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The Life of a Child: Learning, Imitating, and Interacting Among Children in the Northern and Ashanti Regions

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School for International Training
Study Abroad – Ghana
Social Transformation and Cultural Expression
Spring 2012

**The Life of a Child: Learning, Imitating, and Interacting
Among Children in the Northern and Ashanti Regions**

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Abstract

1. Title: The Life of a Child: Learning, Imitating, and Interacting Among Children in the Northern and Ashanti Regions
2. Author: Annie Alexander (Alexaac09@juniata.edu; Juniata College)
3. Objective: The objectives of this project were three fold
 - i. To observe and record children in communities of both the Northern and Ashanti regions.
 - ii. To record and understand how children grow, learn their role, and interact within these communities
 - iii. To explore the similarities and differences both regions of Ghana
4. **Methodology:** During the time of independent study, I split my time between the Northern and Ashanti Regions. I lived in a village by the name of Gumo outside of Tamale and in the Ashanti Region; I stayed in Benim located near Ashanti Mampong. While my home was in each respective village, I traveled to surrounding areas to expand the scope of my research and provide conclusive evidence. I spent my time among the children observing, learning, and recording their interactions. Living in the village gave me the chance to experience the daily lives and actions of the children. Using participant and non-participant observation engaging in the lives of the kids I produced the majority of my research. I then, both informally and formally interviewed children of all ages, adolescents, parents, and teachers. This age range provided a solid foundation for my findings.
5. **Findings:** The data I collected from the village stays covers a vast amount of children and their interactions- how they care for one another, teach, learn, and play. While Gumo and Benim are incredibly different, there was a striking resemblance between the different worlds and the lives of children. In both places, children were all obedient and gave respect to parents and elders. In general, each child will do what he or she can to prove he or she is “moral” or a good person – a benefit to the community. Additionally, lives of children are very physical and hands on whether it was through interactions with other people or doing work for their families. Furthermore, children learn through imitation of all kinds beginning at a young age. To support my findings I had six formal interviews and formal group questions for primary schoolchildren in p5 and p6 at St. Charles r/c Lwanga Primary outside of Tamale metropolis. I also had a variety of informal interviews with children ranging in age from 4 years old to adults in the communities.
6. **Conclusion:** While riddled with differences the basic lives, games, learning, and roles of children in each village appeared parallel with one another. Being a child in Gumo, Benim, or another village is a life among children emulating the lives of adults and elder peers. Further studies are needed to examine deeper the ways in which children are taught to follow their elders and if they understand the actions, they embody.

Additionally, exploring ways in which children express emotions and feelings they have need to be explored.

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Introduction

“It takes a village to raise a child”- this is a phrase used often among people all over when referring to the growth and development of a child. In the US, it is often used to say that children are too difficult to raise for just one person. However, in Ghana truly the whole village raises the children. More specifically, the children once they are able do much of the child rearing for the vast majority of the day. Throughout urban and rural Ghana, one is met with children in every area performing and executing tasks that seem to be the work of an adult. In urban settings, it is not uncommon to see kids as young as 5 years of age working in their family’s store, doing the washing, running errands, and preparing food for the family. Upon entering a village or rural setting, these responsibilities and abilities are amplified in the children. Their lives are structured around being obedient and fulfilling the responsibilities as well as requests of their elders. After their chores are done, the children are often found spending the majority of the day amongst other peers of varying ages seemingly with no adult in sight.

Thus, in my exploration and observation I became fascinated with the lives of children and their roles in terms of living in the village setting. Talking to and experiencing the day-to-day life of a child was a role unlike one that was expected. From sunrise to sunset, they are busy working to help the family in a variety of different ways. Time is first devoted to fulfilling the role and the duties of the role in the home, and then to school, then time is spent with their peers. All of these instances overlap and intertwine to structure the day of the child.

Furthermore, my aim was to delve into the lives children live and how they come to understand their role. To see through their eyes what it means to be a beneficial member of the community. The children with unspoken reciprocity showed me that when someone gives you something – anything- you repay them in the way that you can. It is interesting however, that

children are not viewed as a part of the community until they are old enough to truly give back. I also came to understand the role of the family and in turn, how it holds the image of the child. While the community creates the rules and roles you follow, the education system has its own set of rules and guidelines to live by.

Observing children in each of these settings at play, in the home, around the village, and at school gave me the ability to see how they learn and use imitation. Imitation is the largest way children learn. It is seen in every aspect of their lives. In play, they imitate future jobs – playing farm, selling imaginary foodstuffs, creating a home out of four sticks- each game serves as a function. However, more importantly children learn how to interact with each other in a positive way when they play the games. In the home children imitate what they witness their parents and older siblings doing to prepare food, clean the home, etc. Around the village children watch as older children and adults, interact with elders copying exactly what they do even if they do not understand the reason behind the actions. In short, they are in a society that is driven by imitation and it creates the backbone of how children learn to understand the world.

In addition to understanding, the world children also learn different ways to express themselves.

Methodology

The drive behind my research was to observe children in a village setting to understand how they fit in the community, what their lives are like, how they are taught, and how they express themselves. To gather information I decided that I must not focus on one village or even one region so I decided to split my stay between the Northern and the Ashanti Regions. During my time, I stayed in Gumo a traditionally Muslim village in the North and Benim – where I had stayed for 12 days earlier in the program- a larger and traditionally Christian village in the Asante Region.

In Gumo, I spent the first few days observing the children and watching how they interacted amongst one another and becoming acclimated to the community getting to know the people I was living amongst for the next couple of weeks. Our first day we went to greet the Chief and elders and tell them of our mission after presenting him with kola nuts - the room erupted in laughter and confusion when I told them I would be studying children. “She is not a child why does she care what the children are doing” one of the elders asked, and thus began the beginning of my research. In Gumo I had several people to help me translate one was an older man Mahama Moses Imoro he was very helpful in accompanying me to interviews when he was free, and if he was not he would send his children. I then decided to go to school with the children for the last few days before holiday vacation. This was beneficial in a variety of ways. At school, I was able to talk with teachers, observe the children I knew amongst their peers, and I was able to talk to whole classrooms of students creating an impromptu focus group. Moreover, I was able to speak with children from four surrounding villages not including Gumo. This gave me an even more broad scale of the children I was meeting. To record my data in the North, I made sure to have my notebook with me at all times so I could jot down what I had seen,

interviews I had, and take note of scenario. Additionally, I brought my camera so I could record visually what I was observing. In Benim, I employed these same kinds of documentations for my evidence.

Traveling back to Benim I expected to find a different kind of village than I had experienced in the North. Although I had been there before I could not tell if my mind was merging, the village stays. Going back to Benim proved to be both drastically different and similar to what I had experienced in the North. While school was already out of session when I arrived, I knew what it was like because I had spent several days observing when I was there in March. In addition, because I had already developed a rapport with many teachers, students, and parents in the village it was easy to gain the connections again. Nana Ama who was our cook while we were here and Mr. Paul both provided me with answers and help in conducting interviews. I was able to see what the life of a child is like when there is not school to attend- thus seeing how children spend their “free time”. Staying in Benim I traveled to Nyinamong and Seniegya two villages in the region. In all of these places, I observed and talked informally with people I came across.

Observation became the bulk of the information I relied on. Observation gave me the ability to witness the children interacting in their natural environment, playing their games, learning and expressing themselves in their own way. While in the focus groups I saw them verbally interact, it was in the real observation did I see how their nonverbal movements played such a crucial role in the behavior of children of all ages. Both the participant and non-participant observation opened my eyes to a different world than that described by the children in school.

In participant observation, I was able to partake in the play the children were doing.

Often I would sit with them in each place casually observing and then once invited or bombarded by the children I would attempt to play on their level learning their games, having my hair played with, playing ball, drawing, anything they were doing I did with them – or at least attempted. Participant observation gave me insight to the lives of the children because once they gained my trust and became comfortable with me they began to play their own games not just the ones they thought I would enjoy. They also began to act more naturally amongst themselves as days passed. There were also difficulties in the participant observation both personal and technical. For one, it was difficult for me to sit back and watch children fight and punch one another as they “played” however, in order to have the observation be of children interacting naturally I had to sit back and watch it happen. Thus providing me with conclusive results of how children interact and the hierarchy involved in relationships. While I did my best to keep the scenario natural, my presence placed a very different light on what children do in an average day. Thus, I tried to keep in mind how my being a part of the interaction played a role in the movements of the children.

To further understand how children acted I did non-participant observation. This helped to compare to my participant observation. In non-participant observation, I would position myself in an area where no one knew I was watching and then spend various amounts of time observing children and how they interact when they believe no one is watching. Outside my window in the mornings, I would awaken and watch the children play alone or follow their mothers, as they were themselves waking up. This was a good time to do non-participant observation because often children were in such a daze they did not notice me observing from afar. Other times I would go to homes, talk to friends or parents, and while in conversation observe how the children interacted in the distance.

I also applied the technique of a focus group. Performing research in a focus group comes with a plethora of positive and negative aspects. They are beneficial because the information being discussed is focused on the area of information one is researching on. In addition, it is beneficial because when there is a large group and ideas are brought to surface that would not have been addressed by an individual interview. Along with this, there is often a different kind of comfort that comes with talking amongst peers rather than to an unknown interviewer. The information that is gathered by a focus group comes in a vast and fast quantity – with only a small time for research, this was very helpful. The aspect of open discussion is often the most interesting when in a focus group because the ideas are built upon by other members and the group maintains control of what information is discussed. However, this was hard to achieve because children are trained when there is an authority figure (the teacher in the room) they must raise their hand. To try to remedy this, I asked the teacher to leave but the students, once comfortable just began to talk over one another not building upon ideas but rather talking loudly over them.

Again, the information can be limited in a focus group because there are influences of other peers in the group. This makes the quite children remain quiet and the loud children continue talking. In order to try to minimize this risk I would ask the talkative children to wait to answer until others had a chance to talk. I then called upon those who had not spoken and more often than not, they would remain silent.

Individual interviews were beneficial because as previously stated, ideas can get lost amongst the group. Individual interviews helped me to take ideas from the focus group and build upon an individual's idea of a specific notion. Moreover, I chose to interview adults in the community who were parents of children I had met as well as interviewing specific teachers of

the classrooms I visited. From these interviews, I gained a viewpoint of people who were educating the youth both at home and at school. I also was able to ask questions to confirm or reject ideas I had gained from observation. The types of interviews I collected were both formal and informal. For formal interviews, I would ask the person whom I was interviewing if I could later ask him or her questions- I would then explain my research and proceeded to ask my questions. I attempted to keep the atmosphere light and open by letting them ask me as many questions about my findings and myself as they wanted both before and after the interview. This was helpful because once the participant became more comfortable with me they were able to open themselves up more and share information with me. Informal interviews also were an interesting way to uncover information, often I would find myself in conversation and realize that I was unintentionally interviewing. Informal interviews were very relaxed just a casual conversation amongst children of all ages and adults. I had only informal interviews with younger children because they did not fully understand the questions I was asking.

In my research, I was very lucky to have so much support in the places I stayed. With their help, I was able to interview and encounter experiences that otherwise I would have been blind to. This is however not to say I was not met with setbacks and frustrations. With the children and their interactions, I could not often get them to explain what was going on when it was happening and when I would talk to people who could explain they would not understand why I would care. In talking to the schoolchildren, they seemed to give me the answers they knew they should what was “right” rather than their reality. Moreover, the language barrier provided a setback even with people who spoke English very well did not understand some of the questions I was asking and when they were reworded, they seemed to give the answer they thought I wanted. Thus, much of my research is based on observation allowing me to be

constantly researching.