

Profile of a Comparative and International Education Leader: Karen Biraimah - Akosua Meets the World

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From Oregon to Africa via Japan

Growing up in various areas of the state of Oregon, my idea of travel was restricted to mountainous lakes within the Northwest portion of the U.S. Who knew that one small trip to the mountainous lakes of Oregon would lead to a trip around the world! As my curiosity about a wider world that awaited me beyond Oregon grew, my choice of colleges was dominated by a local college's program that emphasized study abroad for first year university students, as they mentioned that none of us were really ready to learn. Their philosophy was successful — at least for me. While my parents were hopeful that a study abroad program in Japan during my first year of college might cure me of my wanderlust — the reverse actually occurred.

Though my original university major was physics, my initial trip to Japan, followed in my sophomore year as a representative of Lewis and Clark College in the *Operation Crossroads Africa* Program: a creative program that blended American and Ghanaian university students with local market women in a shared project to build a community center (by hand) in coastal Ghana. To support this project, the local government closed the central market every morning and directed the market women to join with us in the construction of a community center, which resulted in all of us carrying pans full of dirt on our heads up a long hill and then dumping the contents within the cement block foundation already constructed above ground. What a fascinating human combination of American and Ghanaian university students and local market women.

Peace Corps: An Adventure that Lasted a Lifetime

Of course, instead of satisfying my desire to explore the world this second international experience led to my participation as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ghana from 1967–69 where I taught math at Takoradi Secondary school (Tadisco). On hindsight, my father's encouragement to study math and science prepared me (almost) to teach my classes in Algebra and Geometry at "Tadisco." However, as there were no available TVs, DVDs etc., I had more than enough time to read up on these subjects. There was one movie theater in town, though the selection was usually limited to John Wayne movies, with masses of people in the balcony section (less expensive seating section) cheering on their hero. The theatre did, however, finally have a wonderful Sidney Poitier movie, "*A Patch of Blue*," that left me crying, and rest of the audience sleeping.

While my Peace Corps training experience was a bit challenging, as we ended up in a training experience that required Peace Corps trainees based in New York city and in various local towns in Ghana (Peace Corps was testing out their new concept of in-country training by having Peace Corps trainees assigned to New York City and local towns in Ghana) to attempt the same activities. As one can imagine, trying to identify a local "home-stay" in New York City was far more challenging than my co-trainees based in

Ghana. Nonetheless, we survived it all and were now recognized as Peace Corps Volunteers, instead of the previous title of Peace Corps Trainees.

Of course, my pre-conceived notions of being a Peace Corps Volunteer were based, somewhat, on old movies and TV shows, rather than the realities faced by the modern Peace Corps program. And while I imagined myself being assigned to a lonely village in the “bush,” I was initially quite disappointed to learn that I had been assigned to a relatively large urban area of Takoradi. Moreover, while I was offered modern housing in the city of Takoradi, sponsored by the Ghanaian Ministry of Education, I instead found housing in a small village located a short walking distance to my school. I rented a home at the corner of the village, which I later realized was made of mud rather than cement blocks, when I attempted to attach a clothesline inside my bedroom.

Cobras and Birds: In the Trees and in my Classroom

One interesting side note regarding my village house: one day on my way home from school, with my arms loaded with exercise books, I met a couple of my students who greeted me, and asked, “Oh miss, aren’t you afraid of the spitting cobras?” I replied that I was not too concerned, but they warned me that to be safe I should look down at the path, and not up into the trees (a good suggestion for more than one reason). My second encounter with a cobra came in the middle of one of my geometry classes when the students spotted a cobra resting on a support beam. While my Peace Corps training did not cover cobras, the thing to do was to remain calm and ask a student to call his father to come to the school, along with his hunting rifle. This was accomplished, and with only one shot fired, the cobra departed the land of the living.

One less terrifying experience occurred with a small bird. While birds will never equal the heart-pounding experience of snakes in the classroom, one student decided it would be hilarious to catch a bird, tie its leg to a string, and then hide it inside his desk. And then, as I entered the classroom with the same daily request to open their desks and take out their math workbooks, this poor bird saw its opportunity to escape, and flew directly towards me, until it reached the end of the string and came to an abrupt halt. Fortunately, the bird didn’t suffer whiplash, and I immediately ordered the student to take the bird outside and release it. Unfortunately, this drama was not equaled by our analysis of quadratic equations, the lesson for that day!

From West Africa to Detroit: Not a Simple Transition

As it turns out, my Peace Corps Training in the New York City Summer Schools (where my lunch and umbrella were stolen on the first day) became invaluable when I began teaching in the middle and secondary schools in Detroit (they were desperate for math teachers, and I was hired the same day as I applied). I remember during the closing of the fall semester in Detroit, the principal indicated that this had been the best semesters yet, as there were no homicides committed on school grounds. When I reminded her that one of my students had stabbed a young man to death, who had subsequently fallen onto a public street bordering the school, her response was that since he died in the street, it could not be counted as a homicide on school grounds. What a relief!

Another interesting sidebar to working in Detroit focused on the student’s hallway lockers. As it happened, the Assistant Principal always had a special list of potential trouble-making students posted in his office, along with their locker numbers and combinations — which came in handy when administrators, hearing that stolen goods or drugs were being stored on campus, knew exactly where to look.

One final tip when working in any school, but particularly in schools such as those in Detroit, is to remain in close contact with the office staff. They seemed to sense when some disruptive behavior was about to take place, and they were also helpful in reminding me one day that my prep period was over, and that I was late reporting to my 4th period math class. Having received their message, I dashed up to my classroom and found two of my students pushing a third student out of a third-story window to see when he would begin screaming. Needless to say, I pulled the student back into the room, assigned the perpetrators to several nights of detention, and then proceeded with my lesson on linear equations.



Karen, AKA “Akosua” in Ghana

Teaching in Detroit also made me quite aware of the educational inequalities experienced by students in poor, and mostly urban schools. Often as teachers, we would go down to the district office to claim older textbooks that had been discarded by students in more affluent schools — a challenging but nonetheless invaluable exercise when trying to make sure every student had their own textbook which they could actually take home. (In poor school districts, such as Detroit, at least from the 1960s–1980s, there was always a shortage of textbooks, which meant that most textbooks had to remain in the classroom instead of being loaned out to individual students.) Another challenge I experienced in Detroit was working with broken or non-existent math tools, such as protractors where you could no longer read the degrees with any accuracy, and attempting to graph systems of simultaneous equations without the benefit of a permanent graph on the chalkboard. (I quickly learned to know the answer prior to beginning, and thus my graphs always intersected correctly!).

However, while the previous discussion suggests many challenges and potential disappointments, one of the greatest benefits of teaching in a school district such as Detroit was the students themselves — at least those who had survived Algebra 1 and were now attending Geometry and/or Algebra 2 classes. In these instances, I’ve never before (or after) experienced such dedicated and hardworking students, particularly given their enormous life challenges. Once, when I asked why they were so dedicated to learning Algebra or Geometry (not a trait often reflected in teenagers) they responded that they were working hard in

school so that they would not end up “back on the street.” I still remember the determination of my students, and their parents (often single and working several jobs) to be successful. For example, I will never forget the working single mom (with only an elementary school education) who came to every parent conference, and who had spent her hard-earned wages to purchase a card table and lamp so that her son Jesse could have a formal “homework study center” in her small home. I also remember that during one parent-teacher conference, she lamented the fact that she was unable to help him with his mathematics. However, I said this was no problem. I will oversee his math instruction if she would make sure that Jesse did his homework every night. It worked! When Jesse was about to graduate from his Detroit high school, he came to my classroom and joyfully announced that he had received a full four-year scholarship to a state university. Hooray! Sometimes, by working together, teachers, students, and their parents can surmount the barriers often found in lower SES neighborhoods and schools.

From an Inner-City School to a Suburban University: Not a Simple Accomplishment

While teaching in Niagara Falls, N.Y. Public Schools I completed my Ph.D. program at the State University of New York, Buffalo, and began hunting for a suitable university position. To control the level of instructional disruption caused by dashing off to university interviews, I always tried to schedule the interviews on Friday. However, even then, my students were not happy with my absences. I remember one of them say, “Where was you? We were to do quadratic equations last Friday, but you weren’t here!” How great to see their enthusiasm!

After being awarded a tenure-earning contract with the University of Central Florida, I began to contemplate the realities of living in the South—an area of the U.S. which I had intentionally avoided my entire life (due to its history of racial conflicts), even though my mother’s family migrated from Alabama to Oregon, when she was a teenager. Actually, before signing the Florida contract, I contacted friends of my husband who were originally from Jamaica, but currently living in central Florida, to find out what the racial conditions were really like in central Florida. They advised me to be very careful when deciding where to live, and encouraged me to consider older communities where the racial patterns and histories were better known. Following this advice, I selected Maitland, a northern suburb of Orlando. Though we were the only multi-racial family to move into the neighborhood in 1985, no one burned a cross on my lawn! Moreover, in just 10 or 20 years, the neighborhood began to integrate! Who would have guessed there would be such a “rapid” change in racial perceptions within the South!

Currently my next-door neighbors are Black (not sure of their ethnic background), and recently another Black family moved in a few houses down from mine. Moreover, regardless of historic worries by Whites about what might happen if their neighborhoods were integrated—nothing happened. We continue to live peacefully side-by-side (as it should be).

Another passing observation about moving to Florida and teaching at the University of Central Florida (UCF) arose due to the racial composition of my classes. Put rather bluntly, this was the first time I had taught a class full of White faces (though I did have minimal experiences of this phenomenon when teaching in Niagara Falls, though in that case SES played an even greater social divide). However, through 40 years of observations, it appears that it was not race, but rather class, which has created and maintained enormous divisions between folks. In Niagara Falls, N.Y. most of my White students had parents that had been laid off from one of the main manufacturing businesses in the city, and poverty and growing uncertainties about the future caused some of the greatest insecurities.

As odd as this might seem, when beginning to teach at UCF I had quite a challenge trying to identify individuals within a class nearly full of White (and often blond) teacher education students. They all

looked so similar to me. I also quickly discovered that I had almost nothing in common with these White university students, though I must say the experience added to my “education.”

Moreover, it has been amazing to experience the social and economic transformations at UCF and the surrounding communities. After about 40 years at UCF, both the surrounding areas of central Florida and the university itself have become far more diversified. For example, I now enjoy walking through the university’s student union and seeing groups of students (who look—and sound—nothing alike) enjoying lunch and a vibrant conversation. To me, this is what a university education is truly about: Moving beyond your formerly transfixed vision of what American society was or should be to welcome diversity and a multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual society.



Karen with her Fulbright Students at UCF

Sixty Years Roaming the Globe, with Enormous Support from Fulbright and the U.S. Department of State

Since 1967 when I graduated with my bachelor’s degree in International Education, I have been fortunate to experience an extraordinary “globetrotting” life with multiple international partnerships and fellowships, many due to the generosity of various U.S. Department of State and Fulbright Programs.

Given my previous tendencies to wander the global, I was fortunate to be awarded four Fulbright Fellowships while a faculty member at UCF which allowed me to teach and conduct research at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, the University of Namibia in Windhoek, and the University of South Africa, Pretoria. During this time, I also received four Fulbright-Hays Awards which allowed me to provide an extended experience for local central Florida teachers in the public schools of Malaysia, Singapore, Peru, Botswana, and Namibia, a U.S. Department of State grant which funded study abroad programs in Botswana, and a joint U.S. Department of

Education/European Union grant that researched “Children at Risk in Education” within the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Spain and the U.S (2002–04).



Karen with UCF President & Fulbright Students



Karen at Conference in Madrid, Spain

Building upon these experiences I was awarded a three-year *Tertiary Linkage Program Grant* (funded by U.S. A.I.D), that allowed extensive and ongoing academic exchanges between UCF and Vista University (now part of the University of South Africa). And finally, thanks to a grant through the Ministry of Education in Spain, we were able to provide annually a 12-week experience in Spanish communities and schools for about a dozen local Florida teachers each year from 2010 to 2015.

While I could author multiple books about my experiences in those locations, I doubt anyone would persevere through the daunting experience of actually reading my proposed books. So, let's skip all the boring details and focus on one tantalizing moment from each Fulbright award.

A Fulbright Scholar in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1993-94)

Being a majority Muslim nation, Ramadan was a significant event on campus, though classes continued to be held. While Muslim students, staff and faculty were not allowed to consume any water or food until sundown, the university was kind enough to maintain a canteen for us infidels (unbelievers). However, while this was handy, my coffee drinking habits needed to be adjusted as my source of hot water (the kettle in an office occupied by a practicing Moslem colleague) was inoperable during the long weeks of Ramadan.

A Fulbright-Hays Award to Malaysia/Singapore (1995)

Working with an understanding and supportive Superintendent of the Orange County (Florida) Public Schools, I was able to broadly advertise opportunities for ten classroom teachers to explore, almost cost free, Singapore and Malaysian schools for six weeks during the summer of 1995 (each participant did have to contribute \$200 towards the acquisition of learning materials regarding S.E. Asia). I must mention that, even though I clearly explain the punitive and strict anti-drug policies of both countries, given that their country's location on a traditional drug route out of S.E. Asia to the West, we almost had one member of our group permanently detained by Singapore's police. (Long story short: He dumped the banned drugs just prior to being stopped by the Singapore Police—or at least that is the story that was related to me! I didn't stop to ask any additional questions, and simply gave a friendly push to my Fulbrighters to board the plane home!).

A Fulbright-Hays Group Study Abroad Project: Peru (Summer 2000)

Thanks to a linkage between archeologists at UCF and at a University in Lima, Peru, our first Fulbright-Hays Groups Study Abroad Project though based in Lima, included well know archeological sites such as Machu Pichu as well as lesser known excavation sites along the coast of Peru. I remember that one of the highlights of Machu Pichu (beyond the obvious archeological wonders) was the ability of a group leader to comfortably rest at one of the highest points of interests while simultaneously being able to observe my student participants wondering about at lower elevations.

One indelible memory of this group exploration was not the fabulous archeological finds, but rather the new knowledge gathered on how banana peels spread across the face of a student participant could help alleviate the discomforts from exploring extremely high elevations too rapidly. Case in point: While our knowledgeable tour guides warned us about the need for bodies to adjust slowly to extreme changes in elevations before heading out to explore the fabulous Inca ruins etc., one of our energetic faculty participants ignored these precautions. And thus, instead of resting in bed for several hours after arriving by air in Machu Pichu she immediately headed out to explore our community. Of course, she became ill very quickly and was dragged back into the hotel lobby where the owner called upon a local herbalist to

administer first aid. This very effective treatment amounted to banana peels spread about her forehead and cheeks, though a local physician was also called upon to provide multiple injections.

Needless to say, before we began our hike up to Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world (I've been told), we followed the guidance provided by our tour guide to take it very slow, and to rest and "catch our breath" every few minutes. Needless to say, as we observed seasoned porters (used to carrying up heavy boxes to the tourist facilities at Lake Titicaca) huffing and puffing, and taking multiple rest stops along the way up, we followed their example. And hurray! We all arrived at our destination, breathing heavily, but alive and enjoying the view.

A Fulbright Scholar at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya (2008-9)

Though my stay in Kenya was not challenged by geographic features as described above, it was ill-times with regard to multiple acts of local unrest during my stay. During local unrest, though I will only discuss one incident. This dilemma focused on a campus riot that ensued after students were tossed out of the institution because they had sent their education bursaries to their families, often near starvation, in rural areas of Kenya, instead of paying their tuition and housing bills. In protest, they began destroying telecommunication dishes and burning down classrooms. The army and/or police entered the campus and started shooting the students. (I believe 9 students were killed, but I have no official record of this event.) Needless to say, students were panicked, running up and down campus streets with their books and suitcases. As our home was on campus, we opened our doors to as many students as we could manage. The individual whom we had hired to drive us to town and shopping, as well as many other families on the university campus, banged on our door and asked if he could park his car in the garage, as they were burning cars at the entrance to the university. Since we had an empty garage, he thankfully parked his car in the garage and joined us for the all-night vigil. On my husband's advice, we moved away from the portion of the house next to the street (to avoid random gun shots), and moved to the opposite end of the home that faced a field of grazing cows. We remained there all-night watching TV news reports, and the next morning seeing that there were no longer any guns being fired etc., we ventured out onto the street after asking permission from patrolling university security guards. As I walked around campus viewing the extensive destruction, one particular incident remains embedded in my memory. A university employee with a clipboard was viewing the remains of a classroom (only the front and back walls remained, along with charred desks and books). I remember him mentioning that this particular building would have to be removed from the list of functioning classrooms. What a surprise!

Fulbright-Hays Award; Botswana (2011)

Probably one of the easiest locations to engage our university students in a meaningful Fulbright-Hays program was Botswana. This was largely due to the thoughtful planning of my in-country coordinator, who had made multiple (and often dusty and bumpy) trips to the north of the country to locate suitable "Remote Area Dweller Schools," (a term used by the Botswana Ministry of Education to identify schools located in remote, northern areas of the country). Of course, given their remote locations, there was never any consideration of making hotel reservations (as none really existed). Thus, and probably for the enrichment of the experience, every participant was placed in a teacher's home. Given the remote nature of these schools, most if not all of the teachers had permanent homes elsewhere, and thus the teaching staff, administrators, and our Fulbright-Hays participants lived in teacher housing located at these remote school locations. In the first year or two of this experience, electricity was certainly not a "given," and it was the uninitiated (or those not paying attention during orientation sessions) who suffered by not understanding the importance of placing a fully charged flashlight under their pillow prior to turning

down the lights (either electric or gas). Beyond the obvious advantages of living with local families, being located at these remote locations also allowed us to join in on local festivities, markets etc.

A Fulbright Scholar at the University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia (2014-15)

While when compared to my previous Fulbright adventures, my time in Namibia was generally positive and peaceful, though water supplies did begin to play a more important role in my life as we transitioned into the dry season. Unknown to most tourists and short-term residence in Namibia, rain water is a public good, and cannot be captured on your property. This translated into the fact that it was illegal (or at least socially frowned upon) to capture gushing rain water as it exited your downspouts and before it entered the public street, and later a public reservoir. I guess the idea was for all rainwater to be captured in reservoirs to be accessed by all people, and not just the renters or homeowners who were desperately trying to capture the deluge of rainwater that occurred in the rainy season. Who knew? Obviously, this had not occurred to most Americans (and others not originating in a semi-arid territory). But as they say, travel broadens the mind (or at least in this case), the ability to capture rainwater, though not a particularly valuable skill in the U.S., at least at this point in history.

A Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Award (U.S. Department of Education): Botswana and Namibia, Summer 2017



Karen and Study Abroad Students in Botswana

While similar activities and challenges occurred as we expanded our study abroad program to include both Botswana and Namibia, it did also provide us with a base to compare the impact of both British and German colonization. From my own perspective, Botswana appeared rather free of colonization impacts (save for

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some impacts on language, school, and their nascent political system), which was not necessarily the case in Namibia, which, in my opinion, was still deeply impacted by previous German colonization and current residential patterns. However, as not to overstate the negative, I must add that the cuisine in multiple German-style restaurants within Namibia was a definite plus (particularly as some even offered hamburgers on their menus!).

A Fulbright Scholar at the University of South Africa, Pretoria (2024-25)

When compared to my previous Fulbright experiences, my final Fulbright in South Africa, seemed a bit uneventful. Of course, from time to time I had to do a bit of quick research, as I was called upon to discuss topics which were not exactly my “forte.” As it happened, while I’m in Comparative and International Education, I was hosted by the University of South Africa’s Sociology Department (Pretoria campus), and thus had to consult my laptop linkages to develop presentations that would be more meaningful for my audiences. When they say traveling offers significant benefits, such as personal growth and broadening your horizons, it’s also been said that international travel will make you feel more grateful for home. Given my previous experiences, I will agree whole heartedly with this notion.

Concluding Thoughts

When looking back upon my academic life, it seems that my international experiences provided scaffolding to both expand my knowledge and perceptions of the world, and my own community back home. For example, my first Fulbright to Malaysia (93-94) provided me with the experience and linkages necessary to be awarded a Fulbright-Hays to Malaysia and Singapore (1994-95) which allowed me to share this experience with twelve public school teachers from central Florida. Similarly, my Fulbright to Namibia (2014-15) built on earlier Fulbrights in Malaysia and Kenya to provide the in-country experiences necessary to receive a Fulbright-Hays to Botswana and Namibia (2016-17) which again allowed me to share the experience with a dozen educators from Florida.

Significant research was also possible due to these Fulbrights. My Fulbright to Kenya in 2008-09 led to three publications and 11 presentations while experiences in Malaysia, Botswana and Namibia produced two books, six publications, 50 presentations, and an AT&T grant that helped purchase materials on SE Asia for local central Florida schools. Recently these experiences helped to prepare a successful Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence Award which brought a colleague from the University of Botswana to UCF in 2022-23. And finally, all of these Fulbright and Fulbright-Hays experiences have helped to enhance my current role as the Fulbright Liaison for my home university.

To date, I have been awarded over \$3 million in grants, made over 150 professional conference presentations, and I’ve published 11 books, 42 book chapters, and 41 refereed journal articles. But don’t panic, I will not be listing and describing these published works. However, if you are really interested, just *Google* me!

Time to Move On?

Needless to say, after around 40 years at UCF where I shared these international grants, programs and experiences with colleagues and local teachers, it is nearing time for me to move along. My current hope is to become a resident of Botswana, where I might be able to work with the University of Botswana graduate students; assisting, but not overshadowing their research and dissertations. Plans regarding this phase of my life are still “under construction!”