white cloth on the table in the church and put a bowl on top of it. Then she must pour water into the bowl and bless it. And then she must call in her extended family, who were the people suffering under the curse, and tell them to drink the water.

Rose did exactly as she was told, and the spell was lifted. Now people in Gyetiase often live to be over one hundred years old and most of the villagers are Christians.

News In Brief

- Welcome to Dr Sandra Mensah Bonsa who will work alongside our principal optometrist, Dr Agnes Oppong, screening eyes and prescribing second-hand glasses. Last month they managed to screen 120 patients in a single day.
- Enormous thanks to the vicar and congregation of St Philip and St James Church in Fleet who donated no less than £1,760 to volunteer Ruth Simpson's project to eliminate worms from Ashanti children. One de-worming tablet costs 50p, so a whole lot of children will be feeling better soon.
- In Mampong town we met a man from Bimma village, buying a high-density mattress. He said he would never have dreamed of having the money to buy anything as expensive until he took part in the Ashanti Development farm support project, sponsored by Leigh Rotary Club. Now it's well within his means.