Crossing the Ghanaian Border University & Public Schools Partnership

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Abstract

Eighteen New Mexico public school teachers, primarily from rural, ethnically diverse areas of New Mexico, participated in the Ghanaian Area Studies in Diversity Globalization: An Intercultural Perspective of Rural Ghanaian Villages as part of a Fulbright-Hays Group Abroad Program. This program was a partnership between Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU), College of Education and the teacher-participants and their school districts. The purpose of the partnership was to provide an expansion of international, cross-cultural area studies that would bring a global perspective to the 5th through 12th grade classrooms of New Mexico. A goal of the project was to internationalize the school curriculum for New Mexico classrooms with the introduction to Ghanaian culture and social science issues. Through curriculum materials that were developed as a result of this project, the New Mexico students are getting a perspective of what daily life is like in rural Ghana.

From the beginning, a sense of excitement and achievement permeated this partnership, which involved eighteen New Mexico public school teachers and Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU). The partnership was established when ENMU invited public school teachers of New Mexico to be part of a Fulbright-Hays Group Abroad Program. The teachers who participated in this partnership were involved in a Ghanaian area studies in diversity globalization: an intercultural perspective of rural Ghanaian villages. This was a once in a lifetime experience for most of these New Mexico schoolteachers. The teachers lived in the rural Ghanaian village of Wusuta, located in the Kpando District of the Volta Region of Ghana.

The purpose of this partnership between ENMU and the teachers was to expand their global perspective by living in and conducting field research in Ghana. The following were the goals of this partnership. The first goal was to provide an expansion of international, cross-cultural area studies that would bring a global perspective to the 5th through 12th grade classrooms of New Mexico. By living in and conducting field research in Ghana, the teachers gained a true cross-cultural experience and a new global perspective.

Three elementary teachers in the Clovis School District have carried out one application of this goal. In the fall of 2003, three teachers at two elementary schools and their classroom children were involved in an extensive learning project. The children learned about Ghana through their teachers’ first hand experience. After several weeks of studying about Ghana, the children and their teachers had a market day and a Durbar
celebration (dancing, drumming, singing, speeches honoring individuals) the week of October 6. The three teachers began their planning of this teaching unit while they still were in Ghana. As Fulbright project director, Caryl Johnson remembers talking with them about their plans and how one elementary school would host the market day and the other school host the Durbar. The children were to walk from one African village to the next (from one elementary school to the other elementary school). The authors were invited to participate in both events and gratified that what the teachers had learned in this partnership between the ENMU and public schools was being put into practice. There was great enthusiasm among the elementary children. “I think it’s unique and fun! We’re learning different things about their culture and what they wear and what their daily chores are,” said Chris Carby a sixth-grader at Highland Elementary School. J.C. Sandoval a sixth-grader at Barry Elementary School said, “My teacher went to Africa, and she is teaching us about it. It’s fun!” Barbara Parson, Elementary teacher at Barry Elementary School said, “I have been pleased with the students’ responses. I think it’s remarkable. It’s fantastic that they get to learn what we saw and heard over there.”

The second major goal of this project was the exploration of current issues of rural Ghana from an educational social sciences point of view. The teachers interacted with various university professors at the University of Ghana and with elementary through high school teachers and administrators in Wusuta, Kpando and Vapko. The village of Wusuta had three elementary schools and two junior high schools. The towns of Kpando and Vapko had high schools that the New Mexico high school teachers visited. Through these contacts the teachers identified many current issues of rural Ghana from an educational social sciences point of view. This was one of the strong features of the project. As a major part of their field experience, the New Mexico teachers spent much of their research time in the rural Ghanaian schools. Identifying some of the current Ghanaian educational issues was a real eye-opener for the New Mexico teachers. Among these issues, they found schools with no textbooks for the children, a lack of school supplies for teachers and children, teachers who had not been paid in over two years, and poor physical conditions of the schools. An administrator in Vapko commented that little of the World Bank loans actually filter down to local levels, reaffirming the belief that developing countries have difficulties in equitable distribution of funds. Yet, the researchers found enthusiasm for learning in the students and enthusiasm for teaching and the teachers. Upon returning to New Mexico and their classrooms, research teachers have been sharing this perspective with their students, other teachers, and administrators within their districts.

A third goal of this partnership was to internationalize the school curriculum for New Mexico 5th through 12th grade classrooms with the introduction to Ghanaian culture and social science issues. Through curriculum materials developed by teacher-participants, New Mexico students are getting a perspective of what daily life is like in rural Ghana. The Elementary teachers from Clovis, New Mexico and their Ghanaian project serve as a prime example. The elementary children involved in this project were able to identify and discuss social science issues of the rural Ghanaian people when the program director did a site visit. As program director, I was pleasantly surprised and impressed with the students’ knowledge about Ghana and the Ghanaian culture.
The following are some of the curriculum materials that the teacher-participants have written and are currently putting into practice because of this partnership:

- Folktales of Ghana (collection of oral history by High School English Teachers)
- Agricultural Practice in Ghana (High School Agricultural Teachers)
- Ghanaian Nutrition & Cooking (High School Family & Consumer Sciences Teacher)
- Dina’s Day (Daily routines of an adolescent girl in Wusuta – Elementary Teacher)
- Mark in Ghana (Daily routine of an adolescent boy in Wusuta – Elementary Teacher)
- Childhood Entertainment (Elementary Teacher)
- Kente Cloth: It’s Ewe Origin (Middle School Teacher)
- Oral Traditions and Education in Ghana (High School Teacher)
- Global Influences & Development in Equatorial African: Ghana as a Model (Jr. High School Teacher)
- Cross Cultural Creativity as a Means to Global Education (Jr. High School Teacher)

The objective of this partnership between ENMU and the public school teachers was to expose the teachers to Ghanaian culture, history, geography, politics, educational systems, religion, and social science issues and to facilitate learning within these areas so that this knowledge could be and is being integrated into their classroom activities. As part of this project/partnership the teachers took six hours of graduate credit through the College of Education. They developed two different research papers. One paper was to focus on and answer three broad-based questions related to the culture, education system, and what they learned as an educator experiencing another culture. In the second paper they were to develop lesson plans that they could use in their classrooms and would share with other teachers and administrators at their school and within their school district. In order to develop these lesson plans the teachers researched a topic that they could use with their students. Examples of these teaching units are listed above.

The following are some of the comments from the teachers as a result of their experience. “Sharing my experience begins this week (August 8, 2003). I hope to dispel some of the commonly held myths that many Americans have about the ‘dark continent’ of Africa. I also hope to encourage the curiosity of young people about the ever-shrinking world in which we live. So many of our students have never been outside the United States, and they have little concept of world affairs and cultures. This past month opened my eyes to a beautiful part of the world and to a beautiful people. It is a priceless experience” (Nell Jones, Co-author and former High School English teacher and presently adjunct instructor ENMU and Clovis Community College).

One of the questions that the teachers were asked to respond to as part of their learning experience was “What did you learn about yourself as a researcher in a setting apart from your own culture? How will you apply your experiences to teaching?” Jolene Welborn, Junior High School from Socorro, New Mexico responds, “I have always believed
that experience in other countries creates an enlightened teacher, one who will be able to understand and accommodate many cultural differences, especially in a setting as unique and diverse as that of the U.S. The demographics of my target school are predominantly Hispanic and Native American cultures. I had no idea how to teach to the culture. I have discovered that one of the best ways to overcome the obstacles was to gain global perspective through international study and travel.”

Angela Czubak, a middle school teacher from the Red River area of New Mexico responds, “My experience in the Ghanaian Area Studies Diversity Globalization Project truly influenced my way of thinking in terms of teaching about other cultures in my classroom. There is no doubt that my experience in Ghana has changed the way I view the world and how I believe the world perceives me. I am the perfect example of Christine Bennett’s view of how people from different cultures may perceive the world differently, often unaware that there are alternative ways of perceiving, believing, behaving, and judging. With that in mind, I am certain that I will grow in my understanding of other cultures, further allowing me to nurture my students as they grow.”

Terry Pipkin, a Clovis New Mexico Elementary School teacher and one of the teachers involved in the extensive Ghanaian project between the two elementary schools, states, “I will keep Wusuta in my heart. Those children will stay connected to my life through letter exchanges with my students and I will speak to any group that asks me to let them know there are treasures everywhere even in Ghana.” Terry, while in Ghana, wrote a postcard to each of her students. When they started the new school year, she discussed the Ghanaian postcards with her students. This was an excellent way to get the children interested in the new unit in which they were to be involved for the next two months.

The assessment on the effectiveness of this partnership between ENMU and the public school teachers was achieved by improving the curriculum and instruction at the teacher participants’ institutions. Any time educators are able to add a global perspective to their teaching they have improved the curriculum and instruction at their educational institution. The following are examples of what they have added to their teaching units:

- Factors affecting food production in Ghana
- Cultivation of major each crops – cocoa, etc.
- Ghanaian farming tools and Ghanaian agricultural practices
- Compare and contrast climate and growing seasons of Ghana and New Mexico
- Compare and contrast duties and responsibilities of a U.S.A. extension agent and a Ghanaian extension agent
- Compare and contrast food pyramids used in U.S.A. and Ghana
- Compare and contrast student lifestyles and daily activities in Ghana and New Mexico
- Make an Ewe word book (Ewe are the ethnic group of Wusuta)
- Use Ghanaian folktales for a puppet theater production
- Children’s literature of Ghana
- Music and games of Ghana
- Ewe kente cloth – history and origin; symbolism and color significance; materials and weaving technique
- Global view through the eyes of Wusuta
Draw similarities between Ghanaian folktales and stories told in the U.S.

A further assessment can be made on the impact of this partnership and the professional development of the teacher participants. One of the questions that we asked them to address as part of their field experience was related to the impact of their Ghanaian experience on their professional development. The following are some of the responses. “This experience has taught me that travel is an important part of my development as a history teacher. Text research alone does not fully complete one’s understanding of a culture. To continue pursuing this kind of experience can only continue to improve my teaching,” (Kimberly Scarborough). Alissa Green reflects, “People of all communities are so similar. There are many more similarities than there are differences, and yet it is the differences that are the focus. There is a desire for more and the idea that education is the key; education is always the key no matter whom or where you are. My experience in Ghana has helped me to grow as a person, and as an educator. I have had the opportunity to relate to a totally different and diverse culture, and have acquired new knowledge, skills and attitudes. As a teacher, I need these things to be effective in my multicultural classroom.”

“In all these experiences there was a synchrony unlike any I have experienced in everyday life,” says Angela Czubak. “There is no doubt in my mind that as a researcher in a cultural setting other than my own, I have a lot to learn, especially as a person from a low-context culture researching a high-context culture” (referring to Edward T. Hall’s Theory on High and Low Context Cultures).

Questions posed by Nell Jones. “Defining my personal impact of a first visit to a third-world country almost defeats me. How do I express the multitude of impressions, emotions, and events that I experienced? What is important? What is insignificant? What is lasting? What changes have I had? Have I grown as a compassionate member of the human race? What are the long range implications for me? These questions haunt my thinking as I struggle to process the entire experience.” In summary, Nell states, “One thing I do know: my month in Ghana was a totally positive experience. Every day led to fresh understandings and questions.”

The teachers’ assessment of this Ghanaian project as a partnership speaks for its self and the value of international experience. The assessment made by teachers included:

“International experiences enhance teaching.”
“The value is priceless because I’ll have memories forever to share with others.”
“Value-firsthand experience with diversity; this provides more than a picture.”
“Very valuable! Firsthand experiences are so helpful in teaching about other cultures.
“Seeing how others live and work and sharing their success and failures.”
“Immeasurable!”
“Just to see how other families live is of vital importance and allows a completely different perspective we could not otherwise attain.”
“I have more insight into other cultures that I can share with my students. The possibility of enriching diversity classes.”
“I can directly draw on the experience in my teaching of middle school history and geography. It provides an amazing opportunity for field study outside of our society.”

As Fulbright-Hays project director and assistant professor of ENMU, Johnson has visited schools to assess the teacher-participants’ Ghanaian projects as related to improvement in curriculum and instruction. The importance of this partnership is clear and the impact is strong, on the teachers, their students, and the curriculum. These teachers have made a large impact on broadening the curriculum and instruction at their schools. Feedback from participants across the state has been positive in the changes that they are making to improve their curriculum and instruction. The project director personally feels that the only way to study another culture is to be actively involved in the daily life of that culture and then share one’s findings with one’s students and institution.

Nell Jones, co-author of this article, is involved in teacher training at Eastern New Mexico University. She is having an impact on the future teachers of the State of New Mexico and their development of curriculum materials as they make their way out into the education world. She also feels that the travel to and interaction with other cultures is a vital enrichment for the classroom teacher. Nell was one of the participants in this partnership project.

There have been many opportunities to share our knowledge and experience. On November 20, 2003 the project director and several of the teacher participants presented a forum on the Fulbright-Hays Group Abroad Program and Ghanaian experience at Eastern New Mexico University. Local educators were invited to this event, which was sponsored by the Dean of the College of Education at ENMU. As project director I provided background information about ENMU’s partnership with the public school teachers. The teachers shared their cultural experiences. Copies of lesson plans that the teachers had developed as a result of this project were made available to local educators. Another teacher has presented her findings to six groups of teachers in New Mexico and Texas.

In June 2004, three of the teachers from this project will present a two hour session at the Teaching Excellence workshop, which is focused on improving classroom teaching. The partnership between ENMU and the public school teachers of New Mexico grows as this workshop is open to all New Mexico educators. Terry Pipkin, teacher researcher, says,” Every day brings new opportunities as a result of this project.”

In summary, the sense of excitement and achievement of this partnership between ENMU and the eighteen public school teachers and their school districts continues.
Reference


