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CHAPTER 4

Seeing Africa through the Eyes of an Educator

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While in country, throughout the trip in both Ghana and Togo, I had my preconceived conclusions both validated and challenged. The experiences that our cohort shared, the places we visited, and the conversations we had provided valuable insight and lasting impacts on my thinking and processing of what it means to be educated, how education impacts society, what education's role in society is and can be, and—most importantly to me—what value education holds in the life of a girl born in Africa.

In-Country Learnings and Potential Campus Benefits

The four points of learning delineated in this section are the major ideas that I intend to explicitly embed into my EDT 110 course, Introduction to the Profession, as well as into EDT 318 and 418, the Urban Teacher Academy courses for juniors and seniors. These points of learning are culminating statements, all a result of the SEC cohort's university visits, conversations with individual colleagues, specific experiences in the schools visits, large and small group discussions, and daily travel experiences. These points reflect



my overall opinion that education is the factor that connects through all circumstances. Education is the key element that can empower a student, change the trajectory of family, and strengthen a nation. All four points also make a connection to UD campus benefits.

I should begin, however, by expressing my surprise when the request was made by the Global Education Seminar to share the work of a previous presentation I had made on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) at Academic City College. Setting the presentation to a new framework in Ghana was one reason for my surprise. As were the myriad issues in Ghana's educational system in terms of access to quality schools, the new teacher licensure exam, and the focus placed on science and engineering by the universities in Ghana. Typically, the concept of SEL is not traditionally aligned with the STEM fields. However, after my presentation to the Academic City College faculty and staff, as well as the audience's follow-up questions and feedback, it became evident that there is a need for SEL in Africa as much as in the U.S.. In fact, SEL was very much on the minds of the faculty in a search for ways to respond to the needs of their students. The faculty members noted that their

students were experiencing concerns regarding financial stress, pressure from family not to put their education over tradition and family, pressure to excel academically, and even physical abuse. Some of these concerns mirrored many of the concerns students at UD have expressed. Continued conversation with faculty helped me realize, however, that they encounter less frequently issues of anxiety or depression that often present in students at UD particularly and students nationally in the U.S. But the ultimate realization for me was that SEL and the need to respond to students and to help them develop coping skills is integral to education. All four of my in-country learnings stem from this understanding.

Point No. 1: Geography, identity, wealth, or ethnicity have no distinction in SEL.

The philosophy and concepts of Social Emotional Learning are crucial to all students, and educators both in the U.S. and abroad are fully aware of this. The UD Campus Impact is evident. SEL is already being implemented into our curriculum for teacher preparation. What I will share directly with my UD colleagues and students is how contextual SEL is; it can be designed to respond to the needs of the students being served. As we professors at the University of Dayton share SEL with our teaching candidates and our local school districts, we accumulate a rich cache of comparative stories exemplifying all the many forms SEL may take within a school setting.

The validation of and challenges to my SEL ideas continued at the University of Ghana (UG), one of Ghana's premier institutions. It was at UG that connections were made with faculty in the departments of teacher education and sociology. Throughout our discussions what resonated was the need to provide meaningful experiential opportunities to teacher candidates. My colleagues at UG face the same issues we face at UD with our candidates: how to move from the theoretical to the practical and how to manage the understanding, implementation, and assessment of teacher dispositions. This recognition of the importance of dispositions was something I had not expected to encounter at UG. In a previous

search of the research conducted by faculty at UG, I had not found any articles on teacher dispositions or any articles focusing on the developmental needs of teacher candidates. Much of the previous research had a heavy emphasis on course content and on passage rates of content examinations. This shift to concerns that relate to pedagogy and dispositions thus demonstrates the importance of collaboration with local school partners and an examination of present-day needs of schools. My colleagues at UG pointed out that their consideration of these matters came as a direct result of feedback from their school partners and from schools that have hired their graduates.

There is much UD can learn from UG's teacher preparation curriculum and the micro teaching lessons that they have candidates complete prior to their student teaching. One ongoing issue for teacher preparation in the United States is the shortage of math and science teachers. Another is providing and expanding course content in both these critical subjects that will give elementary and middle school teachers a strong foundation . Prior to our trip, the Dean of the Department of Teacher Education at UG had shared with me the course requirements for their candidates, and they exemplify the rigor and depth that is required to produce stronger teachers in these subject areas. During the meeting with the dean it was helpful to hear how their collaborations with the departments in the College of Sciences had improved the curriculum. It was also interesting to learn that the curriculum enhancement was not done as a directive from the Ghana Department of Education but was done as a result of faculty research and engagement with schools in the community.

Point No. 2: Responding to the needs of schools and improving teacher quality require faculty support, collaboration both within the university and with local school district, and a commitment from the university.

The validation is especially important for the evolution of the teaching profession. Schools of education should be on the forefront of developing initiatives that help move the needle in terms of closing achievement gaps, improving teacher quality, and modeling



instruction and assessment strategies that will facilitate learning for all students.

The UD Campus Impact of these insights are best shared with my UD colleagues in both Teacher Education and other departments in the university. Our candidates are required to take many of their content area courses in different departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. At times, out of frustration and in response to changing licensure requirements, members of these departments have expressed the opinion that professors in the School of Teacher Education should teach some of the content courses themselves. However, what I think is needed is greater collaboration between these departments. By engaging in conversation more frequently with one another we can ensure, first, that the courses the candidates take fully meet current state and accreditation standards and, second, that candidates take courses with faculty who are experts in their respective fields of study. By strengthening the collaboration and extent of communication among departments, our candidates receive a rigorous curriculum, and we fully utilize all the resources available on campus to provide a quality teacher preparation program.

Visiting the Marianist schools in Togo and the public school in Ghana validated my opinion that children are children no matter the zip code or economic status. Much of the work that I do in preparing students in the Urban Teacher Academy concentrates on helping candidates understand this universal point. All students—urban, suburban, and rural—need and deserve quality teachers and schools.

This principle resonates in Ghana and Togo just as it does in the United States: Education is the way out of poverty.

Both as a person and as an educator, I value what the school trips in Togo and Ghana have verified:

1. Children come to school eager to learn. Educators can nurture this eagerness or stifle it.
2. Committed educators and community members transform schools into learning communities that impact more than just the students.
3. Students will rise to the academic standards set for them when taught in an environment that is safe and supportive.
4. Poverty is not an indication of the academic potential of a student.

Point No. 3: The most effective schools serve the community in which they are located.

Education is not done in isolation. Ideally, it takes place within a context beneficial to all stakeholders. The UD Campus Impact here is clear. Sharing with teacher candidates examples of the activities and programs the schools have developed and implemented is another means of demonstrating how teachers and schools both create responsive learning communities that impact the lives of their students and families. The examples also demonstrate how academic success is not a function of income. In the United States, we often hear that poverty and family circumstances are excuses for why students underperform. Yet the examples of schools in Ghana and Togo stand in direct contradiction to this idea. Improving student performance starts with removing the deficit perspective that many people tend to have about those who are different from them. These examples also illustrate that the Africa frequently portrayed in the media does not represent all of Africa, that the entire continent is not paralyzed by war, famine, and poverty. Such encouraging examples show an Africa that our teaching candidates know very little about—an Africa that is resilient, innovative, and educated.

That said, being born female in Africa can have a very different outcome and life trajectory than in other countries. In a 2017

National Geographic entitled “For These Girls, Danger is a Way of Life,” Okeowo pointed out that “Poverty, violence and cultural traditions oppress millions of girls around the world, but some are finding hope through education. The impact that little or no education has on the lives of girls was evident throughout the trip. Lining the streets of Accra, Kumasi, and Lome were all the water girls and market girls—girls selling bread, Voda phone cards, meat pies, and every possible imaginable household item. From sunrise to well past sunset, girls are working to contribute to their families’ household finances. The obligation to support the family prevents many girls from getting an education beyond primary school. When I met with professors at the University of Ghana and the College of Education in Winneba, I asked about the retention rate for girls after primary school. The response during all these conversations was, “It’s lower than we would like.” When I looked up data for more specific 2017 figures, the disparity in education between males and females is small in secondary schools (males 85% to females 83%). And these figures speak to the strength of Ghana’s educational reforms since the early 2000s. Many of the professors prefaced their comments by stating that the numbers showing the small educational gap don’t reflect the daily attendance rate of girls nor the graduation rate of girls.

An old saying asserts that “When you educate a girl, you educate a family.” We encountered evidence of this saying’s truth as we listened to the stories of many female students at the university and when we heard from the teachers at the primary and secondary schools. Perhaps the most heart-touching story came from a female graduate student at Ashesi University. She is from the Northern Region in Ghana, and she poignantly expressed how being at Ashesi changed her life. She spoke of the struggles she and her mother experienced in order to earn money to send her to the university, the trials of being different from other students from the city, and the challenges of keeping up academically. Yet she also spoke with determination, and often holding back tears, about how the professors encouraged her, made her join groups, tutored her, and never let her quit. As a result of her time at Ashesi, she has been able



to get her younger sister not only through secondary school, but also to Ashesi as well. And she herself is currently completing her national service by helping students from underserved areas understand the importance of school and higher education. Most important to her is her plan to go back to her village and use her knowledge to improve her community. She has a confidence and resilience that

cannot be denied. It is clear that in educating her, a family/village has been educated.

Point No. 4: The education of girls is critical, not only for individual growth, but also for family and community growth. Access and equity are paramount.

The story of the Ashesi graduate relayed under the previous point speaks to the power of opportunity. The UD Campus Impact here is similar. Continuing the partnership with high-needs school districts in teacher education, the University of Dayton supports the Flyer Promise Program and The UD/Sinclair Academy, current examples of equity and access opportunities that lead to life-changing stories. Such programming, because it particularly targets those who have been marginalized, should remain a part of UD's mission to support equity and other social justice issues. The GES trip served to underscore why I will continue to be a proponent of initiatives that provide access and equity. In fact, it was during the GES trip that I decided to join the advisory board for UD Men for Gender Equity. If my role is to be an advocate, I have to be a part of what is happening in my own community.

I have traveled to both Ghana and Togo multiple times, but I never experienced them in the ways we did on the GES trip. It was interesting to experience the countries without family, gaining a different perspective by examining how can these experiences impact me professionally. The trip confirmed for me something I have always believed, that the beauty and culture of Africa are often overlooked, taken for granted, and underappreciated. Clearly, the histories and cultures of Ghana and Togo are rich and meaningful. I always worry that the push to become more “modern” and “Western” will destroy African culture. However, what I saw is that both Ghanaians and Togolese are protecting their heritage and traditions—and making sure that they control the narrative and determined to show that tradition and progress can coexist. While I left Africa feeling as if I had a better understanding of what was being done to preserve and protect, at the same time I sensed that Africa does have a stake in the future of the world’s progress. The universities in both Ghana and Togo are producing learned individuals who can contribute to their respective professions in powerful ways. What still is missing, however, is a wider worldwide recognition that countries other than western ideologies have value and should be respected for what they can contribute to the overall benefit of the world. It is my personal hope that the recognition of African intellectual traditions and innovations comes sooner rather than later.

The professional idea that remained foremost in my mind while we traveled the countries, engaged with students, learned from professors, toured schools and universities is that education is a central factor in improving society. The impact of education was visible in all aspects of the trip. Educating the community regarding water safety, public health concerns, and any number of topics could have their start in schools. Of course, as an educator, I have the tendency to see the nexus between schools and society. However, I could see that there were untapped opportunities for the local schools and business/industry to work together to improve the community. For example, there were frequent conversations about how to better educate the public about sanitary matters, the use of water, and other

matters related to public health and safety. It seems to me that this is where educators should enter the conversation. Teachers and schools can help to engage the community around these important topics. Having educators at the table would be beneficial for multiple reasons. Throughout the trip, I kept coming back to the question of how could education help roll this out? How could teachers help educate the future generations to understand the importance of this topic? There is an important role here for education.

So, in the end, my trip with the Global Education Seminar reinforced for me the reasons why I became a teacher in the first place. To ensure equity and a quality education for all students and to work to make my community a better place. I feel most fortunate to have had this opportunity to experience, engage with, and reflect on such a place of beauty and culture; to do so with this group of people has established rich connections that will move us all forward. In her poem *The Human Family*, Maya Angelou (1994) proffers the line, “We are more alike my friend, than we are unlike.” This is a line I recited to myself frequently during the trip. I believe that part of the role of the GES program is to get faculty to recognize and appreciate this idea.

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