

Akalpa: ENGLISH Interview

I was born in the Northern Region of Ghana. Specifically, I grew up in Tamale because my father was a Policeman and he had to work there. So, I went through my primary school in that city. Actually, I attended three primary schools when I was a child. I first went to Anglican Primary school where I spent three years there, from Primary 1 to primary 2. However, I never went to Primary 3 because I was really a naughty child. So, I never experienced primary 3 in my life because I spent the year I was supposed to be in Primary 3 in the Cinema House watching movies all the time and I think this happened because I was living in an area that was very deprived, in addition to frequent absence of my parents.

As I mentioned earlier, my father was a Policeman and as such was always and mostly out of the house on duty calls. My mother too engaged in trading and was also always trading. In view of their occupations, my mother especially had to always wake up early to prepare us for school. She would give us food and pocket money where we would go to school and spend half of the day in school, that is from 7:00am to mid-day and which we were expected to return home when school closed. Even though, I attended P1 alright and didn't face much problem, the story was rather different when I got to P2. In fact, there was a teacher who was terrible and difficult to deal with. He whipped pupils at the slightest provocation. He whipped all of us whether you spoke in class or not. He was particularly merciless when he asked a question in the class and we (pupils) couldn't answer. He would whip and whip. So, I felt it was a terrible place to be or better still a curse to be in his class.

In the wake of these circumstances, I met a friend who introduced me to the Cinema and even took me there for the first time and I enjoyed the movies. It was an unforgettable experience. Consequently, I said OK, I preferred to spend the time in the Cinema watching exciting movies instead of going to school, where I would be whipped even if I didn't talk. Hence, this was how I missed Primary 3.

In regard to this, my father had to send me to the village since I couldn't explain to him that because they whipped I couldn't cope. According to my father, flogging was part of the training required in the upbringing of pupils and students. As a Policeman therefore, one could readily guess the consequences of refusing to go to school because they whipped. So, sending me to the village was the only option available since he didn't understand me and more so, felt I could continue my education at the village under the guidance of his brother.

At the village, I was entrusted in the custody of his elder brother who was even considered a strict disciplinarian. In my father's view, he took me to the village with the idea that his only brother who was always at home could monitor my education, especially my class attendance and performance. So, at my village called Chuchuliga, I continued from Primary 4 (P4) because the above-mentioned circumstances didn't permit me to start or even end Primary 3.

Indeed, finding myself in P4 and at the same time at the village was a mouthful of experience for me because I spent all my schooling hours in school and spent the rest of the day usually after school tending cattle in the community. In fact, the latter part of my village's daily schedule was kind of exciting because cow milk was plentiful for us to drink and what was more exciting was the cattle ridding/saddling that I relished. These experiences of course subsequently shaped me differently at the village. However, in spite of the strict laws and efforts enforced by my Uncle, he too couldn't contain me since at a point; my truancy grew out of manageable proportions. This therefore called for a new set of ideas required of my father instill in me the ideals of schooling in my formative years.

Consequently, my father took me from the village back to the city, Tamale. In his new strategy, I realized that my father awarded or gave gifts to my siblings who were doing well in school. Not only did he lash out gifts, he also gave attractive favours to those performing well and treated some of us rather badly especially those of us including myself who felt school was a place where children were punished. He gave us nothing and this vexed me into reorganizing myself for his lofty gifts and favours. So, I started getting so serious in school. However, my enjoyment was to be short-lived because at P6 where I had reached, and which also marked the end of the primary education, my father died and we had to relocate to the village, Chulichuliga.

At the village this time round, I had to support my mother on the farm and at the same time tender my father's cattle since he had invested a lot in livestock before his untimely demise. In fact, these cattle were our only property, and as such required full attention since one could not play about with his property at the village. Clearly, this was a Herculean task for a young boy of my age. I had to support my mother on the farm, tender cattle, and at the same time go to school since we could not get any body to tender these cattle. Despite the fact that, it was challenging though, I must admit, I also felt it as an interesting experience because I understood the culture and particularly in regard to how children are raised at the village and the challenges of children of school going age. It also left a lasting legacy on me as this was to be useful to me in my future work.

I say this because when I completed Six Form in 1995, I had to do what we call National Service. This is a mandatory national duty that every student who completes this level or a higher level of education goes to a chosen region to engage in community service as a service to the community and the nation as whole.

In fulfillment of this national assignment, I chose to go back to serve my people in the Upper East Region where I come from. Subsequently, I got a job at the Navrongo Health Research Center (N.H.R.C) where I distributed Insecticide Treated Bed nets to vulnerable groups in deprived communities. This was mainly field work and as a former shepherd, I knew the geography of various communities, even the inaccessible ones. Indeed, I would not hesitate to mention that my childhood experience were brought to bear on my new found job as I navigated various communities easily distributing bed nets with surprising ease. This particularly gave me an urge over my colleagues in this work especially when it came to what we called Community Entry. Community Entry is an intricate process

that require special skills and knowledge of a community when you are about to embark on work or a study in it. You need to know the basic norms and rules of the intended community. Moreover, one needs to be able to identify himself/herself quickly with the community and its inhabitants and everything thereof so that one would be able to carry out any intended plan of action or work.

I had therefore imbibed all these skills as a shepherd and these proved useful when I started working in the fields distributing bed nets. In fact, this experience was easy for me and I was successful in my work until I began to look further to furthering my education since I had gained some level of experience.

After gaining these experiences both after Six Form and at the National Service level, I continued to the University of Ghana where I studied Geography. I must say that my childhood experience as a Shepherd influenced the choice of this program. When I successfully obtained my Bachelor's degree, I returned to the Navrongo Health Research Centre (N.H.R.C) again, and this time, as a Research Assistant (RA). Interestingly, I was given a similar job as I did after my Six Form. In fact, this time, instead of working as a Field Worker, I co-ordinated the promotion, sale and proper use of Insecticide Treated Bed Nets among vulnerable groups in the Balsa District. My experience on this new responsibility was quite amazing and exciting since I already knew the geography, culture as well as relating with the people. Training of my field workers thus became easy for me. Moreover, this enhanced my work greatly throughout my three (3) year stint with the N.H.R.C.

By dint of hard work and foresight, I decided to pursue further studies, this time looking beyond the borders of Ghana. I got a scholarship to study in Scotland at the University of St Andrews where I studied a Master of Research in Health Geography (MRes Health Geography). In Scotland, it was very miserable, to say the least. This was because the Scottish were closed people, though they are actually nice people, but it takes them some time to open up to foreigners.

Even though, that was my first time of going abroad, I felt pretty bad about their hospitality. For instance, in Ghana when you meet a foreigner, the first thing you would begin to think about is, you would want to engage in a conversation or chat with the person to try to get to know the person and besides consider how much help you could render to the person. However, the story is completely different in Scotland.

Naturally, I smile a lot of the time and I wasn't different in Scotland. I smiled, and they smiled back. But in an attempt to solicit help or any form of support from them in terms of direction or the location of a shop/mall or the direction to any important amenity, then I noticed the people backing off and I found this very strange especially in the first week since I didn't know the name(s) and location of any food or shop. I spent a year in a small town in Scotland. However, towards the end of the year and the end of my program, the people started opening up and some of them even introduced me to some friends and we became friends. But this was late and since this was not to last for long as I was to about to return to Ghana to serve.

Back in Ghana, after finishing the program, I worked with an organization called Foundation for Grassroots Initiatives in Africa (Grassroots Africa) as a Public Health Officer where I co-ordinated the activities of a Joint World Bank/Dutch Government sponsored project which was the Nutrition in Gender Project. The aim of this project was for us to work to improve the nutritional status of vulnerable groups (especially women and children) through what we called the Gender Lens. This was because we realized a wide gender gap with respect to nutrition. In the Upper East Region where the project was situated, there exists a Patriarchal society which is ruled or controlled only by men where decision is the sole prerogative/preserve of men with women at the periphery. This therefore doesn't give women the opportunity to take part in the decision making process that affects their lives. This we considered a worrying issue.

In view of this, my project sought to create the space and more importantly create the enabling environment so that women and their husbands could sit on the same platform to discuss issues bothering their well-being and development. In discussing these issues through the decision-making process, it allowed husbands and wives to sit side -by -side to decide when to provide food, when to access food, whose responsibility it is to provide what kind of food. Basically, these were the kinds of facilitations I offered and I did create this atmosphere through a process called Social Clinics.

In fact I expanded the innovation of Social Clinic beyond the household level (husband, wife and children) to include the entire community. But this was after we (I and my supporting staff) conducted extensive research on the project. We then put the data into stories and subsequently hired some professional Drama Troup/Group and they performed thus, role playing the stories obtained from the community. This indeed, attracted views from men and women of the various communities expressing their opinions freely without fear or favour and more importantly, it enabled women to freely interact and tell the story as it is.

I co-ordinated this project for two years and then came to Boston University to study DrPH in International Health. This has been my story to date.