

Bringing AAC to Ghana’s Special Needs Teachers: Finding Ideas That Work

By Harvey Pressman

The past ten years in Ghana have witnessed a rapid growth in educational services for children with disabilities. There is now a system of “unit schools” throughout Ghana that provide 2 to 3 classrooms within general education schools for students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and cerebral palsy. Special needs educators are now using an expanding collection of approaches and strategies to support the basic skill development and communication needs of their target population. Over the recent months, some unit schools have begun to include preschoolers. There are currently 25 Unit Schools throughout Ghana, with approximately 1,200 students.



For the past eight years, these unit schools have benefited from an annual visit from 15-20 graduate students and faculty members in speech language pathology from the Bi-Lingual Institute at Columbia University’s Teachers College in New York City. During each visit, there is a weekend “AAC retreat”. Between 50-60 unit school staff from Ghana learn new teaching and communication strategies from their visitors and increasingly, from each other. Over the years, the Central Coast Children’s Foundation in Monterey, California has provided technical assistance and support to these retreats. They have also provided travel grants so Ghanain unit school teachers can attend AAC conferences and model programs in other countries.



As a result, a growing body of practical, valuable classroom ideas has emerged that fit the culture, the pocket books, and the level of professional development needs of these teachers. In addition, through the efforts of Dr. Cate Crowley and her colleagues at Columbia, many of the most promising ideas and approaches are documented and available in videos, guides and print.

Weekend AAC Retreats

To get a flavor of the weekend AAC retreats, one might first watch the videos from the 2012 and 2013 retreats. In the 2012 video, Crowley discusses the professional development day for Special Education Teachers in Ghana at Nkawkaw. Activities focused on communication passports, name tags, and market cards: (<http://www.leadersproject.org/2013/09/23/ghana-2012-aac-professional-development-day-at-nkawkaw-for-special-education-teachers/>)



The 2013 AAC Retreat

In the 2013 video, Crowley describes narrative stories, adapted from Carol Grey's excellent work in "Social Stories", word walls, and general classroom materials, *i.e.*, calendars, schedules, and math. The 2013 video also provides a glimpse of teachers working on social stories and market cards: <http://www.leadersproject.org/2013/03/28/ghana-winter-2013-professional-development-retreat/>

What Are Market Cards?

In collaboration with Belinda Bukari, faculty from Teacher's College developed the AAC market cards. Bukari was a Unit School Director, but now administers the nationwide unit school program. Bukari and her university friends created market cards so that children could participate in a typical activity for Ghanaian children: buying food for the family.

These cards are now used by students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and cerebral palsy throughout Ghana. The AAC market cards have the name and picture of the item the students are to buy for their families. The cards also have quantity of items the family wants the student to buy and the cost. Directions about how to use the cards is shared during the annual retreats. Also, video tutorials are available in several African languages including Swahili, Amharic, Kikuyu, as well as West African French.

<http://www.leadersproject.org/2015/08/20/aac-market-cards-in-ghana-playlist-2/>

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Approaches Pamphlet

This pamphlet highlights successful AAC strategies. The focus is on using AAC to facilitate participation at home, in school and in the community. The pamphlet includes simple "recipes" for classroom use. Ideas include how to use Name Tags, Market Cards, Talking Mats, Community Request Cards, Narrative Social Stories, Five Finger Story Retell and Joint Action Routines:

[file:///C:/Users/TouchSmart/Downloads/AAC-Pamphlet-Ghana-2d85b9k%20\(1\).p](file:///C:/Users/TouchSmart/Downloads/AAC-Pamphlet-Ghana-2d85b9k%20(1).p)

The 2014 AAC Retreat: Part I

Presenters reviewed AAC Market Cards, Narrative Social Stories, and Communication Passports. They also introduced: the Five-Finger Story Retell, Talking Mats, and Joint Action

Routines. The teachers shared information about their favorite activities. They spoke with passion and shared stories about how they use AAC approaches in their classrooms.

One of the teachers, Mary Osei, shared a story about one of her students with limited speech. The student took the wrong way home and went missing. Fortunately, the student had a Communication Passport that included emergency information. The student was able to communicate well enough to find the way home.

Many teachers also shared how students were learning to make holiday cards, paper beads, and even fashionable bags. Then, they were able to sell these products. Again, their AAC skills and training were making a significant impact on their day-to-day lives:

<http://www.leadersproject.org/2014/01/03/ghana-january-2014-insights-through-collaborations-sunyani-professional-development-retreat-part-i/>

Ghana 2014 Professional Development Retreat, Part II

As the Professional Development weekend continued, participants discussed various strategies, such as how to incorporate the use of a daily schedule and calendar in their classrooms. Some had added physical movements to their “Days of the Week” song and others displayed their hand drawn daily schedules.

During the “Make and Take” activity, Columbia graduate students worked directly with the teachers to create classroom materials. They worked side by side, brainstormed ideas, created materials that would be easy to replicate and sustain in Ghana. Each teacher also went home with the “AAC Approaches Booklet”. It highlighted information covered throughout the weekend: <http://www.leadersproject.org/2014/01/04/ghana-january-2014-sunyani-professional-development-retreat-part-ii/>



Narrative Stories

This video tutorial offers instructions and examples of how to create narrative stories to address specific behaviors that may interfere with a student’s participation in the class, home and/or community. Narrative strategies are often helpful for students with intellectual disabilities and autism. Both unit school teachers and teachers of students in general education also benefit.

The stories help teachers and students identify and understand targeted behaviors, and provide the child with more “adaptive” behaviors so the difficult behaviors decrease. In addition to the English version, subtitled versions of this video are available in [Swahilli](#), [Amharic](#) and French.

<http://www.leadersproject.org/2013/04/04/ghana-winter-2013-narrative-stories>.



Taken together, the videos tell a story of impressive progress over a relatively short period of years. They also indicate the importance of persistence. Short-term, in-and-out visits from

outside “experts” rarely end up having a long-term impact. However, when a group of “outsiders” who are respectful of local cultural and economic realities work collaboratively, over years, with local educational leaders and teachers, real progress can be achieved. Professionals from both countries, family members and, most importantly, the students have benefited.

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