**< Ghana's Parent Trap**

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GREGORY WARNER, HOST:

Every evening after dinner, Herman Agbavor and his 5-year-old son have a ritual.

HERMAN AGBAVOR: Herbert.

HERBERT AGBAVOR: Yes.

WARNER: Herbert climbs up into his dad's lap.

AGBAVOR: Come here.

WARNER: ...Unzips his book bag, and they start his kindergarten homework.

AGBAVOR: Circle the object below that are shaped like...

HERBERT: Circles.

AGBAVOR: Circles.

HERBERT: This one...

AGBAVOR: Show me.

HERBERT: ...And this one, and this one, and this one and this one.

AGBAVOR: OK.

WARNER: Herman, the dad, is 47. The boy on his lap in the oversized T-shirt is his oldest child. They live in a cement-block apartment in a multifamily house. They have a TV, some books, no indoor plumbing. We're in a working-class neighborhood of Accra, the capital of Ghana.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Herman has been doing some version of this homework ritual for years.

AGBAVOR: (Yawning).

WARNER: He's enrolled his son in preschool since age 1.

AGBAVOR: Daddy's tired.

WARNER: And sometimes he gets frustrated.

AGBAVOR: T-R-A-C-E - what does it mean?

HERBERT: T-R-A...

AGBAVOR: You've got to learn how to read. It's very important.

WARNER: Here in Ghana, there's a lot riding on getting your kid to read by age 5.

AGBAVOR: I'm not supposed to be reading the thing for you all the time.

WARNER: No one can pinpoint when those expectations started, but everyone feels it, this pressure.

AGBAVOR: You work. And then after, you play.

HERBERT: OK.

Daddy, I'm finished.

AGBAVOR: Let me see.

NURITH AIZENMAN, BYLINE: OK.

WARNER: I'm here at Herman's house with...

AIZENAMAN: What did you say?

WARNER: ...Nurith Aizenman, NPR correspondent.

AIZENAMAN: And why did you start him at school at 1 years old?

AGBAVOR: In fact, we don't have that opportunity.

AIZENAMAN: Herman's stuck in a job he doesn't love. And he thinks it's because he didn't get the right start.

AGBAVOR: We don't have the opportunity to...

AIZENAMAN: He's working at the airport filling out paperwork on the planes that come in. And for his son...

Do you want him to have a certain kind of job, you know...

AGBAVOR: I would love my child to be a doctor. I would love my child to be a pilot.

AIZENAMAN: But pilot, doctor, pastor, whatever his son chooses...

AGBAVOR: That have to be his choice, what he want to do.

AIZENAMAN: Like, whatever his talent is...

AGBAVOR: Fulfill it.

WARNER: Everywhere, Herman hears the message that Africa is rising. Just last year, Ghana ranked among the world's fastest-growing economies. And that makes Herman both hopeful and afraid - hopeful that his son could have better choices than he did, afraid that this new economy might leave them both behind.

AGBAVOR: Every step is a foundation for the next level.

AIZENAMAN: It's not just Herman doing this. There is a trend in Ghana and, actually, in many fast-growing African cities. Parents are putting their children in school at younger and younger ages - not day care - preschool, with homework and tests and grades.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: A few days later, walking around Herman's neighborhood, you just keep seeing all these colorful hand-painted signs.

So there are a lot of these new schools.

...For preschools.

...Around here?

AGBAVOR: Yes. There's one here. There's one here.

AIZENAMAN: Oh, really? Which one?

AGBAVOR: First Step (ph).

AIZENAMAN: First Steps, Tiny Treasures (ph).

AGBAVOR: There's another one also here.

AIZENAMAN: High Hopes School (ph).

AGBAVOR: ...One on the same road.

AIZENAMAN: Yeah. Did you consider that one for Herbert?

AGBAVOR: It's quite expensive.

AIZENAMAN: How much do they charge?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: I'm Nurith Aizenman.

WARNER: And I'm Gregory Warner. This is ROUGH TRANSLATION, a show about how the conversations we're having in the United States are playing out in some other corner of the world. In the U.S., there is a lot of hope around preschool, how it might change the lives of kids across the country. And there's a big push to get kids enrolled.

AIZENAMAN: In Ghana's capital city, they're already enrolled. Eighty percent of 3-year-olds are in school. That's twice what you see in the U.S. But the government tested these kids once they went onto elementary schools, and they realized most kids are not actually learning. Those schools are not doing what they promise.

WARNER: So this is a story about how the government of Ghana looked squarely at this problem, brought in some experts tried an experiment to fix these schools, and this fix seemed to work. Scaled up, it might help millions of kids across the continent. But then it ran into a wall when the same forces - fear and love - that were fueling these schools started getting in the way.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: We're back with the ROUGH TRANSLATION. And to tell this story of how Ghana looked at this problem and tried to fix it, we're going to do a very awkward, awful thing to do to any human being.

AIZENAMAN: We have the video.

GODAIVA GBETODEME: (Laughter).

AIZENAMAN: It's just a tiny bit.

WARNER: We are going to show them a video of themselves...

AIZENAMAN: And what we'd like to do is show you the video.

WARNER: ...Doing a job that they're not doing very well.

Is that OK?

AIZENAMAN: Is that OK? You're OK with it? OK.

Godaiva Gbetodeme is a kindergarten teacher.

GBETODEME: It's not easy. It's not easy teaching...

AIZENAMAN: She's 41 years old - round face, huge smile.

GBETODEME: So I'm doing it with love, yeah.

AIZENAMAN: A couple years ago, she was part of a research project in Ghana, and they filmed her in her classroom.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

GBETODEME: Amen. (Unintelligible).

AIZENAMAN: This is the first time she's seen the video.

Can you hear it OK?

And as she's watching this, she's just wincing.

GBETODEME: You see my empty classroom (laughter)?

AIZENAMAN: Godaiva has a particular laugh when she's uncomfortable.

GBETODEME: (Laughter) But I'm just looking at the classroom.

AIZENAMAN: What do you see?

GBETODEME: How it was empty.

AIZENAMAN: The walls are bare - no posters, nothing for the kids to look at.

GBETODEME: They're not even paying attention.

Stop that. We are in a classroom.

AIZENAMAN: She speaks sharply to the kids.

What's it like to watch this?

GBETODEME: Very sad how I was doing this.

AIZENAMAN: It makes you sad?

GBETODEME: Yes.

AIZENAMAN: For Godaiva, this gap between the teacher she wanted to be and the teacher she was - Godaiva felt it for years.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: She got into preschool teaching at age 20 because she needed a job. Her mother had died, and she had to support her siblings.

GBETODEME: So I have to hustle here and there.

AIZENAMAN: And there were all these preschools popping up around her neighborhood. They were desperate to hire.

GBETODEME: I just go to the headmaster and spoke with him.

AIZENAMAN: She applied for a job. They didn't care that she'd never taught before - that she only had a high school degree.

GBETODEME: That was my first class.

AIZENAMAN: She gets in the classroom, and she loves it.

GBETODEME: I realize that that's what God has planned for me. So now I have to get into it fully.

AIZENAMAN: She started to talk to the school owners about how can she be a better teacher. And they always gave her the same advice

GBETODEME: More homework.

AIZENAMAN: More homework.

GBETODEME: Why don't you give the children three homework. Why don't you give them four homework?

AIZENAMAN: The parents, they want to be sure that the kids aren't just sitting around - that they're learning their ABCs, 123s. They'll open the kid's book bag in front of her.

GBETODEME: The parents took the bag and open it - see how there is no homework in the child's bag. And we say, oh, we are sorry. So Monday, we will double it for the child.

AIZENAMAN: So you said don't worry. We'll give you double as much homework on Monday.

GBETODEME: So that was the game.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Everyone around her saw her job in this one way - the headmaster who ran the school, the parents who paid for it. But she was convinced there had to be more to teaching than this. Godaiva saw that there was this other preschool nearby. Tuition there is three times as much as hers. She wondered what was going on in that school.

AIZENAMAN: So she launches a kind of spy operation.

GBETODEME: Let me be truthful. Don't laugh at me.

AIZENAMAN: She kind of sneaks a peek into this school that's not too far from where she lives.

GBETODEME: So I went there, in a pretend manner.

AIZENAMAN: She actually pretends...

GBETODEME: I'm bringing my child.

AIZENAMAN: ...To be a parent.

GBETODEME: Let me say the truth.

AIZENAMAN: And her scheme worked. She got the headmistress there to show her around.

GBETODEME: Then she took me to the class. I was like, oh, wow, so this is how you do your classroom?

AIZENAMAN: What did she show you?

GBETODEME: She had Legos - shapes and different sizes.

AIZENAMAN: Shapes and different sizes.

GBETODEME: No, she had a lot of things.

AIZENAMAN: She was pretty blown away by the contrast.

GBETODEME: She had books with pictures in them.

AIZENAMAN: She did feel like this is what you can have when there's money.

GBETODEME: That's what made me go to manager and was like...

AIZENAMAN: So she tries to make the case to her headmaster - like, we should buy some more stuff for the kids. But he just tells her look. We don't have those kinds of resources. This is a school for working-class African parents.

GBETODEME: They always complain there is no money. In my school, there is no money - no money. All the time, there's no money.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GBETODEME: Is that even correct?

AIZENAMAN: Godaiva goes back to her classroom, with the bare walls, knowing that somewhere out there there's this preschool nirvana where kids have colored shapes and Legos to play with.

WARNER: Years would pass before Godaiva would find out that there was something wrong with her classroom. But unlike Legos - something tangible - this was a problem that she couldn't see.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: And the story of how she learned to see this thing, it actually begins one day in her classroom when she gets some visitors.

AIZENAMAN: She says these guys show up at her school. One has a tablet with a camera. That's when they took that video of her - the before picture. It feels a bit like a reality show. But these guys are researchers for an international group called Innovations for Poverty Action - IPA. Ghanaian officials called them in after the government tested these kids - second graders in city schools. And they realized a third of them could not read a single word of a simple story.

SHARON WOLF: The government actually came to us. We have all these kids in preschool. But children are not getting anything from it. And actually, they could be being harmed in the process.

AIZENAMAN: Sharon Wolf is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. She studies early childhood education.

WOLF: I've done this work in Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

AIZENAMAN: She gets the call to go to Ghana. She starts off by measuring what kids know.

WOLF: And one way you do that is by showing a picture and asking children to tell you what they see.

AIZENAMAN: Like a landscape with animals in it - get them to describe it.

WOLF: You can kind of count the number of words they say - get a sense of their vocabulary skills and some other things. And when we basically just asked children, what do you see in this picture, we would just get blank stares. Children could not tell us what they were seeing.

AIZENAMAN: Maybe, she thinks, they don't know the words. But...

WOLF: You could ask them where is the tree. Where is the bird? And that, they could do.

AIZENAMAN: They know the word for everything on that card. And yet when the kids are asked just generally what do you see, they're stuck.

WOLF: It became very clear that children are really not getting opportunities to do this in school.

WARNER: So Sharon started visiting classrooms in Ghana. And what she saw there was a particular kind of teaching.

GBETODEME: Attention. Good morning, school. How are you?

WARNER: You walk into one of these classrooms. You find 2-year-olds sitting at desks in rows. It's a very serious environment. There's no toys, no windows to look through. And the teacher holds up picture cards.

GBETODEME: Shoe.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN: Shoe.

WOLF: These preschools have basically just become extensions of primary schools - a lot of rote memorization.

GBETODEME: Come on. Say shoe.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN: Shoe.

GBETODEME: Shoe.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN: Shoe.

WARNER: We called up the official in charge of Ghana's elementary schools, Margaret Okai. She says most preschool teachers in Ghana, they don't have any training.

MARGARET OKAI: Sometimes when you enter their classroom, you realize that they are not able to engage the children.

WARNER: They fall back on how they learned in school, with lectures and memorization.

OKAI: And talking, talking, talking.

GBETODEME: Say nose.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN: Nose.

GBETODEME: Nose.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN: Nose.

GBETODEME: Show me your nose.

WARNER: Now, this class of 2-year-olds is onto Roman numerals.

GBETODEME: I stand for one. II stand for two. III stand for three.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

HERBERT: I want the pencil.

AGBAVOR: OK, get it.

WARNER: The dad, Herman, who we met doing homework with his son, he says this style of teaching is such a feature of life in Ghana that Ghanaians have a name for it.

AGBAVOR: We call it chew and pour.

AIZENAMAN: Chew and pour.

AGBAVOR: Yes, you chew it. And you come and pour it for the teacher.

AIZENAMAN: You chew it up from the teacher, and then you pour it back out to her.

AGBAVOR: And then you forget about it (laughter).

AIZENAMAN: You what?

AGBAVOR: You forget about it. You pass your exam and finish.

WARNER: The people in Ghana laugh about chew and pour because it's always been this way - same way Americans complain about standardized testing or why we get a whole summer off to forget everything.

OKAI: (Laughter) Chew and pour.

WARNER: Margaret Okai says this kind of teaching...

OKAI: Yes, chew and pour.

WARNER: ...It's not very effective at any age.

OKAI: They should rather engage the children more.

WARNER: But it's especially problematic for the littlest kids because there is something that young kids need that can be almost invisible to adults - unless that adult is trained to see it.

WOLF: Supporting student expression, which is trying to get children to develop their own thinking skills.

AIZENAMAN: Getting them to think about things and then articulate it back to.

WOLF: You know, who can share what they loved about today? And why did you enjoy that?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: So Sharon wondered, in a country where chew and pour was the classroom norm, what would it take for teachers to try something different? And would that change actually help students here learn?

WOLF: So we brought teachers to a training center in Accra. And they had...

AIZENAMAN: That's the capital.

WOLF: And they had five days of training that was very practical.

AIZENAMAN: Eighty schools are chosen at random. And at one of these schools is Godaiva, our former spy. She finds herself with all these other teachers sitting in a room - learning about things like young kids' brains, sensory learning, why you should seat kids in circles instead of in rows.

GBETODEME: Yes.

AIZENAMAN: So of all of these things, which of them was the most eye-opening for you - different from the way, you know, typically?

GBETODEME: The one that I like most is about our morning arrival.

AIZENAMAN: It's this morning arrival ritual. They told her when the kids first get to class you should ask them...

GBETODEME: Why are you happy? The child will tell you the reason why he or she is happy. Why are you sad?

AIZENAMAN: But if she wants the children to really answer her and not just give blank stares, Godaiva realizes she doesn't just have to ask different questions. She has to become a different kind of teacher.

GBETODEME: As a teacher, you should be approachable.

AIZENAMAN: Approachable like...

GBETODEME: If they sit on floor, I sit on floor with them.

AIZENAMAN: When they sit on the floor, she sits on the floor.

WARNER: Why didn't you do that before?

GBETODEME: I felt I'm a teacher, you know, yeah.

AIZENAMAN: And what does that mean? I am the teacher. What does that mean?

GBETODEME: I put you where you belong, yes.

AIZENAMAN: Like you need to command respect.

GBETODEME: Yeah, that's the way.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: The way Godaiva grew up, a teacher's job was to put you in your place - to teach you respect for authority. This idea of asking kids questions about their feelings and waiting for them to answer...

GBETODEME: Hmm, at the beginning...

AIZENAMAN: Her thought is...

GBETODEME: This is Ghana, yeah. We are supposed to handle children in our own way.

AIZENAMAN: A kid shouldn't be the one to initiate a conversation with an adult in Ghana. Kids shouldn't look adults in the eye even.

GBETODEME: That one is normal.

AIZENAMAN: You were supposed to be afraid of teachers.

GBETODEME: It's part and parcel of us. I remember a teacher...

AIZENAMAN: She remembers one time one of her high school teachers knocked her on the head.

GBETODEME: Knocked my head at dining hall.

AIZENAMAN: She was 16. She's in the cafeteria. She's trying to sneak some food. And this teacher - he was the French teacher. He catches her, and he just hits her really hard.

GBETODEME: I had a severe headache for more than two days.

AIZENAMAN: When she became a teacher, she did it too.

GBETODEME: Let me be frank. I knocked their head.

AIZENAMAN: You knocked their head?

GBETODEME: When they did something bad, I just...

AIZENAMAN: Now, as she sits in that training program...

GBETODEME: That keeps flashing back into my brain.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: She starts to rethink all those experiences that she's had - like that time with the French teacher, how humiliated she felt.

GBETODEME: I put my head on the table, and I cried.

AIZENAMAN: She dropped his class, never studied French again.

GBETODEME: I don't even want to see his face. And that teacher, I hate him up until today.

AIZENAMAN: Reflecting on that, Godaiva realized that she had seen that same hatred in the eyes of one of her students - a boy named Chris.

GBETODEME: He was doing something naughty, yes.

AIZENAMAN: She knocked him on the head. Now, when she sees him around the neighborhood, calls out to him...

GBETODEME: I say, Chris, why are you walking so fast like that - trying to avoid me. That child will not forgive me. It's true.

WARNER: It is totally legal in Ghana to use corporal punishment in schools though there is a debate here about whether to change that. But Godaiva came out of that training with a promise to herself. She would not lay a hand out a child again. And more importantly, she wouldn't try to put kids where they belong. She'd talk to them, ask them questions. It would be a different kind of space within the walls of her classroom - a different kind of Ghana.

GBETODEME: We are going to start.

AIZENAMAN: Visit Godaiva's classroom today, and it doesn't look anything like that video.

GBETODEME: (Singing) There is a fire on the mountain.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILDREN: (Singing) There is a fire on the mountain.

AIZENAMAN: There's not an inch of wall that is not covered with some kind of colorful something that Godaiva has made. It doesn't need to be store-bought Legos. She can cut things out of cardboard. She'll save toilet paper rolls. She tells all of her family members, like, when you're done with the toilet paper, save the roll because I can use that in my class. Instead of yelling at the kids, she just rings a bell and says hello to get their attention.

GBETODEME: Hello, hello.

AIZENAMAN: If they misbehave, she talks it through with them.

GBETODEME: Why? Michael, why do you like fight? Always you like fights. Say sorry to him.

MICHAEL: Sorry.

GBETODEME: Don't do it again, OK? Let's get him.

AIZENAMAN: All through the day, she finds ways to draw the children out in conversation. Like, there's this moment when she breaks out these straws. She wants the kids to count them into bundles of 10, and she realizes she doesn't have enough.

GBETODEME: It's not enough. I don't have enough.

AIZENAMAN: One of the little girls volunteers.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: They are selling some in our (unintelligible).

AIZENAMAN: We have some straws at the shop near my house, and Godaiva's like...

GBETODEME: Then you will buy some for me? Are you going to buy it for me?

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Yes.

AIZENAMAN: The kids are engaged. They notice things, and Sharon says Godaiva is not an outlier.

WOLF: With teachers, we saw transformative changes.

AIZENAMAN: This training, it got teachers to change their approach. When they did, their students tested better on math and reading and all these things their parents had sent them to school to learn.

WOLF: If teachers do this, your child will actually learn more of their ABC's and one, two, three's.

(SOUNDBITE OF CHILDREN CHEERING)

AIZENAMAN: And not only did the kids do better in these improved classrooms...

WOLF: We actually went back and found those kids a year later. They were going back to those classrooms where they're sitting in rows and, you know, memorizing and...

AIZENAMAN: The students continued to do better even after they left the preschool.

WOLF: So that was very exciting to see that there could be really longer-term implications of these findings.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Godaiva loves her new classroom. She loves how she is. She loves how the kids respond. She'd never want to go back to the old way. But a few months ago, something happened that left her feeling torn between the teacher she was and the teacher she wants to be.

GBETODEME: Why are you all happy, happy, happy like that? Yes, Herbert.

WARNER: It had to do with little Herbert, the 5-year-old kid who worked so hard on his homework each night.

HERBERT: Buy me toffee.

GBETODEME: Your mommy buy you toffee.

HERBERT: Yes.

GBETODEME: That's why you're happy.

HERBERT: Yes.

WARNER: Herbert is in Godaiva's class this year.

AIZENAMAN: Earlier this year, she gets a visit from Herbert's dad.

GBETODEME: He came to me.

AIZENAMAN: He steps up to this porch. Little Herbert is right there watching.

GBETODEME: When he came here, he first told me he will be going somewhere.

AIZENAMAN: So first, things start off friendly. He wants to let her know that they're going to have to take Herbert out of school for a few days for this family trip.

GBETODEME: Some sort of asking permission.

AIZENAMAN: And then he says this thing to her. He says, my son is not learning. He's being naughty.

GBETODEME: Yes. He told me lash my - I should lash his son for him.

AIZENAMAN: I need you to lash him for me.

GBETODEME: He said, lash him for me. He's not learning. Yes. So he want to - he say beat my son for me.

WARNER: Lash is kind of a general term here that can mean anything from slapping a kid's hand to something harsher.

AIZENAMAN: In that moment...

GBETODEME: I feel its pressure.

AIZENAMAN: ...Godaiva felt uncomfortable and a little lonely.

GBETODEME: You will not feel comfortable within you

AIZENAMAN: She knows she's got to keep parents happy. These preschools are a business.

GBETODEME: Yes. If you don't do things to please them, don't - forget it. Their children are not coming to you.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: Facing this disappointed father, she didn't feel like she could begin to explain to him everything that she had learned in this training about brain science, how a child learns, alternate strategies for disciplining kids. But she does wish that parents could know this stuff.

GBETODEME: It will help. It will help a lot. If parents have that training, I think it will help.

WARNER: So you want the training you got at least the parents to get some of that training, too.

GBETODEME: Yes.

WARNER: Sharon, the researcher working with the Ghanaian government, she also wanted to bring parents on board but for a different reason.

WOLF: Parents' demand is really what drives the choice of schools.

WARNER: Parents decide where to send their kids. Parents decide what the curriculum is going to be.

WOLF: And so we knew that if we wanted to really take on the issues that Ghana's education system was going to be facing over the next decade or more, we had to think about the role of parents.

AIZENAMAN: So Sharon designs a second piece of her experiment.

WOLF: We created videos.

(SOUNDBITE OF VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #1: (As character) In part one and two of this training...

WOLF: They were acted out by local actors.

AIZENAMAN: She already has the 80 schools where the teachers were trained. That's Godaiva's group. And she picks another 80 schools at random. And there, she gives the teachers the exact same training, but then she also gathers the parents of their students.

(SOUNDBITE OF VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #1: (As character) You as a parent can support by asking your child's k-t teacher about activities you can do at home.

WOLF: They were focused on why play is important for learning for young children, what parents can do to support their child's learning both at home and through the school and trying to encourage more parent and teacher communication.

(SOUNDBITE OF VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #1: (As character) Children learn by talking and questioning in both your local language and in English.

WOLF: A screened video followed by a discussion, really emboldening parents.

(SOUNDBITE OF VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED ACTOR #2: (As character) It is very important that you speak with her teachers, understand what she is learning and how you can help support her and the school. When the teachers see you around...

WOLF: Yeah. We thought this was going to help the teachers and the children even more.

AIZENAMAN: So you were expecting to, like, go through the data and, like, this was going to be the best of the bunch.

WOLF: Yeah (laughter) that is what we thought. Yeah.

AIZENAMAN: That is not what she found.

WOLF: This is one of our most puzzling findings that we really still are trying to get to the bottom of, but we found that when you add this parenting program to the teacher training, all those gains that we saw for children around their positive, you know, improvements in their early academic and their social and emotional skills completely were counteracted. They went back to zero.

AIZENAMAN: It's like they're no different from the group where nothing was done.

WOLF: Right.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WOLF: All those gains that we saw for children are erased.

AIZENAMAN: We told this to teacher Godaiva...

GBETODEME: I'm not getting you.

AIZENAMAN: ...And she was floored.

GBETODEME: Teacher is not improving.

AIZENAMAN: This training that was so transformative on the teachers -

the teachers were worse, did not improve.

GBETODEME: Why?

AIZENAMAN: When that same training was also given to the parents, did it have the opposite effect?

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: When ROUGH TRANSLATION returns, the problem with parents.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: I'm Gregory Warner. This is ROUGH TRANSLATION. We're telling a story with Nurith Aizenman about a remarkably successful intervention to transform Ghana's preschools that had just run into a weird hurdle. In the first group of schools, just a week of teacher training helped students do better. But in the second group, when teachers were trained and they showed parents a video...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: You, as a parent.

WARNER: ...That encouraged them to get involved in the classroom...

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: By asking your child's KG...

WARNER: ...The kids didn't improve at all.

WOLF: So the first thought was, what happened in the classrooms?

AIZENAMAN: Sharon goes back to her data.

WOLF: I was going through every single school.

AIZENAMAN: All those before-and-after videos of the teachers.

WOLF: Two-hundred and forty schools.

AIZENAMAN: She wondered, what had changed in those classrooms?

WOLF: Are they doing these things that they were trained on?

AIZENAMAN: Are the teachers putting up colorful posters? Yes. Are they finding nicer ways to discipline the kids? Yes.

WOLF: The one thing they didn't do was supporting student expression.

AIZENAMAN: They didn't ask kids those really simple questions - how do you feel, what do you think?

WOLF: For whatever reason, the parenting meetings got them to pull back. And so we decided to just do interviews with parents and teachers and ask them, what was their experience?

AIZENAMAN: As far as she could tell, parents had no issues with the training. She calls up some teachers. They don't seem to think that they're doing anything different than what they were taught in the training.

WOLF: Right.

AIZENAMAN: The only thing they do tell her is that more parents were coming to them to talk about their children.

WOLF: But the content of what they talked to their teachers about was concern that their child isn't learning enough and that they want the teacher to help them get their child in line.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: Maybe there was something happening under the surface that neither the parents nor the teachers even realized.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GBETODEME: Yes. He told me I should lash his son for him.

WARNER: You remember that conversation that the teacher, Godaiva, had with the dad on the porch?

GBETODEME: So you want to say, beat my son for me?

WARNER: Well, we asked Herman, the dad, about this conversation.

AGBAVOR: That's a fact. That's a fact.

AIZENAMAN: OK. Like, you're remembering it now?

AGBAVOR: Yeah.

WARNER: He didn't say, beat my child. He said...

AGBAVOR: Don't let him play too much.

WARNER: ...Don't let him play too much.

AGBAVOR: When he's playing too much, make sure that you put him right.

AIZENAMAN: What does that mean?

AGBAVOR: Correct him. Discipline him.

WARNER: He wanted her to show his son who was boss.

AIZENAMAN: And to let her know whatever she needed to do, he'd have her back.

AGBAVOR: Giving her a confidence.

AIZENAMAN: You're trying to give her confidence.

AGBAVOR: Yes, to go full steam...

AIZENAMAN: Yeah.

AGBAVOR: ...And make sure my child succeeds.

AIZENAMAN: He wanted her to be the authority figure that would get his child to buckle down.

GBETODEME: Yes. Sometimes I feel its pressure.

AIZENAMAN: That's not the kind of authority figure that Godaiva had vowed to be.

GBETODEME: You're doing your best that you can for the child, for the schoolchildren.

AIZENAMAN: Does it make you question yourself? Do you...

GBETODEME: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes it does.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

AIZENAMAN: Godaiva had promised herself she would not intimidate students. She'd create a different Ghana within the walls of her classroom. And yet in that moment on the porch, Godaiva bends a bit.

GBETODEME: I called the child. When I called the child, I ask, Herbert, did you hear what your daddy told me to do to you? He say, yes, I heard it. Then it's, like, the moment I say that then you see that he's kind of timid.

AIZENAMAN: Little Herbert got quiet.

GBETODEME: Yes. Then he don't want to be too active as he was doing before, and that was it.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: What exactly happened in this moment that was an otherwise fleeting event in the course of a school day? A dad spoke to a teacher, and that teacher spoke to a child. There were no loud disagreements about curriculum or educational methods. But somehow the parent's hopes and fears rubbed off on the teacher, and the teacher changed her behavior. So Sharon wondered, might conversations like this one be the reason that the teachers in that second group were less likely to engage their students?

WOLF: These conversations with parents might have affected their practices in ways that they weren't fully aware of.

WARNER: If the message that the parents were sending was that teachers had to be more of an authority figure for their child, what an authority figure is in Ghana is someone who does not ask your opinion.

AIZENAMAN: Sharon says there's an American parallel here.

WOLF: That's something we've seen in our education system. Kindergarten and preschool are becoming more and more academic and less and less focused on play. In our concern that children are going to learn enough and succeed in our society, we're doubling down on these academic focus and losing a lot of the essence of how children actually learn.

AIZENAMAN: Even though education experts like Sharon say, no, no, no, this isn't the right way to do it. We shouldn't be giving homework and tests to little kids, it's hard for her to see how to reverse this trend.

WOLF: Yeah, these questions and concerns are not unique to Ghana, that's for sure.

AIZENAMAN: Does it raise, like, a bit of a moral dilemma? Because, like, you're trying to do the best for the kids, and it's like...

I asked Sharon...

Do you have to kind of keep the parents in the dark about what's actually happening in the school?

WOLF: That is kind of our proposal moving forward.

AIZENAMAN: Until they figure this problem out, she's recommending to the Ghanaian government they hold off on getting any parents involved.

WOLF: Let's focus on the teachers for now until we can figure out how to engage parents in an effective way.

AIZENAMAN: Yeah. Is there a part of you that's, like, slightly uncomfortable with that?

WOLF: It makes me think we - you know, Ghanaian parents are doing a lot to invest in their children, and they care about their education. And in the way that we tried to engage them, they ended up being a problem.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: On our last day visiting Herman's house, it was a Saturday. Little Herbert was finally free of homework, and he's drawing a picture - orange shirt, stick-figure legs and a big smile.

AIZENAMAN: Oh, this is your daddy.

HERBERT: Daddy.

AIZENAMAN: This is your daddy.

HERBERT: I draw him smiling.

AIZENAMAN: Smiling. Why is he happy? What makes your dad happy?

HERBERT: Because he pay my school fees for me.

AIZENAMAN: Because he paid your school fees for you.

HERBERT: Yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

WARNER: It would be easy to make the parents the villains of this story, the ones trapped in their habits, dragging everyone else, the kids, the teachers, back with them. If you talk to Herman, the dad, about these new educational methods that Godaiva's trying, he is pleasantly surprised to learn about them. He wasn't part of the group of parents that saw Sharon's video, so he didn't know Godaiva had that special training. But in talking to the teacher, he might have made her less confident to try those methods.

AGBAVOR: You may think like that, but that's not what I meant. No.

WARNER: But maybe - I don't know if this happened, but it sounds like you have a lot of - can I say? - anxiety about you...

AGBAVOR: Passion.

WARNER: Passion - to make sure Herbert's future is not...

AGBAVOR: Tamper with.

AIZENAMAN: Tampered with.

WARNER: And maybe your passion, your anxiety, your concern, communicated itself to her and made her feel...

AGBAVOR: Yeah, that's a possibility that - yes.

AIZENAMAN: The thing is he can't see entrusting his son's education to anyone else.

AGBAVOR: Herbert is my first son.

AIZENAMAN: You don't have room for error with him.

AGBAVOR: We can't do that. We can't do that because look; if you're a one-eyed man, you don't play with sand.

AIZENAMAN: Herman feels like you can't afford to get it wrong.

If you're a one-eyed man, you don't play with sand.

AGBAVOR: Because sand can enter your one eye, and you can't see anymore.

AIZENAMAN: You only have one eye, so you don't have an eye to spare.

AGBAVOR: So we don't play with sand. That's what it is.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "DEBI DEBI")

M.ANIFEST: (Rapping in foreign language).

WARNER: This story is part of an NPR series called How To Raise A Human, and check out some other podcast episodes. Hidden Brain takes on the stories that parents tell themselves. Code Switch looks at how we can inherit our grandparents' trauma. And as part of that series, we have a question for you. As a parent, was there ever a time when you felt like you maybe pushed your child too hard or not enough? Or in your childhood, did your parents ever push you too hard or not enough? Submit your story to npr.org/herbert and we'll feature some of those stories on NPR. This episode was produced by Jess Jiang; editing and scoring by Marianne McCune; music by John Ellis. And thank you to the Ghanaian rapper M.anifest for use of his tune, "Debi Debi," which is featured on his album "The Price Of Free."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "DEBI DEBI")

M.ANIFEST: (Rapping) Education getting poorer at a higher price, less quality teachers and more strikes. Students no dey learn, chew and pour all night (ph).

WARNER: Sharon Wolf's collaborators on the Ghana teacher training study were professors Larry Aber of NYU and Jerry Behrman of UPenn. Also thanks to Innovations for Poverty Action, which organized the study. They do randomized control trials around the world. Thanks to their Ghana staff - Bridget Konadu Gyamfi, Edward Tsinigo and Henry Atimone. Also thanks to Loic Watine and Jeffrey Mosenkis, who was an early sounding board for this podcast. Thanks to Tim McDonnell and Juliet Ediwachmateen (ph) as well as the many teachers and headmasters in Accra who welcomed us into their classrooms. Editorial feedback from Anya Kamenetz, Bryant Urstadt, Dan Charles, Kenny Malone, Michael Oba (ph), Sana Krasikov, Sarah Gonzalez, Hanna Rosin and Vikki Valentine. The ROUGH TRANSLATION high council includes Neal Carruth Anya Grundmann and Mathilde Piard. Katie Daugert fact-checked this episode; mastering by Natasha Branch.

We'd love to hear from you, what you thought of the episode. Reach out to us on Facebook - @roughtranslation - or on Twitter - @roughly. And if you'd like more stories like this in your podcast feed, give us a rating or review on Apple podcasts or tell a friend about the show. I'm Gregory Warner, and next week we got an extra special show. It's a collaboration. It'll drop Friday, June 29. See you then with more ROUGH TRANSLATION.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "DEBI DEBI")

M.ANIFEST: (Rapping in foreign language).

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