

TRYING SMALL

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From Pretense to Potential: Reflections on Education in Liberia

Eleven years ago, I took my first trip back to the US from Liberia. That was before I had concluded that Facebook was more harmful than helpful. I remember posting a message and a picture on Facebook. The picture was of a ten-year-old girl named Annie, and the message said something along the lines of Annie being my next-door neighbor and how I would miss her the most among all the people I knew in Liberia. Liberians are quite casual with terms like father, mother, sister, and brother, so I wasn't surprised when Annie started calling me her father. I have been sending Annie to school and supporting her for over ten years now. We endured the Ebola crisis together, which was challenging. We even managed to navigate her turbulent teens, which was no easy feat.

Last week, Annie completed the WASSCE (West African something something something), which is the set of exams all students in Liberia take at the end of the 12th grade. She's done. That's her in the picture. Can you see the happiness on her face? She truly is overjoyed, and I couldn't be prouder. I am eternally grateful

to Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the former president of Liberia, for being an excellent role model for the girls in Liberia. Without Ellen's influence, I doubt Annie would have finished high school.

BUT...

While my heart swells with pride for my daughter, I also recognize that it is largely a façade. WASSCE takes a few weeks to complete, and during that time, I sat with Annie and asked her, "Annie, let me ask you. When you took the chemistry exam, could you read and understand even one question?" Shaking her head, she replied, "No way." We talked further, and she confirmed that the same was true for nearly all her classmates and almost all the exams.



I followed up, saying, "So when you're sitting there in the chair, holding your pen and appearing to concentrate, you're just pretending?" She burst into laughter, amused by my willingness to state the obvious, and eventually managed to say, "That's it." She did explain that it's not all pretending, as a significant amount of time is spent either cheating or attempting to cheat.

You might be wondering, "Then why take WASSCE at all?" Well, I actually have an answer for that—it's all about money. Students are required to pay to take the exam (I believe it was \$40 USD), and then they have to pay a "processing fee." The intention behind the processing fee is to use it as a bribe for the people grading the exams. Principals and other administrators invariably keep a portion of the processing fee for themselves. It's difficult to obtain a receipt for a bribe.

If this sounds shady, that's because it is. If it sounds ridiculous, that's because it is. I can think of several relevant adjectives: shady, ridiculous, corrupt, nonsensical, and silly, to name a few. Despite all its flaws, the American education system is light years ahead.

AND YET...

I have brilliant, capable students in Gbarnga who yearn for knowledge. They have become adept at pretending, out of necessity, but when given a genuine opportunity to learn, they quickly abandon the charade in exchange for truth and understanding. It's these Liberian students who fill me with optimism for Liberia's future. It may be a slow process unless an AI comes up with a quick solution, but progress will come. Let me mention a few names: Paul, Promise, Genevee, Matthew, and Darleplay, just to name a few. In Jesus' name..."