

Abstract

Globally, social mobility is either enhanced or hindered by the quality of education. Undeniably, one's qualifications, or lack thereof, affects the lives of young people. Every year, following GCSE Results Day, a mild panic holds English media hostage: the white working class are 'falling behind'.¹ It is a recurring conversation because we know the importance of school. If the standards of education drop, so do children's life prospects. However, as the descriptor 'recurring' suggests, we appear not to know how to resolve this academic inequality. While we may know the barriers to higher education, we know not how to dissolve them, and they are only heightened in Ghana.² It is crucial to note that children in Ghana do not face abnormal or unimaginable barriers to schooling. Students are not falling behind because they were preoccupied with pet lions, tigers and bears. Rather, domestic barriers to education are exacerbated by an unforgiving education system. Just six weeks have characterised Ghana's as such. Institutions which prioritise getting through the year over individual wellbeing and progress.

Introduction: Project Breakdown

The Laidlaw Foundation requires a project outline prior to departure. Assuming that I would be supporting English proficiency in Ghana, I had titled my project accordingly. 'Bridging the English Language Gap' despite Ghana being an English-speaking country. Ghanaian children did not need a native speaker to teach them English. They needed a teacher to help them find the joy in learning. My project outline did not fit Ghana – like two pieces from separate puzzles – so my project had to change: I couldn't bridge a non-existent gap. Rising Sun assigned me to Downsview International School to teach from 8.30am-3.30pm. I taught Maths, English and Science to classes Basic 2 (ages 7/8) to JHS 2 (ages 12/13). At Downsview, the children soon revealed what was lacking in their education. It was *that* gap I bridged to the best of my ability.

Evaluation of Ghana's Education

Ghana's corporeal, one-size-fits-all approach fails students, with some young people either dropping or aging out of school. This view is informed by the experience of local people in Teshie Nungua and the observations of multiple volunteers (including myself).³ An outsider might have expected the main

¹ Lewis Denison, "Crime, nothing to do, no opportunity': Why white working-class boys are falling behind in education' *itvNEWS* (London, 10 June 2026) <['Crime, nothing to do, no opportunity': Why white working-class boys are falling behind in education | ITV News](#)> accessed 23 Aug 2026.

² Barriers such as socioeconomic status, institutional overpopulation, dismissal or intolerance of special / additional needs.

³ Respective institutions were Prince of Peace Royal Academy, Vickmens Montessori School, Vivibon School, Let's Talk Educational Consult and, of course, Downsview International

hinderance to Ghanaian education to be scarcity of resources. This could range from a limit or lack of textbooks to suffocating, overcrowded classes; perhaps this factor has a greater impact in government schools. However, I had found the greatest barrier to learning derived from the teachers' ability and desire to teach.⁴ Although I was happy to lead the classes independently, I had expected a minimum level of support, such as a guide to the curriculum or access to lesson outlines. The last thing I had expected, particularly for safeguarding concerns, was for the teachers to leave me utterly alone in the classroom with little more instruction than 'Teach English'.

Even where I was accompanied by the class teacher, barring one, they would not assist the lesson or monitor my teaching. Instead, they would be zoning out of the lesson, asleep at the teacher's desk, messaging others or watching videos on their phone. After observing a few classes, it was evident that the teachers had chosen to work with minimal effort. Though I did meet kind, involved teachers who wanted to support me in the classroom, but this was the exception and not the rule. Ghana demonstrated that if the teachers do not love teaching, it is not possible for the students to love learning. For 'problem' students were engaged in my lessons; 'quiet' students felt free to contribute to class discussion. Even 'distracted' students would constantly ask me to look over their class work. When teachers are disinterested, the environment created is not one of cultivation and opportunity. Students will not respond. However, when a teacher believes in their students, I saw firsthand how involved and intelligent these young people truly were.

In Ghana, fear is a teaching method and wooden canes a tool to encourage learning. Initially, it appears effective. A tour of the school will present quiet students who seem to be attentive. It would be perfectly reasonable to assume that the students understood the lesson for they were completing their work in silence. However, when I stepped into lessons and asked the students what they were doing, they admitted that they were confused. Rather than asking the teacher or each other for support, they had wasted half a lesson not learning. Certainly, it is vital that the class is not disruptive and the students respect their teacher to listen. Yet, commanding obedience via duress will only dampen academic potential, not unlock it. Students were apprehensive to ask questions or to participate in class for fear of incurring the teacher's wrath or being incorrect. At first, I would be asked 'Miss Amanda, do you lash?' more times than I would be asked any other question.

⁴ Downsview International was a private school; the barriers to learning in a government school might be different.

Without fear of the cane, I can admit the students had lost their rigid silence. They were more boisterous; they did tend to veer off topic in class conversations. At the same time, the class was full of laughter, the students were happy and comfortable. Ultimately, they understood the work they were tasked to complete because they asked when they didn't. Even if the sole aim of the cane was not to improve learning, but to demand respect, it fails in preparing these young people for the world beyond school. Respect should not only be given to those who have the capacity to hurt you. Since I didn't 'lash', I noticed some students did not appear to respect my space or professional boundaries. 'No' was not taken as a final answer and 'stop' was met with laughter. Such comfortability was not an act of misbehaviour, rather evidence of their misunderstanding as to who commands respect. Responding accordingly, I explained how their behaviour was disrespectful rather than scolding them or 'lashing' them for their conduct and their behaviour did improve.

Ghana's reliance on punitive response fails the emotional and social development of these young people. In fact, they even learn in RME (Religious and Moral Education) that those they respect have the right to beat them. If they only respect those with this ability, they will never truly respect anyone smaller, weaker or in a lower position to them. Respect will become conditional rather than mutual. I do not believe this is the tradition of respect Ghana aimed to enforce.

Ultimately, it appears these young people are discouraged from learning, and vulnerable students either repeat the year or drop out of school to support their families. If not for the tense, corporeal environment they must learn in, then the indifferent attitudes of teachers whose role it is to inspire.

Resolutions

Despite these findings, I knew, as a mere Rising Sun volunteer, I would be unable to resolve such issues intrinsic to Ghanaian education. I could not pack the wooden canes in my suitcase. Even if I did, I would have only provided relief for one school, and it would have been temporary; I would be naive to assume the canes would not return.

Instead, I focused on enhancing the learning experience of the students I taught. If students did not pass their exams each year, they would be held back to repeat the school year. My arrival coincided with the end of term, so my students were mainly revising past topics. Yet, across different year groups, students struggled considerably.

While they had remembered learning the topic, they could not remember any of the content to the extent to which it had seemed like they had never come across it before. I arranged a meeting with

the Head Teacher, expressing my concerns. I asked for approval to lead free after-school revision classes for all yeargroups during exam week.

In fact, many students stayed after school, revealing not only how anxious they must have been but how eager they were to reap the benefits of their education. There were no sets at Downsview, but 'mixed ability' did not explain the extreme academic disparity I witnessed. Certain children were multiple years behind their peers, either using worksheets for younger students or struggling with concepts they should have learned years before.

To accommodate these students, I adapted my teaching style to simultaneously run 1:1 tutoring sessions and address the rest of the class. For every model or set of questions I gave to the class, I would sit with the student in question and re-teach the content. By matching the lesson to their pace, these students would make amazing progress. Most importantly, they would be proud of themselves and excited to share how much they knew.

Initially, without lesson plans or worksheets provided by the class teacher, it was difficult to determine those who were struggling as I had felt unable to assess individually. My dependency on prepared resources was challenged, forced beyond my comfort zone. Accepting that the methods of teaching I was accustomed to were not the only ones at my disposal enabled me to adapt, providing my students a meaningful learning experience.

Before long, I created lesson plans after just five minutes of reading the relevant pages in the students' textbooks, drafting questions and creating interactive classroom activities. Admittedly, this adaptive style did not suit every class – particularly where I had depended on the availability of exercise books in the classroom. Unfazed, I would endeavour to bring multiple whiteboard markers with me so that students could work on the whiteboard.

Downsview International gave me no support as a volunteer and Rising Sun could not interfere. I was treated as a fully fledged teacher, capable of being left alone in the classroom, so that is what I became. Though I would have appreciated some guidance, I cannot deny that in rising to the challenge, I did achieve what was once unthinkable. From this, I believe I have become a better teacher.

While I did not 'Bridge the English Language Gap,' I did achieve my new goal: providing my students a memorable and positive learning experience.

Conclusion: Professor LiA

The Laidlaw Foundation sends their Scholars abroad to put their leadership skills in action, allowing us to see tangible results from our role as a 'global citizen'. Now, more than ever, does helping the planet in any way (socially, economically, environmentally) feel impossible. Laidlaw, and this project, has taught me that making a difference can only be achievable once you are aware of the difference that needs to be made. Sometimes, being there, seeing the issues for yourself, is enough to start a chain reaction. We may feel that there is nothing we can do and might even respond to the problems around us as 'just the way the world is,' as though our current state is something we must accept.

My LiA has taught me otherwise: knowing that flaws exist or that *something* is not right does not bring us closer to a solution. Yet, if we allow ourselves to walk in the footsteps of a stranger, to learn what the problems are beyond knowing that problems exist, we can see much clearer the contribution we can make. Crucially, I left Ghana without making a permanent change to those students' education. In my absence, they will remain with the same teachers, and the teachers will continue to teach in their same way. The difference is, I have seen the flaws in Ghana's education and have practical suggestions on how they might be solved.

We often ask: what difference can one person make?

The person I was 3 months ago felt out of depth and had no real understanding as to what was prohibiting my students' learning experience. Then, I would have asked the same thing. Unlike her, today, I am a person who knows what these young people are facing. Thus, I am closer to making a difference than the person I used to be.

What difference can one person make? Nothing, if that person does not know the difference that needs to be made.