

Education students in Zambia – comparative education in action

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study visit for undergraduate education studies students from Bath Spa University to Mufulira, Zambia, established in 2005. They were self-funding and participating in a second year undergraduate module entitled 'Education in Africa' which examines generic educational and development issues through case studies in different African countries. The visit builds on a link with Mufulira College of Education and affords students the opportunity to work within different primary school contexts for a period of three weeks. The paper argues that this visit represents an exercise in first-hand comparative education study, since their assignments reveal that students have reflected in some depth on the cultural contexts within which their classroom observations have been made. The discussion reflects upon the impacts of the visit and issues raised by it.

Key words: *international education, comparative education, Africa*

Introduction

The relationship between Bath Spa University and Mufulira College of Education was established in 2004, building on a British Council-funded link between a cluster of primary schools centred around Ansford Community College in Somerset and a similar cluster of primary schools surrounding Mufulira High School in Copperbelt, Zambia. Representatives from Bath Spa University and Mufulira College of Education arranged a study visit for 10 undergraduate education studies students from Bath Spa to Mufulira in May/June 2005. They were self-funding and participating in a second year undergraduate module entitled 'Education in Africa' which examines generic educational and development issues through case studies in different African countries. The Zambian co-ordinator of the placement visited the UK in March 2006 to visit UK primary schools (funded by Bath Spa University) and to teach on the module, preparing the 2006 group for their visit. The study visit was repeated by 11 students in 2006 and again with a larger group of 14 in 2007.

Bath Spa University's education studies programme has a strong emphasis upon international and comparative education, since we believe that studying the systems and practices of other countries can hold a mirror up to our own contexts, recognising those features which are deeply cultural and those from which we could usefully learn (Alexander, 2000). The Education Studies degree programme at Bath Spa University has included a strong global dimension since its inception, having drawn significantly on a pre-existing International Education programme. All students undertake a module entitled 'Education for Change' in their first year, introducing them to global issues in education, and they can follow this up with a number of optional international and global modules - including Education in Africa. There is evidence that these modules make a profound impact upon students' preconceptions about the world and their awareness of educational issues (Hicks, 2004), but

there are few opportunities to experience education in different cultural contexts at first hand as the university is located within a predominantly rural, white community. Although the university participates in the Erasmus scheme, there is evidence that student take-up is declining nationally (Osborn 2006) owing to the relatively long-term nature of the placements (a whole semester) and the requirements to study in another European language. The four-week visit to Zambia therefore represents an attempt to engage students in a deeper reflection upon their own educational experiences and aspirations through first-hand experience of a profoundly different context.

The Education in Africa Module

This module grew out of a South African School Experience module (1998-2002), so has as a major focus the development of primary education in South Africa, from the apartheid system of schooling set up in the 1950s through to the changes which have come about since the election of the African National Congress government in 1994. However, the module has broadened to consider the effects of colonialism, globalisation, conflict and epidemics such as HIV/AIDS upon the past, present and future of education in the continent of Africa. It does this through case studies such as that of Eritrea, where the impact of several years of war with Ethiopia provides the context for a newly emerging education system. The module also explores links with schooling in the UK, through migration, curriculum content and the involvement of NGOs such as Oxfam. The module can be taken without the Zambia visit, and has the following aims:

- to provide an overview of African history, particularly that of the colonial and post-colonial periods, to contextualise the study of education in the continent of Africa;
- to outline some of the challenges facing independent sub-Saharan African countries in providing universal primary education;
- to use the case study of South Africa to highlight some of the issues raised by attempting to change from an authoritarian, divisive educational system to one that is more democratic and equitable;
- to highlight other case studies of African countries illustrating different pathways towards successful African education;
- (for students making the optional Zambian visit) to use the case study of schools in Mufulira, Zambia to highlight some of the issues faced by educators in sub-Saharan Africa;
- (for students making the optional Zambian visit) to draw comparisons and make links between education within Zambian and British cultural settings.

Zambian Primary Education

Zambia, formerly Northern Rhodesia, gained independence in 1964. It is now one of the poorest countries in the world, with an education system that relies heavily on external aid. It is a large country with a small population (around 11 million at present), but rapid population growth and the re-introduction of free primary education in 2002 is putting an almost impossible burden on education provision; the target of Universal Primary Education by 2015 seems a vain hope. Other problems include the immense disparity between urban and rural provision and the decimation of the teaching force by HIV/AIDS. Nonetheless there is optimism, with the implementation of exciting experiments in educational methodology and new strategies for bringing more children into school. These include the Programme for the Advancement of Girls' Education (PAGE) initiative, which has been very

successful in reducing gender disparity in primary education in recent years, though the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in this area are yet to be met. This forms a fascinating contrast to the situation in England, where girls appear to be out-performing boys in many aspects of primary education and where boys' achievement has been the focus of national concern and government initiatives. Other recent initiatives include the *Breakthrough to learning* programme, designed to raise standards of literacy. This includes the 'four corner' method which bears similarities to group work strategies recommended by the National Literacy Strategy? in England. Zambia has also recently introduced a more relevant curriculum that deals with local issues (e.g. the geography of Zambia, cultivating Zambian foods).

There are three types of primary school in Zambia. Government schools (also called 'basic schools') follow the national government curriculum. These are subdivided into 'lower basic' (grades 1-4), 'middle basic' (grades 1-7) and 'upper basic' (grades 1-9), though there are few trained teachers for grades 8 and 9. Since removing fees, government schools have become very large (over 1000 pupils). To accommodate all the pupils, grades 1-4 have two shifts (6.45 – 10.10 and 11-15.00), often with the same teacher. Grades 5 and 6 run from 6.45-12.00 and 12.00 to 17.00, but usually employ different teachers for the two shifts. Most teaching is in English, but there is provision for local languages in grade 1. There is also a growing private sector. These schools are established as businesses, often run by people without a teaching background. Many are run in private homes, garages and other structures. They tend to follow a government syllabus, but not the most recent initiatives. Frequently, they employ teachers who are unable to obtain posts in government schools. The fees vary depending on residential area and facilities (e.g. computers). All teaching is in English only, no local languages. The third type of school is the community school. These are voluntary schools in rural or very poor areas, established by government and run by the Zambia Community Schools Secretariat. Some are supported by women's organisations and other NGOs, but usually receive negligible funding (e.g. free books). Community schools are aimed at the most vulnerable children, and have no uniform. They follow a different syllabus from government schools, consisting of a four-stage programme (across a seven year course). At the end of this pupils sit grade 7 examinations and may be accepted into an upper basic school. There is often a wide age range in a single grade (e.g. pupils between the ages of 6 and 18), and the mentors (teachers) are not trained or paid, acting as volunteers.

The Mufulira Placement

Participating students are paired with primary trainee teachers at Mufulira College and spend three weeks learning alongside their Zambian colleagues for a day per week on the Zambian Teacher Education and Training (ZATEC) programme. They spend four days per week observing pedagogy in nine Zambian primary schools of different types (government, private and community). Whilst in schools, students are given guidance on aspects for study:

Questions to ask the principal (headteacher)

- Does your school have a link with a school in Castle Cary/Somerset?
- If so, what kinds of activities has this involved? (visits, letters, projects)
- What have been the benefits of the link for your school?
- How many children in the school? (age groups, classes, grades)
- How is the school funded?
- What changes/developments have happened in your school over the past 1/2/3 years? (building, curriculum, teaching)

- Are you making any special provision for girls' education?
- What are your plans for the future?
- May we take photographs in your classrooms? (make arrangements to send some to them)

In the classroom

- How is the classroom laid out? Take photos, draw a sketch map.
- Record timings (length of school day, starting and ending times of lessons, how long teacher spends talking etc.)
- What 'subjects' are included in the curriculum over the four days of your observation?
- Is there any evidence of an 'African' aspect to the curriculum, e.g. local knowledge included, Zambian examples
- What teaching styles do you observe (e.g. 'rote learning', lecturing, question and answer, group activities, one-to-one interaction with children)
- How are children recording their work? (e.g. just verbal, writing – see guidelines, drawing, on paper/boards/slates?)
- What is the relationship between pupils and teacher? (Authoritarian? Mutual respect? Friendly? Relaxed?) How do pupils show respect for teacher?
- How does the teacher manage behaviour? (Corporal punishment? Rewards? Verbal rebukes?)
- How does the teacher assess pupils' progress? (Exams, tests, records, marking work etc.)
- Does the teacher treat or respond to girls and boys differently? Are girls getting a good deal in this classroom?
- Choose a child to observe for a day and interview him/her about his/her life. Write notes on 'a day in the life of a Zambian child'

Assessment of the Placement

Students' observations and analysis of the wider issues raised by this visit are written up and submitted as the formal assessment for the module. Their 4-5000 word report is in the following format:

- Introduction (10%)
In this section students clearly set out their rationale for going to Zambia. This should include a clear articulation of their aims and objectives for the experience.
- Setting the Scene (20%)
This section should give a background to the current state of the educational system in Zambia, showing the results of students' background reading and describing recent curriculum initiatives. They should give a context for the placement by describing relevant features of Mufulira and its cultural and educational context.
- The Placement (40%)
This section should give a clear account of the essential aspects of the placement, using students' diaries to illustrate important points that they wish to make. They are encouraged to make this section fairly factual, but to try to place their observations in the broader context established by the previous

section. They are encouraged to include photographs and extracts from interviews with teachers or pupils to illustrate key points.

- **Conclusion (30%)**
This section should contain students' critical reflections on the placement. They should analyse what were for them the most significant features of the placement, including the issues it raised for them and how they intend to respond to them. They should also draw comparisons between educational contexts in Zambia and the UK, particularly the issues facing girls' education within the two countries. Students should also give an indication of how they think that the placement will influence the rest of their course, and how it has affected them personally as emerging professionals.

Impact on Students

All participants in the Zambia placement speak of it as a 'life-changing experience'. The following quotes illustrate the impact it has upon students' thinking about education and their own career paths:

As an emerging professional I have realised that I have developed a clear passion for global education. The experience I have gained from my time in Zambia will be beneficial to future teaching situations."

This placement in Mufulira has been the most wonderful experience of my life so far. I hope it will affect the way in which I live my life and help me to appreciate what I have got. I believe that this placement will influence the way in which I think about education throughout the rest of my course.

From this amazing experience I now look at our country very differently.

This experience has... increased my determination to become a teacher since Zambia has shown me how education is the key to all future developments.

Being able to understand some of the issues facing educators in Africa I will be in a better position to encourage existing links or set up new ones in schools I will teach in. Personally, the trip has been an amazing life experience and a great opportunity for me to grow in self-confidence and I have made many new friends.

Discussion

The Bath Spa University visit to Zambia is arguably an exercise in first-hand comparative education, which has a long and distinguished history. Broadfoot (2000: 369) defines its particular contribution as follows:

... (the) particular contribution of comparative education is to highlight the lessons to be learned from a systematic and scholarly engagement with the specificities of cultural norms and values, language and tools.

Through their diaries and assignments, students have reflected in some depth on the cultural contexts within which their classroom observations have been made. For example, in

referring to the Programme for the Advancement of Girl's Education (PAGE), students acknowledge the cultural disadvantages girls continue to experience in accessing education and maintaining enrolment, necessitating a range of interventions and support strategies. They were then able to compare this with the situation in the UK where girls are relatively advantaged within the culture of primary classrooms and tend to outperform boys. They have also discussed the issues surrounding education in mother tongue (in this case Bemba) in grades 1 and 2 within government schools, whilst private schools insist upon English as the medium of instruction for all ages.

The benefits of a similar placement undertaken by student teachers from Canterbury Christ Church College visiting India have been documented by Scoffam (2004: 40):

Students who participate find their teaching is enriched and other students and colleagues learn from their experiences. There is an impact on the entire cohort of ITET students which enhances their perspective of the 'developing world'. Now that the programme has been running for a few years, the impact on local schools in Kent is also becoming more apparent. Children in a number of classes have established email links with pupils in south India.

Although our students are not on a teacher training programme, many subsequently undertake a PGCE, and the impact of the first group to visit Zambia in 2005 was evident in their school practice. The schools in Mufulira had pre-existing links with schools around Castle Cary, Somerset, but new links have been forged on the initiative of these students. They have also contributed to a Global Learning day for schools in the Bath area, and several have chosen to conduct third year research projects on an issue arising from their visit (such as girls' education and comparison of provision for visually impaired children in England and Zambia).

One issue which is a continual source of difficulty is that of funding. Messer and Wolter (2007) found that that participation in student exchange programmes depends significantly on the socio-economic background of students, and the self-funded nature of the Bath Spa trip makes equality of access to this experience impossible to achieve. Students are encouraged to apply to funding bodies for travel grants, but these are very difficult to secure. Without any external source of funding for the placement, any reciprocal visit by Zambian students is out of the question and the charge of elitism will be difficult to avoid.

Conclusions and Future Plans

The experience of running this placement for three years and observing its effects on the participants have convinced me of its value in providing a powerful, first-hand, comparative context. Ideally, it should be a reciprocal arrangement as currently the Bath Spa students gain much more from the visit than their Zambian hosts. Unfortunately we have as yet not managed to secure funding to make this study visit reciprocal, so that the paired Zambian students can spend time in UK primary schools. We applied, unsuccessfully, to the British Council 'England-Africa Partnerships' scheme in 2007, and are in the process of making an application under the Department for International Development (DfID) Development Partnerships in Higher Education programme. In the meantime the visit is running again in 2008, with the university funding a pre-visit from the new Principal of Mufulira College of Education in order to further strengthen links.

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