

Participatory Development Communication and Child Well-being in Northern Ghana

*A journey*

by

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*“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul  
than the way in which it treats its children.”*

— Nelson Mandela

### **Abstract**

Children in the West African country of Ghana may face many challenges to their safety and well-being, including trafficking, child labour, sexual abuse, violent discipline, gender inequality, and neglect. This paper relates a journey into the lives of the residents of a small village in Northern Ghana and explores the role of participatory communication in understanding the issues and making life better for their children. Through an ethnographic study of the culture and the community's perception of the needs of children, the field of education and the difficulties of the local school emerge as a priority for the village population. Choices and plans are made for a grassroots initiative to address one of the problems at the school. The author shares her discoveries in this reflexive, personal account.

**Key words:** development communication, rights of the child, participant observation, ethnography

**Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
For Ramatu .....	6
Understanding participatory development communication .....	8
The rights of the child .....	9
Profile of Kitoe, Northern Ghana .....	12
<b>Exploration of the culture, the issues and the researcher</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Participant observation – a reflection .....	14
Gathering information .....	18
Analyzing the data .....	21
<b>Discoveries</b> .....	<b>21</b>
The Gonja people of Kitoe .....	21
“We need help” .....	24
Place of the child .....	26
Role of gender .....	29
Poverty .....	31
Education .....	31
<b>Community conversation</b> .....	<b>34</b>
Communication channels and challenges .....	34
Discussing the findings .....	36
<b>Making changes</b> .....	<b>39</b>
Identifying issues .....	40

COMMUNICATION AND CHILD WELL-BEING 5

Planning and implementing change activities ..... 40

**Looking back, looking forward** ..... **42**

Journey outward to Kitoe .....42

Journey through a PDC process ..... 43

Journey into myself and toward others ..... 45

**References**

## Participatory Development Communication and child well-being in Northern Ghana

*A journey***For Ramatu**

Ramatu is five years old. She has been living in a mud and plaster compound with her grandparents and four other children – her aunts and uncles – for more than four of those years. Her mommy comes to her village once a year for the annual festival but Ramatu hardly knows her. Her grandfather says he will “give her back” soon.

Ramatu and her six-year-old aunt are in kindergarten. They sit on broken furniture in a broken classroom every morning and wait for their teacher. When she doesn't come, the restless children play at hitting each other around the head, with hands or small sticks, until somebody lands on the floor crying. When the teacher does come, she writes a few words or numbers on the board and the children repeat: 1, 2, 3, 4; table, chair, pen, paper. The teacher goes back outside, escaping the heat, and the monotony.

At home, Ramatu has no toys, but she scrounges the debris pile every day for a box, a tin can, or a razor blade to add to her collection. She also does her chores, usually with a skip and a grin. Apart from assisting in pounding the peppers and groundnuts, she carries a bowl of water on her head from the borehole to the compound, arriving soaking wet. She places a long wooden bench in front of her grandfather twice a day, so that her grandmother can serve his meals. She runs errands around her village, delivering messages and buying foodstuffs from other villagers.

Ramatu has learned that mistakes are not tolerated. One afternoon, she was sent off with a few coins to buy tomato paste from a woman on the other side of the village. She came back with bouillon cubes and was soundly smacked on the head and sent outside to cry alone. And this is another standard in Ramatu's young life. If you want to cry – if you have cut yourself, burnt

yourself, if you are so exhausted your young neck can no longer hold up your young head – cry if you must, but cry alone... and not for long.

I undertook the present research for children like Ramatu. Through this process I explore the potential of participatory development communication (PDC) to make their lives better, by attempting to respond to the following question: *What is the role of communication in a participatory development approach to improving the situation of children?* The overarching question can be broken down to: *What are the challenges facing children? What does the community want to change? How can participatory communication support the community in motivating and implementing change?*

This research is a journey, and although the destination is uncertain, this document is the story of that journey as it unfolds in three interconnected ways. Physically, this journey takes me from Montreal, Canada to Kitoe, a small village in Northern Ghana, where I lived with a family for 10 weeks. Academically I journey through a participatory communication exercise, rooted in ethnographic fieldwork. Personally, I journey into myself, exploring my own culture, comfort and expectations and outward into the surprising relationships forged with these villagers. For this reason, I have chosen a style that is personal and self-reflective to enhance the authenticity of the findings and provide a genuine context for lessons learned.

I would like to acknowledge the support of SEND Ghana, a local non-governmental organization (NGO) that agreed to act as gatekeeper and sponsor for my research on the ground. SEND arranged for a host family for my husband and me for the duration of our stay. I am deeply grateful to the village chief and the people of Kitoe for welcoming two white strangers into their midst, and especially to Jonathan, Salamatu, their five children and granddaughter for

offering more than a room. They knowingly opened their personal lives to scrutiny and critique, and I am filled with gratitude, and warm respect.

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### **Understanding participatory development communication**

To understand the concept of participatory development communication it is useful to take a look at the meaning and relationship of its three parts: development, participation and communication, beginning with a brief history. After World War II, the goal of development was economic growth, based on the idea that societies should all evolve to the same “modern” stage. This, it was felt, could be achieved by developed societies transferring their technology and culture to traditional societies. Less developed societies were therefore expected to give up their culture, religion, language and traditions if these were perceived as obstacles to the modernist transformation (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, p. 19).

During this period, communication strategies supported development by focusing on diffusion of innovations, an approach that aimed to create knowledge of new ideas and persuade target audiences to adopt them (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, p. 146; Servaes, 2008, p. 21). This is a top-down model, based on the transfer of information, persuasion, and heavily reliant on mass media (Barker, 2001, p. 5).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholars and social activists challenged the dominant paradigm and called for liberation, conversation and participation. Development was seen as “more about exploring and enabling, less about prescribing” (Quarry & Ramirez, 2009, p. 2). Although the practice may be slow to change (Waisbord, 2008, p. 506), the theory of development is now increasingly understood in terms that involve empowerment, self-

determination, with a bottom-up, contextual, culturally-affirming approach to assisting individuals and communities attain their own goals for improving their quality of life.

This participatory approach to development necessarily involves a participatory approach to communication (Barker, 2001, p. 4). In fact, “Participation in development programmes and projects cannot occur without communication for one simple reason: participation is communication, the concepts are entangled, intimately knotted as the strings in a fisherperson’s net” (Gumucio-Dagron, 2009, p. 460). Communication is the means of implementing participation and participation feeds the activities of communication.

I would suggest, then, that participatory development is both the process and the end result of community empowerment to attain social change that will improve quality of life. Communication enables, and often leads, this process. For the present research, I decided to optimize the listening and empowering approach and to limit my own input into the process in order to explore a bottom-up communication model based on grassroots participation. The research methodology is highly inductive and emergent, and the results are dependent on the community’s motivation and capacity for change, especially in a limited timeframe. The methods used draw from the fields of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) as championed by Robert Chambers (Leurs, 1996, p. 87), Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Narayanasamy, 2008 p. 13), and applied ethnography (Lewis & Russell, 2011, p. 398). I chose to focus my observations and inquiry on the situation of children and possible grassroots initiatives to improve their well-being. Because of this, a basic understanding of the field of children’s rights provides some useful parameters to guide and interpret the research.

### **The rights of the child**

Ramatu lives in the West African country of Ghana, where the rights and well-being of children are enshrined in law. Ghana became the first country in the world to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on February 5, 1990 (Unicef, 2011, p. 1) and later adopted the “Children’s Act” (Act 560, 1998) to ensure its application in national legislation. The gap, however, between policy and experience remains. Children face risks and hazards that include trafficking (Lawrance, 2010), child labour (Unicef, 2013, p. 133), sexual abuse (Lawrance, 2010) and violent discipline (Unicef, 2013, p. 133; Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012, p. 69). Poverty (Hashim, 2007, p. 914; Oberg, 2012, p. 620), gender inequality (Salm & Falola, 2002, p.139), educational disparity (Hashim, 2007, p. 916; Windborne, 2006, p. 167) and neglect (Twum-Danso, 2009, p. 428) are among the more subtle challenges, more difficult to identify and measure, but essential in understanding the condition of Ramatu and the other children in the small village of Kitoe, Northern Ghana.

As this research explores the well-being of children, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) offers a good starting point. The major tenets of the CRC are as follows:

...Freedom from violence, abuse, hazardous employment, exploitation, abduction, or sale; freedom from hunger and protection from diseases; access to free compulsory primary education; adequate health care; the right to know and be cared for by both parents; the right not to be separated from one's family; the right to registration, a name, and nationality from birth; the right to an identity and to preserve such an identity; equal treatment regardless of gender, race or cultural background; the right to express opinions and freedom of thought in matters

affecting them; and safe exposure/access to leisure, play, culture and art (Mulinge, 2010, p. 10).

Despite the signature of most states to this accord, many child protection practitioners point out the reality of ongoing suffering and exploitation of children (Mulinge, 2010, p. 11), while some question its intercultural validity (Harris-Short, 2003, p. 134) and others decry the barriers to implementation (Manful & Manful, 2014, p. 151).

The foundational premise of the rights discourse is the assumption that human beings operate as individuals, with individual value, and therefore individual rights. This typically western worldview does not take into account the communal cultures of much of the world, including sub-Saharan African societies (Kipton, 2011, p. 297 Laird, 2011, p. 434). This is in fact one of the reasons why The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child was created and adopted by what is now the African Union, in 1990. Additional issues addressed in the ACRWC include the responsibilities and duties of the community toward the child and the duties and responsibilities of the child toward the family and community (Windborne, 2006, p. 160; Unicef, n.d., p. 3).

The implementation of children's rights is especially challenging in a context of poverty. If poverty strips a child of his or her rights to adequate nutrition, clean water and sanitation, for example, those rights cannot be addressed in a vacuum, and the complexities of the problem of poverty will be a formidable barrier. What of the right to education if there are no schools, or the right to stay with my family if we are separated by war, or my right to birth registration if the infrastructure does not exist in my area?

And what if the child is getting lost in all the high-level rhetoric and debate? Emma Crewe (2010), Director, ChildHope UK points out that "many child-focused civil society

organisations (CSOs) working in Africa, Asia and South America have shifted from organising their work around children's needs to promoting their rights" (p. 43). This is a top-down, judicial approach that often targets exceptional abuses and misses the ongoing barriers to health, security and opportunity faced by millions of children. Another potential misapplication of a rights approach is to focus solely on educating people about their rights, which runs the risk of shifting the responsibility onto vulnerable people to "claim" or "defend" their rights, when it is not in their power to do so.

When I speak of the rights and well-being of the child in this paper, I am not referring to laws and policies. It is my intention to critically consider the condition and experience of children like Ramatu, based on the values of their families and community. I do realize that the culture of this community itself may be responsible for injustices committed against children so I will evaluate my observations through a lens informed by the rights outlined in the CRC, insomuch as the ultimate goal "is the child's full development, including the physical, mental, moral, social, and spiritual well-being of the child, in preparation for citizenship and a responsible life in a free society" (Svevo-Cianci, Hart & Rubinson, 2010, p. 53; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989, Article 29).

### **Profile of Kitoe, Northern Ghana**

Ghana is a coastal country in West Africa with a population of more than 25 million people. Ghana gained independence from Britain in 1957 after which it suffered a period of political and social instability. Today it is considered "one of Africa's true success stories" (Unicef, 2011, p. 2), due to democracy, political stability and economic growth based largely on natural resources including gold, cocoa and now oil. Christianity is the main religion although many people, especially in the north, follow either Islam or what is generically referred to as

“traditional.” Although English is the official language, Ghanaians may speak any of 70 different tribal languages and dialects (BBC News, 2014; Central Intelligence Agency, 2014).

The profile of Northern Ghana is very different from that of the south. Subsistence farmers, cultivating yam, maize and cassava, generally live below the poverty line, with less progress on most development indicators including maternal and infant mortality, education, treated water and improved sanitation. Isolated tribal clashes continue to upset community stability and economic activities in rural villages (Salm & Falola, 2002, p. 29; World Food Programme, 2013).

Kitoe is situated approximately 11 km. south of Salaga, the capital of the East Gonja district in the Northern Region of Ghana. Kitoe is composed of two tribes that live on opposite sides of the road: a Gonja and a Konkomba population. Although the groups share schools, a trade economy and a territory, they are distinct in terms of language, religion and culture. The civil war in 1994 which affected much of the eastern corridor of the Northern Region led to a Konkomba raid on Gonja land and homes, and the deaths of dozens of villagers. The reconciliation agreement still holds, but ethnic tension exists.

The Gonja tribe, which is Muslim, counts a population of approximately 180 people in Kitoe, whereas there are closer to 500 Konkombas, a mix of Christian and traditional. Guided by SEND Ghana regarding the choice of a host family, I lived on the Gonja side of the road and conducted my research there.

The people of Gonja-Kitoe are subsistence farmers, with little opportunity for employment, trade, or economic improvement. Polygamy is practiced by this tribe. Village business is decided by the chief and a group of elders. The majority of the population is illiterate.

There are three functional boreholes providing water for the village, two schools – one primary and one Junior High School (JHS)—and one community outhouse. There are no household toilets, and the accepted elimination practice is known as “free range.” Electricity is available and most of the 36 compounds are hooked up. There is no waste management. Garbage is discarded behind the mud and concrete houses, and occasionally burned. The land is shared with a considerable free-roaming population of goats, sheep, chickens and other assorted fowl.

### **Exploration of the culture, the issues and the researcher**

#### **Participant observation, a reflection**

My goal in living in Kitoe was to understand its residents, but I found myself continually questioning my role and attempting to evaluate the impact of my presence on the people I was attempting to study. I am white. I am a woman. I am in my 50s. These things are obvious. I am educated. I am Canadian. I am a married mother and grandmother. This information can be easily gleaned in a brief conversation. I am passionate about human rights, gender equality and the security and well-being of children. I am a Christian. These are some of the invisible but powerful drivers behind my attitudes and actions. These are the factors that led me to this research and influence my topic and research design.

I am generally not conscious of the colour of my skin but I am acutely aware that being white and living in Kitoe is no small thing. During our stay, we did not see another white person in the village or in the entire Salaga region, which helps to explain the open surprise and curiosity our presence created. A few children cried, most laughed and waved. The brave ones ran toward us. Adults would often stand and stare. Groups formed and watched us as we walked or rode a motorcycle down the road between villages. In fact, in our farewell gathering organized by the village elders, one of them said that in the long history of Kitoe, no white person had ever

slept in the village for an hour. They saluted the simple fact that we had lived with them, and we were white.

I do not know how profoundly being white impacted my research, but in this hierarchical society, there were indications that we occupied a fairly high rung on the ladder. Admittedly age and the fact that we were visitors could have also had an influence, but did not explain the preferential treatment we generally received. People considered our visits to their home a privilege. They showed pleasure and appreciation (and amusement) when we attempted to participate in daily activities – washing our laundry at the borehole, watering mangoes, planting yams – but quickly insisted on helping or taking over. A white person was not able or not expected to do any kind of physical work. If we walked to the soccer field or the borehole or the local school, a plastic chair was likely to arrive within seconds, carried on the head of a child, to ensure that we would be seated comfortably, although in many cases we were the only ones with chairs. Blending in was just not an option (Cragg & Cook, 2007, p. 47). Although not important to us, the colour of our skin remained a determining factor in the perception and reaction of the people around us.

The local understanding of “whiteness” also led to the assumption that we were rich (and benevolent), and produced the expectation that we were there to deliver, to provide, to give or to help. This was verbalized in many ways, including the persistent “we need help” as the introduction to most interview conversations. The request came more specifically as, “We have no money. Maybe you can help us,” from village residents, to the suggestion by the circuit supervisor of the Ghana Education System that the white lady could supply the funds to put a new roof on the school. The 22-year-old daughter of our host family asked us to buy her a laptop computer. Two neighbour women suggested we could buy them gifts when they heard we were

going to the city. A young man from the neighbouring tribe showed us a rip in the village soccer ball and asked us for a new one. Aside from these personal and targeted requests was the general expectation that we would return home and somehow start the wheels turning in terms of our government, NGOs, funding organizations or whoever it was who could come and “help” them. I was never sure that the message got through that we did not have the power, resources or intention to provide them with financial assistance.

On the other hand, this perception of white privilege offered the possibility of opening doors. I was confronted with another dilemma. Should I use the colour of my skin to gain a hearing with public officials on behalf of the community, for example? What ends justify what means?

I also struggled throughout my stay with balancing my role as an observer and a participant (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 37). In the first week, for example, a child in our family cut her foot and I quickly produced some disinfectant and a bandage from my bag. It was a small gesture, but it changed something. White medicine had arrived in the village, and the next cut and the next one came knocking on my door. How did they deal with some scrapes and cuts before I arrived? Would the presence of my box of Band-Aids prevent me from ever knowing?

A few days later, the 9-year-old son, who had a swollen toe, underwent a traditional treatment that left me trembling in my room. He was restrained by three adults (including his mother), while a fourth heated a rock in the fire and applied it to his foot. He screamed and flailed and cried and pleaded and they did it again. I was appalled. I wanted to run out and stop them. I wanted to put his foot in cold water. Instead, I remained in my room and ruminated over his torment and mine. As he cried in the night on his cot in the courtyard just outside my door, I wondered if I should slip out and offer him a painkiller. I was here to watch and learn, not to

interfere, but I was also here because I am passionate about alleviating the suffering of children. Did I have a moral obligation to do something for this child? Would my involvement in this incident compromise my ability to have a more lasting influence later on? I faced the same dilemma when I witnessed children being caned by a volunteer teacher a few weeks later. As a researcher, even a participant one, I chose to confront less so that I could observe more.

The very concept of participation raises other interesting questions. Was my goal to live like the people in the village? The population of Kitoe has been sleeping on mats on cement floors, eating pounded yam and drinking questionable water for generations. It became obvious within days that I would be making some adjustments if I were to survive. I decided I could not live “like” these people in every way, but I could live “with” them and share their daily routine. Even this proved to be more problematic than I expected as my personal values were confronted in many ways through that “daily routine.” There was no waste management in the village, for example, and all garbage, including plastic and metal, was thrown on the ground. I worked within a social system based on gender inequality. Children were at the bottom of the social order. Aggressive behaviour was the norm. What practices would I copy and where would I draw the line?

My husband and I often said that we were the ones being observed, not only when all eyes were focused on us as we flipped pancakes on a gas burner, but in more subtle ways as we lived our lives within a family and a community. As a couple we shared tasks, dialogued regularly (without yelling) and ate together. We looked for opportunities to be kind. We played with the children. All of this was noticed and remarked upon. And maybe it is just my imagination, but I had the impression our host father grew gentler, funnier, more open to his wife

and children during our stay. Is it possible that modelling as a form of communication could play a more strategic role in community transformation?

In terms of the influence of participant bias on research integrity, I discovered that in the absence of objectivity, openness and flexibility were still essential. The subject I set out to explore was the well-being of children, and my literature review and NGO interviews had already provided me with certain data on the issue, which influenced my focus. Upon arrival in the community, the obvious disparity between the work load of girl and boy children, the treatment of women in the home, and the imbalance between the numbers of girls and boys at the village Junior High School influenced my early direction in questioning, hoping to raise the issue of gender inequality. However, although I personally had a problem with this situation, it was not a priority for the population, including the women and young girls. I had to admit my subjectivity and return to a more open listening approach. This does not mean that gender is not a valid issue that might be addressed by somebody else, but it would not be the focus of my emergent, participatory research.

### **Gathering information**

My journey took me to Kitoe to live in the community and conduct an ethnographic study of the people and their culture. *Who are these people and what do they care about?* In terms of the research I was conducting in the field of child well-being, this translated more specifically into, *What is the condition of children in this society and what, if anything, does the community want to change?* Although there is overlap, the first question relies heavily on observation whereas the second question, which involves identifying issues, requires more interactive data-gathering, including, in this case, interviews and artistic voice.

My husband and I were welcomed into the village where we stayed for 68 days with our host family. I lived as a participant observer in the community for three weeks before beginning interviews (Angrosino, 2007, p. 20). I washed my clothes at the borehole, watered the new mango grove with the women, and interacted with the children. This was an important foundation for trust and cooperation in the research activities. Observations gleaned in this stage also informed the direction of the interviews. As the data collection evolved and I was able to gather more information through the use of an interpreter, the angle of questioning evolved as well, as did my intentional observation of more specific challenges facing children (Angrosino, 2007, p.58). I took notes on my observations of the society in general, and the condition of children in family and social life, in particular, noting as well my own reaction to what I was experiencing (Coffey, 1999, p. 159).

In casual interactions and interviews, language limitations were a challenge as the people of the village speak Gonja, with about 50% of the men and only one woman able to converse in limited English. Almost all consent forms were signed with a thumbprint. I used three different interpreters to help facilitate the semi-structured interviews in the community, all of whom had a tendency to summarize and even editorialize. For this reason I cannot guarantee 100% accuracy in the data gathering, but the fact that all three interpreters corroborated the main themes, many details and even used similar English expressions, reassures me about the integrity of the data.

In the cities of Accra and Tamale, before arriving in Kitoe, I conducted two semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with staff of international NGOs who work in the field of child protection. During my stay in Kitoe, I also conducted two NGO interviews concerning the issues facing children. After analyzing my research data, I e-mailed a questionnaire concerning methods of development communication to 20 NGOs, and received five responses.

In the village, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals and gender homogenous groups ranging up to seven people, for a total of 43 participants. The groupings formed spontaneously as I entered homes and requested to speak with somebody about my research topic. The interpreter's voice was recorded, and recordings were later transcribed for analysis. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers in the local schools: the headmasters of the primary and Junior High Schools (JHS), two voluntary teachers at the primary level and one regular teacher at JHS. These interviews were conducted and recorded in English and transcribed for analysis at a later date.

I lent a digital camera to grade 6 and junior high students, age 14-18, and instructed them to take 10 photos: things they liked about their life in Kitoe and things they would like to change. Each young person was then asked to describe or explain his / her photos, opening the door to further questions and insight into their lives (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 10). I abandoned this technique earlier than expected because the young people were unable to adhere to the instruction of keeping the camera to themselves and not letting other teens or young children "play" with it. There were no other cameras in the village, and the use of this technology created a level of interest and excitement among the children that I did not feel I was able to properly manage.

I conducted another artistic voice activity in the grades 4 and 5 classrooms in the village school. I requested that the students draw a picture of themselves in the future, illustrating what they would like to do as an occupation. The students then showed their drawing to the class, said what it was, and I took a photo. Thirty-four students participated in the activity. The opportunity to use coloured markers on a clean sheet of paper, to draw something of their own choosing, and to have their picture taken all seemed to be factors of privilege and excitement for them. In both

of these exercises with the children, the novelty of the activity and the access to materials and technology overwhelmed the process and potentially compromised the outcome of the activity.

### **Analyzing the data**

Relevant subjects that emerged through observation, conversation or inquiry during the process of data gathering were then explored further in the literature, in targeted interviews and/or by adapting the line of questioning in village interviews and artistic voice activities. Therefore, data gathering and analysis in this inductive process were mutually influential and ongoing.

When villager interviews had been completed and a substantial body of material collected, I undertook an exercise of collating and analyzing the data in order to arrive at an understanding of the context and the community's perception of issues facing children. To do this, research data including observations, impressions and interviews were transcribed in order to facilitate a thematic analysis of the material. I began by coding, including identifying and noting key words and colour-coding themes. I also highlighted seemingly exceptional or incongruous information. I then regrouped the coded material by theme (Crang & Cook, 2007, pp. 134-139) and re-coded the major themes by sub-topics, thus identifying the issues concerning child well-being that were important to members of this community, to other stakeholders, and myself, and searching for a common issue that could be addressed through development communication with a goal of making a change. A rights /well-being approach helped to sift the content in terms of relevance to the purpose of the research.

### **Discoveries**

#### **The Gonja people of Kitoe**

Life in Kitoe feels raw and elemental. It is a context of survival, characterized by primary needs and very basic skills. Suffering and pain are expected. People scold and yell at each other, and slapping around the head is common as a means of contact and communication. Life is lived from day to day, with little sense of time, planning or organization. The presence of animals in and outside the houses underlines a sense of proximity to nature. It is hard to evaluate the impact of the harsh environment and extreme heat on the habits and mentality of the residents, but they are inescapable. My husband I often said it was a miracle that children could survive until their fifth birthday, but those who did seemed indestructible. Lack of education and lack of contact with information and communication technology and mass media leave the residents isolated and ill-informed.

I belong to an individualistic society, where human beings are treated as separate entities with equal rights and autonomy is valued (Moemeka, 1998, p. 122). Ramatu, on the other hand, belongs to this communalist culture, where there is little recognition of individuals (Agulanna, 2010, p. 288; Boykin, 2013, p. 411). The West African axiom “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am” represents well how a person’s identity belongs to the whole (Boykin, 2013, p. 410). In a communalist culture “the supremacy of the community is culturally and socially entrenched, society is hierarchically ordered, life is sacrosanct, and religion is a way of life” (Moemeka, 1998, p. 124). A web of interdependency is valued over autonomy (Nwosu, 2009, p. 167). Maintaining relationships is a priority, more so than taking care of people. Life is lived in open spaces and open compounds, where neighbours, children and animals wander and interact freely, as if every creature, including humans, is part of an ecosystem. The social hierarchy is clearly defined and authority is not questioned (Moemeka, 1998, p. 129; Nwosu, 2009, p. 169). There is an ever-present element of intimidation that ensures the status quo. The chief is the head

of the village. He answers to the paramount chief of the East Gonja tribe, located in nearby Salaga. The elders support the chief's authority and carry their own to a lesser degree. These are male roles. Men own the land and the houses. They may have several wives. Our host stated the obvious: "women could never have power." Older people should be revered and served by younger people (Moemeka, 1998, p. 131). None of this is random. Responsibility is a recurring theme that works in both directions. "In carrying out his obligations, the individual expects his community to reciprocate by providing him with the needed security and protective shield" (Agulanna, 2010, p. 293). Kitoe is safe and peaceful, relatively free of criminal activity, with a strong spirit of cooperation and sense of belonging.

In terms of communication practices, people do not converse in the ways we do. The use of words is limited as is typical for a "high context" communication environment, where messages are understood through non-verbal codes such as actions and body language (Moemeka, 1998, p. 125, Gudykunst, 1983, p. 50) and it is up to the listener to understand rather than the speaker to make him or herself clear (Nwosu, 2009, p. 174). I got the sense that there was not a lot of explaining to do anyway. It's as if the play is written, the script is ingrained, and people basically play their parts. Verbal agreements are regularly repeated, misunderstood and misapplied, making it challenging to arrange for a ride into town with a villager on his motorcycle, especially if the pick-up spot was different than the drop-off. In my experience, verbal communication is not prioritized in problem solving and conflict resolution. Threats are used regularly and although they have the effect of underscoring the instruction, they are also often laughed off. Words of encouragement and compliments are rarely spoken (Moemeka, 1998, p. 134).

This is a group of people resistant to change. There is one way to cook, one way to wash, and one way to greet. There is comfort in the familiar, the traditional (Bessette, 2004, p. 44). Questioning does not come naturally. There is a sense of fatalism (Nwosu, 2009, p. 173) which is also expressed in religious language as this Muslim community talks regularly about submitting to the will of God. There is no separation between the secular and spiritual (Moemeka, 1998, p. 131). Reverence and even worship of ancestors also plays an important role. Graves are prominent in and outside of village compounds and the yearly “festival,” the highlight of the social calendar, is in fact a four day celebration to commemorate the dead.

Life is slow in Kitoe, no doubt due in part to the extreme heat, but also connected to their perception of time, which is unlimited and flexible. Few people have watches. Many do not know their age. The day, according to their greetings, is divided into three undefined parts – morning, afternoon and evening (we went by *hot*, *hotter* and *dark!*) – but there is little scheduling or planning. The future is a vague concept which does not usually extend beyond “tomorrow next.” Time in this context is cyclical, rather than linear. It is based on a natural pattern of crops and seasons, of life and death, and of repetition (Nwosu, 2009, p. 171).

### **“We need help”**

A recurring theme in the community interviews was the need for help. The expectation for a handout was high, and ideas for innovation, involvement, or entrepreneurship were low (Leurs, 1996, p. 60). Although the request for help was often formulated in financial terms, the general feeling of powerlessness was pervasive. I often opened the interview with the question, “What is good about life here, in Kitoe?” The most common answer was, “We suffer. We need help.” Although I tried to repeat the question to solicit a positive answer, one respondent only

repeated their collective need for help. When I made the remark to the interpreter that I was trying to find out his view of the advantages, she reiterated the obvious, “They just want help.”

In response to a question about possible improvements for the life of his children, one man asked me his own question: “How many days have you been here in this community? You have seen the suffering for yourself. So we think that we need help.” Another offered a few suggestions, “We need help. We are in poverty. If there is help there will be development...If we get help from government, district assembly, this would help us.” Not one respondent offered ideas about ways individuals or the community could work to ensure the well-being of their children.

It is also evident that expectations were high in terms of a financial contribution as people told me directly that they were hoping for money, either from me personally, or from whatever contacts I had that I could solicit upon my return to Canada. In two different interviews, two different interpreters told me, “They don’t have money. So they need your help.”

A programming director for an NGO working in the area, and native of Northern Ghana, helped put things in perspective. “If you look at the history of NGO work in Ghana, it is purely service delivery.... If they see a white person, they think that the person is coming with all the goodies, so it is an entrenched practice.” He believes that this attitude is changing as NGOs work increasingly in partnership with communities with a focus on participation and empowerment. “They have what it takes to get themselves out of their present situation, but they expect help from the outside.” This learning informed my focus on helping the community identify what they were able to undertake themselves. According to Bessette (2004), “The first step on the road to development is ... the people’s conviction that they can change things for the better, their refusal

to be the permanent victims of any situation, and the emergence of a sense of self-confidence” (p. 17). It would be important to address this sense of helplessness.

### **Place of the child**

Having children is expected and births are celebrated in Kitoe. New babies are welcomed into the village with a traditional naming ceremony and accompanying party. When they outgrow being strapped to their mother’s back, however, children are left to wander throughout the village with little supervision or protection in an environment that presents hazards such as sharp objects, fire, ditches, animals, and other stick-wielding children. They are victims (and perpetrators) of physical and verbal aggression. Their physical and emotional suffering elicits very little adult attention. Crying may provoke punishment. Their needs for attention, affection and stimulation are not considered. In 10 weeks, I did not see an adult hold or hug a child over four years of age. In fact, even though we were known for hand-holding and high-fiving with the children, if we raised our hand too quickly, they ducked.

Children are everywhere, but they are ignored – not seen and not heard. They belong to everybody and to nobody. This pervasive neglect was summarized by my interpreter when I asked her about Ramatu who was wandering alone, crying. “It’s like that here,” she said. “They keep their babies in their compounds until they can take care of themselves, four or five years old, like this one. After, they don’t care.” In this context it is not surprising that two NGO respondents raised the issue that children have little or no voice in the decisions that affect them (see also Twum-Danso, 2009, p. 421). In general these observations are personal and subjective, and further research on the social structure and role of children would certainly contribute to a greater understanding of the context within which we are seeking change.

Children do have value when it comes to contributing to the family and community, which they do at a very early age. The 5 and 6-year old girls in our family helped with grinding ground nuts, sweeping, carrying small amounts of water and running errands. The size of the loads and the number of tasks increases until at about 14 a child is expected to be able to assume the workload of an adult (Twum-Danso, 2009, p. 424; Hashim, 2007, p. 914), which for girls includes washing pots, sweeping the compound inside and out, carrying water and firewood, pounding fufu, and assisting their mother in preparing the fire and cooking the meals. Boys, I was told, start helping out on the farm at around age 10. Not only is this practical assistance needed to operate the farm and the household, but it is considered necessary for the proper socialization of the Ghanaian child (Lawrance, 2010, p. 72).

As I got to know the families in the village, I discovered how difficult it was to track how many children they had, where they lived, with whom and why. It was in fact very common for people to send their children of senior high school age – boys and girls – to live with a relative in the city to pursue their education. Many village girls were also sent away when they were much younger to strengthen family bonds and/or to do housework for another family. Kinship fostering plays an important role in Ghanaian society, and although there is much literature there is little consensus on its impact on children or its evolving purpose. It is worth noting here that the notion of family in this culture is not nuclear, but extends to close and distant relatives (Kuyini, Alhassan, Tollerud, Weld & Haruna, 2009, p. 441) and that even the words to identify brother, uncle or cousin are sometimes used interchangeably.

Generally speaking, kinship fostering “involves transferring predominantly female children from their natal family to the household of another extended family member” (Laird, 2011, p. 441). Some of the reasons identified for the practice are: reinforcing the collective

responsibility of child-rearing (Tetteh, 2011, p. 221); re-distributing the costs and benefits of having children (Hashim, 2007, p. 919), solidifying family bonds, (Hashim, 2007, p. 919; Laird, 2011, p. 441; Kuyini, Alhassan, Tollerud, Weld & Haruna, 2009, p. 441), girl child domestic labour (Tetteh, 2011, p. 229; Laird, 2011, p. 441); the incapacity of parents through illness, death or divorce (Hashim, 2007, p. 919), and improved educational opportunities (Hashim, 2007, p.922). The mothers consistently told me that children in fostering situations were not treated fairly, but it was still the best option if they had a hope of completing high school. One NGO worker describes his own situation: “Because you are a girl child, your parents have to send you to a relative. My sister’s daughter, she has to send her to me... We need to educate about this issue. These girls are not treated equally in many cases.” In this context it was not alarming that two mothers asked us to take their children home with us. They did not seem desperate, but rather believed they had found an opportunity for their advancement.

More disturbing than family fostering is the practice of young teenagers, girls especially, leaving rural villages to go to the towns and cities to trade. One NGO representative said that in many cases, the girls were working for a little extra cash to buy the pots and bowls they needed to be able to get married (see also Hashim, 2007, p. 924), so they went to the city market to become head-load carriers – kayayoo. Young girls carry the purchases of shoppers or hawk their own wares, from fish to socks, in the streets or in the market. “Women traders use kayayoos to move their goods between markets or purchasing points and transport facilities,” so that head porters actually become a means of transportation in the informal economy (Apt, Agarwal, Turner, Kwakye, Grieco & Attah, 1997, p. 246). They sleep on the streets and are preyed upon by male “benefactors” who give them a few Ghana cedis for sexual favours. One mother in Kitoe told me that her daughter had gone to the city to sell so that she could add a few dollars to the

mother's few dollars, and maybe she could go to high school. "It's risky, but I don't know what to do. If I had money, I wouldn't send my children to do kayayoo – they would just attend."

This drive for children's education is a recurring theme which actually supports the premise that the experience of the child is not valued as much as the outcome for the family and society. Education, I came to understand, was not a process, but a product. The goal of education was the ability to support the parents and other community members. Children are seen as an investment, a retirement plan, and completing their education is a major factor in their ability to provide (Boakye-Boaten, 2010, p.108; Lawrance, 2010, p. 72). One participant put it this way: "If the child is more educated and gets work, he or she can take care of their parents, their food, health, everything. That is why we are now serious; we want to invest in children's education." A 17-year-old boy in grade 9 told me, "If I have money I will help my brothers and sisters get an education so they can get a job too."

### **Role of gender**

The gender imbalance in terms of work for both children and adults was striking in our host family. The mother worked from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., often carrying heavy loads or bent over in front of a fire. She sometimes rested for a couple of hours in the heat of the afternoon, in or behind the compound. The father went to the farm three or four times a week, for up to four hours in the early morning. We saw him wash his clothes once when his wife refused. He sometimes drove his motorcycle to the borehole and returned with jugs filled with water for us. We did not see him perform any other physical tasks. His afternoons were spent resting under the mango tree, and then participating in a gathering of the elders before supper. He watched television in the evening. In our home as in most of the village, the young boys were exempt from household chores. This family represents well the research that demonstrates that in

Northern Ghana, as in most sub-Saharan African societies, women do more work than men (FAO, 2012).

However, what was even more jarring in this situation was a fairly generalized denial of the disparity. Although some respondents recognized that women and girls worked harder, many saw no difference and some, especially men, responded that men worked harder than the women. Young girls perceived their workload as normal, and even a source of pride. One teenager took a photo of the woodpile outside her home in the context of our photo inquiry exercise. I asked, “Does this represent something you like or don’t like about life in Kitoe?” “I like.” “But you have to carry this wood on your head all the way from the farm. You don’t like that hard work, do you?” “I like.” (I admit to biased questioning in this instance.)

Although many of the women in the village had been kept at home while their brothers went to school, this seemed to be changing. The trend was for both genders to attend school in Kitoe, although the state of this “equality” was still fragile, as indicated by some of the interview responses. I was told that men still believed that the place of the girl was in the kitchen, or that investing in a girl’s education was a waste of resources because she would marry and then belong to another family (Tetteh, 2011, p. 228). On the other hand, others mentioned that girls were more likely to think of their parents in the future, so that girl child education was very important. Unfortunately, according to an NGO respondent, even in families and communities that support the education of girls, the extra requirements in terms of housework and family care may compromise the ability of girls to pursue their education.

In Kitoe Junior High School, the student attendance averaged 25 boys and 12 girls. Based on what I had learned and observed to that point, I assumed this was an indication of a high drop-out rate for girls, and so I formulated my question in that way. The answer I received to “Why do

girls drop out?” was generally the same: aside from the possibility of early marriage practiced by other tribes, 11 respondents suggested that the problem for Gonjas was teenage pregnancy. “The girls are unable to do a job and get something, so they go alongside young men to get some money and they get pregnant, so they are unable to continue schooling and they drop out. More girls drop out than boys.” One person’s answer took the issue in another direction when she said that most of the girls from the Gonja side of the village chose to go to Junior High School in the town of Salaga rather than Kitoe, which for her was enough to explain the imbalance. I was unable to verify this comment but did not observe an influx of young girls back into the community on weekends or holidays when many boys came home.

### **Poverty**

The people of Kitoe are subsistence farmers, cultivating mainly yams, cassava and maize. The little cash that is generated from selling their surplus is generally used to buy food staples – oil, tomato paste, and dried fish – but no fresh fruits or vegetables. The free-range goats and chickens in the village provide an occasional piece of meat to add to the stew. There seem to be a few cedis (Ghanaian currency) circulating around the village as people buy small produce from each other but they are not really making any profit. New money is not being injected into the economy. There are, however, cell phones, televisions and motorcycles in the village. These belong to the men.

Poverty was referenced in every individual and group interview with adult respondents as they spoke of their lack of food and clothing, lack of cash, the lack of work and trade opportunities, and the primitive farming practices. Poverty was blamed for lack of access to education, especially Senior High School and beyond, where school fees are required.

### **Education**

Education was by far the dominant theme that emerged from community and stakeholder interviews, as summarized by a villager: “Formal education is the best investment you can think of.” Another person expressed it this way: “Fifteen years ago, children went to the farm, but now, children don’t like going to the farm so they will have to work, so we are doing all we can to invest in our children’s education.” This was borne out by the artistic activity conducted at the school. When I asked children to draw how they saw themselves in the future, there were many pictures of police officers, soldiers (“soja”) and teachers, a few nurses and a driver, but not one child drew him/herself as a farmer. The older students who participated in the photo activity and interview had ambitions such as teacher, bank manager, accountant, doctor, and professional football player. One young man interviewed with the adults said he wanted to be a veterinarian and his brother wanted to be an electrician.

Despite the emphasis on education, villagers were divided on the quality of education offered at the village schools. The interpreter made the remark that many of the people do not have the capacity to evaluate the school. They feed and dress their children in the morning and send them off. They trust they are getting a good education. Others, including the village chief, expressed their dissatisfaction: “It’s never okay with the school here, because whenever they write exams or anything, they always fail. The students are not improving.” Whether or not they verbalized their dissatisfaction, at least 19 respondents spoke of sending their children to schools outside of the village, many of them of primary or JHS age.

My own observations of both the primary and junior high confirmed that the quality of education in the village was an issue of child rights and well-being in this community. The major challenges that I observed in the local schools were the following: the poor quality of teaching; lack of teachers; poor teacher performance, including lateness and absenteeism; over-use of

voluntary teachers; lack of parental involvement; chaotic environment; inadequate facilities (filthy, broken buildings); absence of materials; the practice of caning; teacher-centred rather than child-centred education; rote learning, no creativity or critical thinking; no regard for the importance of early childhood education; little communication between parents, teachers and school board. These observations are confirmed by this Unicef report on the situation of children in Ghana: "...A major challenge is to ensure that children complete primary education and do so with competencies needed to succeed in life. Educational materials are still needed, and teacher training and making schools safe, healthy and gender-sensitive are all-important" (Unicef, 2011, p. 2).

Respondents emphasized their financial challenges as well as the number of teachers. "The children are not improving due to lack of teachers, lack of trained teachers." There were four regular (trained) teachers for eight primary classes, from Pre-K to grade 6, although one was missing due to a motorcycle accident. There were also two volunteer teachers from the community who had regular classes, and two occasional volunteers who shared the grade 4 class. The fact that the village was remote was offered as a reason why teachers were not attracted to Kitoe, as was the lack of housing. "We don't have teachers, no bungalows. No buildings for teachers so the teachers won't come."

A few people were also aware of poor teacher performance. Teacher absenteeism is a major problem at both schools in the village, as it is throughout the country. The issue was addressed by the Minister of Education at a press conference on March 1 (while I was in Kitoe), where she said there was a 27% absentee rate among teachers and vowed to find solutions (Citifmonline.com, 2014). One person stated it simply, "Teachers are not always there. Some days they don't come." An NGO respondent explained that even when teachers were on the job,

their performance was often under par: “Because they also go through the same system, they go back to the communities to teach, they repeat what they were taught, what they were taught was not the best, but they repeat the same thing.” Another NGO participant remarked, “Teachers used to be our best allies – agents of change in the communities. It seems it’s no longer the case.” A 13-year-old girl who loves to read and has dreams of becoming a doctor or a nurse said, “I want the teachers to be teaching us hard so we could be better.”

Respondents also remarked on the inadequate furniture and lack of materials, including textbooks, chalk and teaching supplies at both primary and secondary levels. One secondary student was clear about improvements to the school: “We need better buildings, lights (electricity), toilets and computers.”

The issue of lack of parental involvement was raised by both teachers and parents. One mother admitted that she was unable to help her child with her homework because she herself had never gone to school. A teacher told me that “they (parents) are supposed to visit the school from time to time to see what is happening. Only one parent came to the school to see how his children are doing, but the rest did not come.” Another one said, “They don’t visit the school and they don’t check their textbooks to see if the children are doing their homework or not.”

Inadequate schooling emerged as the child well-being issue that the community members cared most about based on our conversations, and confirmed by my own observations. I would share my research findings by reflecting them back to the community, in an effort to identify one or two tangible needs related to education and the community’s capacity to address them.

### **Community conversation**

#### **Communication channels and challenges**

Communication at a community level takes many forms in Kitoe, both for the transmission of culture and the relaying of information. Typically in African villages, life events – births, weddings, funerals – are opportunities for gathering, singing, dancing, drama, storytelling (Salm & Falola, 2002, p.8; White, 2009, p.8) and sharing news. The quickest and most reliable network for the spread of information seems to be an informal one, which I suspect is controlled by the women, who filter what is relevant. Everybody knows when somebody goes to town or fights with her sister-in-law. On the other hand, nobody in the community was aware that the grade one teacher was out for weeks because of a motorcycle accident, and had not been replaced.

The communication of information could also be more open and direct. When I was ready to discuss initial research results with the community, our host made the announcement at the mango grove when the villagers had gathered to weed and water. The involvement of our host is significant, as the person generally perceived as managing our presence, and also the village elder responsible for calling meetings. He had a whistle for this purpose, which would indicate the beginning of a general gathering.

NGOs that I consulted concerning means of communication with communities emphasized the role of program officers engaging in conversations with the chief, elders and other decision-makers, village gatherings, or training sessions with selected individuals or families. One NGO representative outlined some of the play and artistic techniques used to encourage the contribution of children. Another group relied heavily on modelling in the field of gender equality, by training “gender model families” to demonstrate a more equitable lifestyle to other members of the community. Although some NGOs effectively used local radio, this would

not be relevant in Kitoe where media and internet technology had not yet been widely adopted by the residents.

Some of the challenges I observed in terms of communication channels in Kitoe were finding ways to involve women and children, verifying and validating that messages have been received and understood, and the unstable state of the internet and electricity services when communication with other stakeholders was desirable.

### **Discussing the findings**

I worked through my host to communicate with the chief in order to call a village meeting where research findings were presented to all villagers present, not only those who actively participated in data collection. A challenge to accept responsibility and become involved in their own development was presented in the form of a skit performed by the children. Individuals and the community as a whole were invited to consider the area and extent of their involvement in change (Bessette, 2004, p. 47). The context of a village gathering under a mango tree provided a friendly and informal setting for an initial presentation of research findings and challenge for ongoing participation, but it was not conducive to decision-making and strategizing for several reasons: this community is normally directed by the chief and the elders who sit together every afternoon to make decisions about the direction of the village, so that participation of the women, children, and other men is not a natural context for the process; the facilitation of the process by a woman would not be taken seriously or as binding; the information was new and change does not come quickly here; the non-negligible presence of a white outsider would have short-term influence that would not necessarily inform long-term transformation; and, as my host pointed out, as the interpreter and co-facilitator of the event, “the women want to go cook supper now.” That was the ultimate bell signaling the end of our discussion.

The meeting began with a song performed by the women. I was not expecting this, but I understood that the people were signaling their involvement from the outset. I then opened my presentation with a verbal overview of positive aspects of life in Kitoe, the aspirations of their children, the challenges they were facing generally in terms of development and economic progress, and the difficulties related to education. The specific issues that had been identified were summarized in one or two words, written on separate sheets of paper, read off one by one in English and Gonja and held by children to allow the participants more time to absorb the information. At this point it seemed essential to me to address this issue of powerlessness if we were to realize the goal of the community improving the situation of its children.

To accomplish this, I called on the children to present a skit that we had prepared together in the days preceding the meeting. Doing a skit was my idea, and I provided the basic storyline. A local young man ran the practices and the presentation of the skit, and worked with the children to integrate their suggestions. This was, admittedly, more directed than emergent, both in message and form, although not totally disconnected from the African tradition of storytelling and symbolism (White, 2009, p. 23). The imagery that I used was drawn directly from their daily lives and evoked positive audience response.

The skit was presented in two parts: The parable of the foolish farmer and the wise farmer. This is the story as I had summarized it in English:

*The foolish farmer.* A farmer wants to grow yams so that someday he can harvest them to eat and sell. He goes to his field and throws his yam seed on the ground, and returns home. He prays and asks God to give him yams so he can feed his family. At harvest time, he returns to his field to find that none of his yams survived. He goes away feeling very sad.

*The wise farmer.* A farmer wants to grow yams so that someday she can harvest them to eat and sell. She goes to her field and prepares yam mounds. Then she plants the seed. And she prays for rain. She returns to chase away the animals. She returns to her field and removes the weeds. Her yams grow and grow. At harvest time, she brings home many big yams to feed her family. She is very very happy.

The goal of the skit was to incite people to evaluate the problems at school and choose a few elements that they could change – like the wise farmer planting and weeding – without extra finances or outside help (Bessette, 2004, p. 58). The skit was a hit. People laughed, clapped, and our host father even tried to help chase away the goats.

At this point in the community discussion, I returned to the words on paper in an attempt to make the application and solicit feedback on community and/or individual priorities. As I passionately described the risks and perils involved in almost 200 primary school children arriving long before their teachers to play and fight in a facility containing broken furniture, and broken cement, I received no reaction. My interpreter did not know what I meant by dangerous. Even though he understood the word, he did not see its relevance to this situation. I had often seen the children hitting each other with sticks, pushing, slapping heads, with the youngest crying on the ground. This was a flashing red light for me, but not for the community. My hope of encouraging some parent participation in adult supervision was not going to happen.

The related problem that emerged as more troubling to the villagers, however, was the simple fact that teachers were not present when school started. Teacher lateness, absenteeism and lack of diligence had been observed by certain community members or reported by their

children. This level of irresponsibility that was putting their children's "education" at risk was important to these people.

In the context of the village meeting, I highlighted other topics that had emerged from the research and were noted on the signs, eliciting varying reactions, including: the importance of supporting voluntary teachers in non-financial ways, the possibility of being clean and neat even without new uniforms (an obsession for teachers and parents alike), increased parental involvement by helping with homework and visiting the school, possible improvement of facilities through furniture repairs and general cleaning, painting, and building repairs. One person spoke up and said that he had been to school himself, and could help his children with their homework. Somebody else offered to weed and clean up the grounds around the school. As I closed the session with a charge to continue discussing these issues in their families, with the elders, and with the PTA, a village elder responded by saying that if you are sleeping, and somebody comes to wake you up in your sleep because he has something to tell you, he is truly a friend. Although the meeting came to a close with no plan for next steps or follow-up, the door had been opened to continue discussion, with the possibility of framing it with the wise farmer metaphor.

This conversation underscored for me the difference in our set of values. I was reacting to the issues as they had a direct impact on the children. The villagers were more interested in making sure nothing inhibited their children from getting a diploma. Rather than introduce new information or a different perspective, I chose to listen to them, feed back to them the information they had given me, and assist them in making changes according to their own values and priorities.

### **Making changes**

**Identifying issues**

In the following days, I encouraged dialogue with our host, who was also president of the Parent Teacher Association. Teacher absenteeism emerged from our discussion as a serious concern and something he felt the community could get involved in. He suggested it would be possible to set up a schedule and take turns monitoring teacher attendance and punctuality. I mentioned the potential availability of a woman in the community who was a retired teacher (she had told me during our interview together that she was bored and looking for a project). He acknowledged that I could speak with her. This woman confirmed to me her own serious work ethic and presence on the job when she was a teacher. She also suggested that the community could set up a system of volunteers to visit the school and record teacher attendance. This spontaneous agreement from two community leaders signaled to me the viability of developing a simple plan to address one of the problems at the school.

Our host also mentioned that one of the impediments to teacher accountability in the past was the accusation that community members who asked questions were being mean and acting inappropriately. Teachers occupy a high rank in the social order and are generally seen to be above questioning. In this context, support from a higher authority was in order and the Ghana Education Service (GES) Circuit Supervisor would be the appropriate person. Taking the issue to her and soliciting her support for community monitoring of teacher attendance was an appropriate example of asking for outside help, like the wise farmer praying for rain.

**Planning and implementing change activities**

I had met the circuit supervisor during one of her visits to the school. She was overly friendly with me and did nothing to hide her expectation that the white woman would be generous in helping the school. We met again at a PTA meeting that took place just before our

community discussion about research results. She gave me her phone number and asked me to be in touch. I realized that I could use my influence to advocate on behalf of the community and open up direct communication with the GES authorities. The PTA president and I went to town to meet with the circuit supervisor (CS). (The retired teacher was unable to come because she was responsible for cooking dinner for her brother.) During our conversation with the CS, I told the story of the foolish and wise farmers. She expressed enthusiasm about the “parable” approach, and offered an accurate application to the schooling situation in Kitoe. The meeting was positive, with both the PTA president and the CS committing to certain actions regarding school improvements. Most importantly, the CS promised her support to community monitoring of teachers.

This meeting took place during the week of end-of-term exams at the schools, followed by Easter and a three-week holiday. We spoke with the retired teacher who agreed to work on setting up a system for community involvement in monitoring the teachers, to be implemented when school re-opened after the break. My husband and I left the community a few days later.

Although teacher absenteeism stood out as a community priority, other issues were also addressed in varying ways following the village meeting. I printed a one-page summary of the wise farmer approach with a list of challenges that parents could consider, such as giving their children breakfast and helping them with their homework, to be distributed as we visited families to say good-bye. I raised the issue of lack of training for volunteer teachers with the circuit supervisor, who assured me that they would be included in all teacher training workshops moving forward. (One volunteer teacher had told me, “If they offered to train me, I would run to it!”) When a district sanitation supervisor visited the village the following week to encourage households to install toilet facilities, I pointed out that there were no toilets at the Junior High

School. He expressed alarm and promised to follow up. I also presented the video of the farmer skit to a SEND Ghana representative working in the Salaga region, to demonstrate a possible communication approach to encourage increased community responsibility in other areas.

From a research perspective, my journey ends here. I tested the strengths and limits of communication in the first stages of a development scenario. I spent time getting to know the Gonja people of Kitoe; I listened to their concerns about their own lives and those of their children; and I attempted to work with them to identify some small way to improve their situation. Then I left the community before they put their plan into action. Taking the initiative to make some changes at the school will be in the hands of the population, where, like the good farmer planting his yams, the responsibility ultimately lies.

### **Looking back, looking forward**

#### **Journey outward to Kitoe**

**It's never all good or all bad.** Kitoe, Ghana is a long way from Montreal, Canada and different, so different than anything I had ever experienced. At first glance, children in Kitoe seem to be abandoned. With time, I realized they belong, not just to two parents but to a web of extended family and community members, and to the rhythms of the nature that surrounds them. There is no sign of isolation, loneliness, or existential questioning of personal identity in Kitoe. On the other hand, there is little regard for individual value or rights, especially for women and girls. And although life is rough for children, there are glimpses of softness: a mommy covering her little girl from head to toe in skin cream, a father chuckling at his children's after-supper antics in the dark courtyard of the compound. The longer I stayed, the more I noticed the nuances.

**Children are the experts on childhood.** I learned many things from my little friends in Kitoe. The line between work and play can be happily blurred. (I believe childhood ends in Kitoe when a girl stops singing while she sweeps the compound.) Children of different ages *can* socialize well together. We can do much with very little, including spending an afternoon playing with a stick and a tin can. There is fun without technology. And life is good when you know where to look, or how to look: the goats, the flowers, the ducks, the old aunts, the toddlers, friends and even white friends (from photo activity).

**All hail the queens.** A final word about Kitoe: *women*. They are strong in body, mind and character. They have all my admiration and respect. How I wish tomorrow could be different for them.

### **Journey through a PDC process**

**Understanding requires involvement.** I like what Lewis and Russell (2011) say when they write about ethnography as “an attitude toward ‘being there’ sufficient to experience the mundane and sacred, brash and nuanced aspects of socio-cultural life and, through observations, encounters and conversations, to come to an understanding of it” (p. 400). My experience of “being there,” although brief, was essential. If I had not lived with the people and caught a glimpse of the underpinnings of their culture, I could still be trying to fix something that they do not conceive as broken. My time in Kitoe convinced me of the importance of taking the time to get to know the people in order to understand the values behind the behaviours.

**Development issues are interrelated.** Interacting with people and attempting to understand their culture confirmed for me the complexity of behaviour and social norms and the danger of trying to address one particular issue in isolation. The factors that influence the condition of children are interconnected and determined by causes that have repercussions in

other areas as well. This does not mean that we cannot participate in development without a deep understanding of all the cultural nuances, but that we should continue to listen and learn and be willing to adapt our approach at every stage of a development effort.

**An entirely grassroots approach is not enough.** In the present research, I experimented with a grassroots participatory approach, based on the determination that the only value-add that I would bring to the situation was in terms of communication methods and facilitation of stakeholder conversations and initiatives. I attempted to work with the knowledge and motivational factors already present in the community and the community's own capacity to organize themselves and implement change. The results were both messy and instructive. The community was unanimous in citing poverty as their main problem with the majority expressing the opinion that a hand-out was the best solution. This was not what I had in mind. They wanted to be rescued which, among other problems, is incompatible with empowerment.

**Communication belongs in a development framework.** Although good development initiatives are based on the perceptions and needs of the local culture, this is not the whole story. Development is called for because there are certain elements of the local situation that are negatively impacting the quality of life of community members. Social change presupposes the possibility of discovering and addressing these issues. In addition to the participation of the community through communication, the contribution of new information, skills, insights, values and resources is also necessary, and situates the process in a broader development framework. Communication plays the role of giving a voice to the community, facilitating dialogue, enabling the ongoing collaboration of a broad range of stakeholders, and influencing attitudes and behaviours to support the goals of social change.

**Change involves addressing power inequities.** In our little village I was faced with the reality of remaining within a hierarchical, male-dominated system while endeavoring to promote change to the inequities it represents. Our host made it clear that he was my entry into the community and that I should go through him to gain contact with others or initiate any kind of activity. If I did not work through the powers-that-be, nothing would happen. If I did, nothing would change. For real transformation to take place in areas such as gender equality and child rights, systemic injustices need to be addressed and the disenfranchised need to be heard (White, 2004, p. 21; Bojer, 2000, p. 23). Empowerment alone cannot solve these problems, and could in fact exacerbate them. Further research is warranted on the place of children in this culture and the implication for their rights.

**Modelling is a communication tool.** Not only is communication essential to every stage of the development process but it is unavoidable. We communicate by who we are and our example may influence others, especially where relationships and social traditions are concerned. I'm not naïve enough to believe that people in Kitoe have begun to hold their children's hands, or play with them, or that husbands and wives eat together or travel together, but at least they know that the sky will not fall if they do, because they have seen us do it, and survive. I believe the greatest change will come when the younger generation observes Ghanaian families where women and children are valued. The potential of "preaching by example" presents an interesting opportunity for development and communication specialists to explore.

### **Journey into myself and towards others**

**Life can be rough, really rough.** The starkness of life in Kitoe – the struggles, the pain and the joys – moved me in unexpected ways. When they burned the foot of our young boy with a scorching rock, when our host father asked me if he could slap his wife (I said *no*), when the

volunteer teacher systematically caned a dozen kids for arriving after the bell (he himself arrived 30 minutes late), when our 14-year-old girl was beaten by her older sister, when they sliced our 6-year-old's swollen finger with a razor blade, and laughed ... I felt fear and anger and compassion and a deep sense of being lost in another world. If I ever had any illusions about emotional detachment, they evaporated like a drop of water on our scorching tin roof.

**It's about people.** The open neighbourhood, the live-in grannies, the solidarity between children of all ages, the honesty and the hospitality were all qualities that drew me in and made me appreciate the simplicity of this life, these people. And there it is: the people. While I was there, the women chose a Gonja name for me – they called me Bichapor, “she likes everybody.” And despite the fact that this was not true with all of the people all of the time, I know what they meant. I did like them – sincerely, warmly, and with deep admiration. The people of Kitoe taught me that friendship doesn't always need words, that a good laugh covers a multitude of sins, that human beings are deeply resilient, and that we all need each other.

**For Ramatu.** This journey was an opportunity for me to combine my love of people, my passion for justice, and my interest in the field of communication for development and social change. It is my dearest hope that in some small way the sharing of our lives and the very embryonic work that was begun will contribute to making life just a little bit better for Ramatu, her aunts and uncles, and all the precious children of Kitoe. I have attempted to support changes for them. They have succeeded in changing me.

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