The Role of First-hand Experience in the Development Education of University Students

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study visit to rural Zambia undertaken by groups of undergraduates studying education at a small university in the UK. The research conducted around the visit sought to answer the question: 'does first-hand experience of a developing country's education system challenge British students' preconceptions of 'the South' and help them to understand development issues?' In order to answer this question we employed a case-study methodology. Selected participants' written reflections upon the Zambian visit were analysed, comparing the insights gained with the group's preconceptions at the beginning of the module. These case-study students were also interviewed to probe issues arising from their written accounts. Initial findings suggest that the first-hand experience of education in a sub-Saharan African country had substantially augmented their learning from the taught module, deepening understanding and expanding the affective and skills dimensions. Each of the case study students had brought different preconceptions to the experience and these were challenged or – in some cases – reinforced. This paper reports findings from the case studies and discusses implications for the design of similar study visits.

Keywords: undergraduate students, Africa, perceptions, stereotypes, beliefs, study visit, impact

Introduction

This article aims to explore some of the beliefs and attitudes of a group of British undergraduate students concerning aspects of African culture and education, and how these beliefs were made explicit and challenged through a study visit to schools in the Copperbelt, Zambia. The study visit was designed to support the learning gained through an undergraduate module on Education in Africa through first hand experience of an African education system; to provide participants with insight into lives outside of their own and to help them make links between their own experiences of education, their potential future professional lives as teachers and the very different context of education in 'the South'. The authors – one of whom is the organiser of the visit and co-ordinator of the associated module – undertook the

research leading to this paper in order to find out the degree to which participants' responses and understanding of development issues such as inequality and dependency had changed following the visit.

Background

In Shaw and Wainryb's (1999) research on university students' perceptions of the Majority World, they found a widespread perception of homogeneity concerning the beliefs and practices of individuals in 'other' cultures, a view that 'excludes analyses of the dynamics of societies, including the many struggles, conflicts and disagreements among people in asymmetrical relations of power' and 'oversimplifies aspects of what appear to be multifaceted and often conflict ridden, cultural and psychological realities' (Shaw and Wainryb, 1999:469). Brown (2006) argues that an emphasis on poverty in student beliefs creates the perception that the sole remedy is through charitable donation, a view that reiterates the neocolonial stereotype of the 'South' as needy and passive. Elsewhere, Shih (2002:108) has identified perceptions of the 'Third World' as 'humble', 'deferential' and 'appreciative', which she argues reflect stereotyped, racialised depictions. This may be linked to Lerner's (1981) assertion that individuals have a tendency to perceive the world as a fair and just place where people deserve outcomes they receive. Rubin and Peplau (1975) argue that this serves to maintain a view of the world as an ordered and controlled environment in an otherwise chaotic universe. This belief may be pervasive through society; Sidanius and Pratto (1993) have identified beliefs that reinforce social hierarchies even among disadvantaged groups. The comfort and contentment of these beliefs may thus be a coping mechanism for the chaotic and stressful weight of global problems such as poverty.

McRae (1990:78) argues that development education can challenge such beliefs, leading to affective growth and change: 'When issues of disparity are studied in relation to poverty ... education and health, students are presented with issues which call for an examination of personal, national and global values'. This focus on changing perceptions underpins the four defining aims of global learning as articulated by the Development Education Association (2010): 'critical and creative thinking; self-awareness and open-mindedness towards difference; understanding of global issues and power relationships; and optimism and action for a better world'. Brown and Shah (2009: 4) argue for self-reflection: '...an important element of critical global thinking involves situating ourselves in the global'. However, this is difficult where there is physical and cultural separation, students have limited life experiences and educators have limited resources (McRae, 1990). Thus, 'felt knowledge', which may materialise during study visits, makes development issues immediate to the learner and 'address(es) some of the problems spawned by the relational nature of development education' (McRae, 1990:113). Understanding the process of changing beliefs is particularly important as Hine *et al* (2005:300) argue:

'Knowing exactly how individuals understand important social problems, like poverty in developing nations, puts us in a much stronger position to develop programs to change erroneous beliefs and encourage humanitarian behavior'.

The work of Kambutu and Nganga (2007) provides some insight into the process of continuity and change of American pre-service teachers' stereotypes concerning countries of the South. Students participated in a cultural immersion program to Kenya, completing pre and post visit surveys. While the data revealed gains in awareness, understanding and appreciation of the host culture, aspects of ethnocentricity remained. Initial preconceptions of developing countries were centred around apprehension, education and lack of modern amenities (Kambutu and Nganga, 2007:3). These preconceptions may have stemmed from little awareness and understanding of lived experiences of 'other' cultures, resulting in a measurement of mental images against standards from their own culture (see Finney and Orr, 1995). Although their students' post-visit reflections evidenced some change in perceptions of Kenya, participants revealed other degrees of ethnocentrism as they referred to their own cultural practices as the only point of reference. Kambutu and Nganga's participants professed their appreciation for their own lives in America, with statements such as 'I am really grateful for what I have in the USA'. This is consistent with McRae's (1990:70) conception of ethnocentrism where 'Us and Them' is used to differentiate between the people of developing and industrialized countries, inviting comparisons. Their ethnocentrism is explained by Kambutu and Nganga as 'cognitive disbelief', the inability to make sense of new and unexpected experiences. In other words, while new knowledge was able to complicate students' preconceptions, it did not dismantle ethnocentric beliefs.

In order to strengthen visit participants' understanding of postcolonial influences and to help them reflect upon their beliefs Martin (2008) argues for a stronger critical literacy framework within North-South linking. Andreotti and Warwick (2007:1) describe critical literacy as a way of helping students analyze 'relationships amongst language, power, social practices, identities and inequalities, to imagine 'otherwise', to engage ethically with difference and to understand the potential implications of their thoughts and actions'. It is based on the assumption that knowledge is partial, incomplete and constructed according to one's context and experiences, and as a result, it is imperative to engage with one's own perspectives as well as other perspectives to transform views, identities and relationships. This process of reflection on assumptions and reconciling them with present experiences may cause discomfort, but the value of 'unfinishedness' should result in more open-minded and dynamic beliefs. However, the entire premise that simple exposure to different cultures can dismantle stereotypes and build stronger understanding of development has been challenged (Lee, 2006). Hutchings and Smart (2007) caution that some study visits to countries of the South continue to reinforce stereotypes and inequalities. This will be examined further in this article as

we look at the narratives of three students on experiential learning gained from a student visit to Zambia.

Methods

All of the participants of this study attend the same small British university and are enrolled on the Bachelor of Arts Education Studies programme, which has a strong emphasis upon international and comparative education. The focus on internationalism is premised on the belief that studying the systems and practices of other countries can hold a mirror up to our own contexts and help students recognise those features which are deeply cultural – but from which we can still learn – and those which are more directly transferable (Alexander, 2000). The programme has included a strong global dimension and there is evidence that international education modules make a profound impact upon students' preconceptions about the world and their awareness of educational issues (Hicks, 2004). However, 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 and draws many of its students from the locality. The introduction of a four-week study 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 relationship between the British university and a Zambian College of Education was established in 2004, building on a British Council-funded link between clusters of schools in the localities of the respective institutions. Participating British students 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 module provides a strong historical, social, political and economic context for the study of education in Africa; Finney and Orr (1995) stress that conveying information and providing cross-cultural experiences will be ineffective without political and social contextualisation to change prejudices and misunderstandings. Participating students are paired with primary trainee teachers at the Zambian College and spend three weeks learning alongside their Zambian colleagues for a day per week in a teacher training programme. They spend four days per week observing pedagogy in three types of primary school (government, private and community). Whilst in schools, students are given guidance on aspects of pedagogy and curriculum to focus their study. Students' observations and analysis of the wider issues raised by this visit are written up as a report and submitted for the formal assessment for the module.

The research conducted with participants in a 2008 visit to the Zambian Copperbelt sought to answer the question: 'in what ways does first-hand experience of a developing country's education system challenge British students' preconceptions

and help them to understand development issues?' In order to answer this question we employed a case-study methodology (Adelman *et al,* 1984). The case studies were selected by a process of successive sampling. Initially, all students taking the Education in Africa elective (n = 20), whether part of the Zambia visit or not, completed a short questionnaire concerning their conceptions of Africa and African education at the beginning and end of the module (February and May 2008 respectively; see Tables 1 and 2). These provided the background data with which to compare the insights evidenced in the written reports of those who had visited Zambia (n = 9), undertaken in August 2008. Following initial analysis of these written reports using qualitative data analysis software to identify common themes, three students were selected for interview on the basis of their different responses to the experience as evidenced through their reports. Between them, the reports from these three also contained elements of all the themes arising from the reports, as coded using the qualitative analysis software. These interviews were conducted in October 2008 by the author not involved in organising the visit or co-ordinating the module, in order to reduce the pressure on interviewees to 'be polite' about either experience – although the knowledge that the authors were working jointly may have influenced some answers. The interviews were individual and semi-structured, including some common questions and other respondent-specific questions to probe issues arising from their written reports of the visit. Interview transcripts and written accounts were analysed using some elements of constant comparison to derive themes directly from the data, and are presented thematically.

Table 1: Initial Questionnaire

Previous experience of an African country (if any)

Other international education modules studied (if any)

1. When you think of 'Africa', what images come into your mind? (be honest, there are no right or wrong answers here)

2. To what extent do you think these images are true?

3. Are there challenges that you think have particularly affected Africa more than anywhere else?

4. How might these challenges affect education in an African country

5. What do you think 'colonialism' means?

6. What impact do you think colonialism has had on Africa?

7. Why do you think some Westerners might be nervous about going to Africa?

8. What do you think the main differences are between schools in Africa and the UK?

9. What do you think the main similarities are between schools in Africa and the UK?

Table 2: End of module Questionnaire

1. How do you think your images of Africa have changed over the module?

2. How have your ideas about education in Africa changed over the module?

3. Have you identified any more similarities between your education and someone in, say, Zambia?

4. Have you identified any more differences between your education and a Zambian's?

5. What difference has the Education in Africa module made to your understanding of Africa and African education?

The accounts presented are the authors' interpretations of the participants' views and are necessarily written from the perspective of university tutors, although the case studies have been shared with the participants prior to inclusion. All three students were 21 years old at the time of the interview and their names have been changed. The three participants' gender, ethnic background, experience visiting other countries and preconceived notions of 'Africa' are broadly representative of the group of nine students that participated in the visit as well as the 20 students who took the module. Simon was the only male participant in the placement. He is white and was brought up in a middle-class family in a medium-sized city in the South West of England. Lynn is a second year education student with an Iranian ethnic heritage and was brought up in a middle-class neighbourhood on the out-skirts of London. She was registered on an undergraduate route with a guaranteed place on the postgraduate teacher training programme following graduation. Tracy is a white, undergraduate education studies student who comes from a middle-class family in a medium-sized city in the South of England. At the time of the interview, she was considering her career options, including the possibility of teacher training. The case study material is presented in the past tense, since the relevant data were collected during a period of several months in 2008, and the beliefs and attitudes reported here may have continued to develop as the participants reflect upon their experiences. While the three interviews took place separately, we have grouped their narratives into the emerging themes of preconceptions, complexity, inequality, diversity of school provision, conflict and cohesion.

Findings
Preconceptions
Simon's preconceptions about Africa at the beginning of the module were of poverty, suffering and over-population; he mentioned the political instability in Zimbabwe, the ethnic cleansing in Darfur and the riots over elections in Kenya, whilst recognising that these images were strongly influenced by the mass media. Like Simon, Lynn was an enthusiastic advocate of the Zambia visit on her return;

both volunteered to speak to the following year's cohort. Before starting the Education in Africa module, Lynn did not distinguish between individual African countries:

'[I] viewed the whole of Africa – I know it's a continent with lots of countries – but all being the same with each country excluding South Africa, all very poverty stricken.'

Lynn recalled her initial images of Zambia as a: '...very deprived country, raggedy clothes, high risk of AIDS'. Tracy had images of Africa before the module consisting of 'happy children' with very few resources, which she claimed had come from media coverage. While Tracy was felt that she was able to reflect on her personal life as a result of the trip, she found it difficult to articulate both her preconceptions and postconceptions, and how they changed. These pre-visit conceptions are consistent with the initial questionnaire responses from students registered on the module (n = 20), summarised below.

1. Students were aware that there were stereotypes of Africa and African education portrayed in the media. However, their own stereotypes often conformed to these media images. Students were aware of challenges such as poverty and HIV/AIDS. However, this could hold true for other developing countries such as those in Asia or the Caribbean.

2. Although some students had travelled to African countries, there was little reference to educational situations or cultural aspects of specific countries. This may suggest that Africa was viewed as homogeneous, regardless of travel experience. While some students noted the regional divides and grievances between countries, others treated 'Africa' as a whole.

3. Students had difficulty identifying strengths or positive aspects in their responses. Any references to strengths referred to vague comments such as beauty and culture.

4. Students were apprehensive about the language they used. They justified their responses by using words such as 'may' or 'seems'. Little specificity was noted in responses. Students did not engage in detail. However, the survey did not prompt for specific details.

5. Students were able to outline some general differences between their expectations of education in Zambia and the UK. These however were often 'universal' differences between developing and industrialized countries and could be applied to many North-South comparisons.

Complexity

For the interviewees, gaining a stronger understanding of Zambia added complexity to their ideas about the country and helped to shape their understanding of the multifaceted nature of development issues. Simon's motivation to travel to Zambia was to see for himself whether the images he had of 'unhappy' people were 'true'; a

desire strengthened by the insights he gained during the taught module: 'I found that after gaining a brief theoretical understanding of these countries, I wanted to develop a deeper understanding by gaining a first hand experience'. He realised that Zambian society and history were more complex than he had been expecting – he hadn't realised that before the 1970s oil crisis and copper price crash it had been considered a 'middle income' country – and that national statistics can disguise huge regional and local variations. This complex view had changed his expectations of what he would experience visiting other countries in the region:

> 'I would expect to find a lot of community spirit; large groups of people who know each other, support each other. Really friendly people... inequality as well; rich people living side by side with poor people.'

Lynn also reported her initial thoughts about 'education borrowing' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) for the purpose of improving education:

> 'I didn't understand before I went why they hadn't looked at Europe and seen this is the way we need to do it ... This is a pretty narrow minded point of view and I didn't understand about the money issues.'

Whilst acknowledging the limitations of this viewpoint, Lynn appeared to have retained a naïve perspective on educational borrowing even after the placement, being apparently unaware of the strong British colonial influence on Zambian education:

> 'We've been getting it right, not right, but there's been a way of doing it all around the world, everyone else seems to have managed to do it... I don't understand why they hadn't observed us more and invested more time in their education system.'

For Lynn, the experience of visiting Zambia helped to reinforce the content presented in the Education in Africa module, but also made it much more immediate and personal: '...seeing it in reality is completely different and really wakes you up and helps you come to terms with the reality of it'. It is clear that from Lynn's perspective, the experience of visiting Zambia was well complemented by content exposure to the African context through the module. For example, the diversity of the module also helped her to understand the differences between countries in the African continent:

> 'We just went to Zambia, so if I hadn't learnt about the other countries and done the comparative studies in class, I would have just one view of what I thought the whole of Africa would have been like, which isn't the case because each country's so different. It sort of broadened my expectations'.

However, other impressions were more problematic and confusing for Tracy, particularly the issue of poverty. On the one hand, she felt that the poverty was not as 'bad' as imagined, but on the other hand, the impact of seeing it was '...a lot worse because you don't put a face to it'. The visual impact of the images of poverty struck Tracy, as she noted: 'I think you don't really understand it till you see it, I think you can learn all the statistics, everything you want, but you won't get a picture of it until

you see it'. However, she was apparently surprised to see school buildings, where she had perhaps expected outdoor classrooms under the shade of a tree. Tracy recounted one episode in which children asked for more gifts after the visiting students presented a school with some resources, and the teacher proceeded to carry out an activity in which children were asked to name what they would like the students to bring for their next visit to Zambia. When asked to describe her reaction to this incident, Tracy admitted that:

> 'We were horrified. We thought it was quite wrong to get the children's hopes up. We want to help but we haven't got a lot of money ourselves. We expected them to be pleased with what we've given them.'

Yet when asked if this incident challenged the image of 'happy children', Tracy supported this image of the children, and attempts to explain their reaction:

> '...(E)ven when they're asking they're still happy, it was just the teaching staff who made it a sort of game. They were still happy and smiley, it was only the really poor children who were begging for food. They seemed to be happy with what they'd got til it was pointed out to them that they could ask for more.'

Inequality

The placement challenged the students' preconceptions about poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. Although Simon was conscious of not replacing his notions of poverty with a 'poor but happy' stereotype, he was struck by the disparities of wealth he observed and was particularly challenged by the private school he visited. He was surprised by the level of resourcing and small class sizes in a country with such a low GDP per capita. The experience of community cohesion, despite inequalities, led Simon to reflect upon his own life in the UK and recognise some of the deficits in contemporary British society. It strengthened his own commitment to teaching and the value of studying other countries' education systems – he hopes to establish a link between the UK school in which he gains his first teaching post and a school in Zambia, as he had observed how much the existing links between the Copperbelt and English schools had benefitted both groups of children through curriculum enrichment and joint projects. Similarly, Lynn appeared to have had some of her preconceptions challenged by the placement; for example she was surprised to see such a large private sector in the education system. She also acknowledged that visiting Zambia had revealed aspects of nationalism, patriotism and strong sense of community. Lynn identified a contradiction within her impressions of Zambia with regards to money, as in her view there did not appear to be a middle class – either individuals had money or were in poverty, with little middle ground. For Tracy, her visits to schools appear to have been full of contradictions. For example, she was surprised that some of the private schools did not have as many text books as state schools. Although there were computers at the private schools, frequent power failures reduced the usefulness of this resource. This led her to question why parents were willing to pay for a private education with few resources and smaller class-

rooms than the government schools, though she recognised the value of having smaller numbers of children in each class.

Diversity in school provision

The students were able to gain an understanding of education provision outside of their own schooling experiences in the UK. Through visiting a private school, a government and a rural community school, they were able to step outside of their own privileged context of 'First World' education and see how children in other contexts learn. As a committed future primary school teacher, Simon felt that the experience in different learning and teaching environments would help to inform and develop his own practice. He was struck by 'how much you can achieve with so few resources'. Although appreciative of the educational technology available in English primary schools, Simon was able to make the links between his practice and that which he observed, talking about how learning objectives could be planned for and achieved with 'only a blackboard and piece of chalk'. His observations appeared to reinforce his own transmission pedagogy – he referred to the 'imparting of knowledge' as the core of education. However, the requirement to plan and teach lessons in the Zambian schools was for him the most significant learning experience of the visit, and one he contrasted most strongly with the theoretical learning he had gained from the module.

Overall, the visit had led him to reflect upon his own teaching, which he claimed would be henceforth less reliant on technology and resources, whilst focusing on what he saw as the 'basics' of sound pedagogy. On the other hand, Lynn emphasised the skills she had gained from the placement, such as 'interpersonal skills ... learning how to teach without a classroom full of resources, how to improvise with what you had opposed to relying on materials'. Like Simon, she was able to relate classroom observations in Zambia to her own learning as a future professional:

> 'I learnt a lot from other teachers, how they control a class of 80 children, different techniques used, group work, asking each other for help rather than going to teacher, won't have time to go to every child ... Learning to work with a variety of children with all age ranges and abilities. You might have a 14 year old and an 8 year old in the same class, having to amend the way you talk to different people.'

While these observations have helped Lynn to relate her experience to education in England, there appears to be an emphasis on how much Zambian teachers are able to accomplish whilst lacking resources, rather than any reference to the innate benefits of their teaching methods for pupil-teacher relationships and group cohesion. This perhaps relates to her neo-colonial attitudes towards education in Africa expressed above. However, Lynn also noted how her experience of overcoming language barriers in Zambia could inform her practice in multilingual contexts in the UK: '...you'll have a lot of kids who won't have strong English, learning to overcome that and give them the same education as everyone else'.

Lynn also credited the placement with confirming her vocation as a teacher, based on her experience in the community schools where teachers are unpaid and, in Lynn's view, passionate about education:

> '...They're in there every day benefiting the community and the country. That is such an important thing that I've taken away, knowing that this is definitely what I want to do, knowing that I'm going to make a difference, and hopefully I'll be as passionate and wiling as those people in the community school.'

In contrast, Tracy's experience of seeing the lived experiences of teaching in government schools was shocking: '...the teacher I was with wasn't qualified, so she'd grab a few text books and she'd say, 'have you learnt about this?''. She appears to have been less impressed than either Simon or Lynn with the classroom skills of the teachers. Little detail is provided on her impressions of education, perhaps because she was not on the PGCE route and found the experience of going to Zambia reaping more development in her personal, rather than professional life. However, Tracy made it clear that the opportunity to go to Zambia exposed her to a different culture and showed her aspects of another education system. In particular, she was inspired by the teachers in the community school who volunteered their time to help others 'have a better future'.

Conflict

All of the respondents expressed experiences of conflict, whether between their rational and emotional responses to a situation, or between their own preconceptions and observations. Simon experienced a conflict between the requirement to express his thoughts in academic, rational writing and his own 'emotional viewpoint' when writing up his assignment. He resolved this conflict by avoiding statements for which he could not provide evidence. As a result, his assignment is relatively factual, chronicling his observations in private, government and community schools reasonably objectively, whilst largely avoiding value judgements and emotive language. He wrote respectfully of government and local initiatives to promote girls' education, develop early literacy and tackle HIV/AIDS, generally limiting any attribution of blame for the challenges faced by the education system to the colonial legacy and global economic pressures.

Meanwhile, Lynn's conflict resulted in challenges to her preconceptions that everyone in Zambia is 'poor but happy'. Lynn recalled a confusing dichotomy between the attitudes towards the group displayed by the Zambian population at large and the attitude of officials:

> 'I found the people to be so friendly, but the army and the government official and police to be so rude, so cold to you, which was really weird because I'd got such a nice impression of the Zambian people. Like one time we had an encounter with the army, someone took a picture and we got in a lot of trouble ... the army (shouted) that we were looking down on them, that we were going to publish the pictures and say they were monkeys.'

This incident is an interesting one in that it suggests that the benign picture of Zambian society perceived by the British students overlay deeper issues of racism and colonialism of which they were only dimly aware. Lynn hinted at some of these issues when discussing her own expectations of attracting attention as 'the whites in the village'. Having been brought up on London she was presumably more used to living in a mixed community than some of the other students, but still referred to her experiences of walking round the Zambian town as 'a bit scary at times', and was surprised to find '...that everyone would want something from us'. Whilst seemingly reinforcing stereotypical images of the relationships between rich and poor, this observation challenged her 'poor but happy' stereotype.

For Tracy, conflict was in the form of inner tension. When asked about incidents from the trip that challenged her preconceptions, Tracy had difficulty responding and her interview responses indicated a struggle to understand what she learned from the experience of going to Zambia. Yet she was able to articulate the apparent simplicity of outlook she observed in the Zambians she met, which seemed to have a profound impact on the way in which she viewed her choices in life: '... There's something we could learn, our way of life is so complicated, so stressful'. It is clear that this statement is complicated, or perhaps even contradicted with the example she mentions of a wedding of a young girl, which made her reflect on the amount of choice in England and the degree to which human rights are enjoyed:

> 'You respect what you've got more and I hope that doesn't go away. You learn about how other people live, and although poverty is horrible for the people living in it, they make the most of what they've got and are probably happier than a lot of people in the West.'

Despite this inner conflict and inability to express the tension of conceptions and experiences, the trip affected Tracy profoundly, and enabled her to reconsider her current life choices. She explains:

> 'I was having trouble with my boyfriend at uni, we live together and I wasn't sure it was working. Going out there made me realize there's so much to life, if you're not happy with something just move on. We take so much for granted, we should just use what we've got and enjoy life as much as we can because some people don't have much choice.'

Cohesion of conceptions

Like the participants in Kambutu and Nganga's (2007) study, participants' preconceptions interfered with the new learning they were gaining through the visit. Although Lynn was able to reflect on her experiences of education in Zambia and the skills gained through the placement, some of her naïve preconceptions of the African continent had only been modified to an extent. When asked how she would approach other African countries, Lynn admitted that: '... it sounds bad, but I would probably relate them in my mind as being pretty similar still'. Whilst acknowledging that different countries would be likely to experience different issues, she still saw Africa as profoundly 'other': '... I wouldn't compare it to the West or anything'. She was also critical of education reforms in Africa, and struggled to understand why

polices had taken so long to be introduced and implemented. This may be due to a lack of awareness of the complexities surrounding education reform, the way in which aid has been targeted, the constraints imposed by a debt burden and the role of local and international initiatives.

Similarly, Tracy's stereotype of 'happy children' in Africa appears to have been reinforced by the placement, as she described the inspiration she had gained from the welcoming nature and eagerness of the Zambians: 'Lots of things inspired me, the way everyone's so welcoming, they've got nothing but they want to give you what they've got. I've never known so many people to be so friendly'. Tracy also expressed cohesion between her learning and interest in Zambia. She noted that the placement had definitely added value to the university-based learning: 'especially at this level, you're given so much information so quickly, it's hard to distinguish, but when you actually experience it, you never forget that...'. Zambia and Zambians became very important to Tracy personally, as evidenced in her heightened interest in the country:

> 'I actually care more about it, because it's not just figures thrown at me, you actually see how it is and take an interest in it, now if anything comes up about Zambia, I'll read up on it and be really interested in what it has to say.'

Similarly, Simon's experience of going to Zambia further enforced his commitment to education and interest in the country. The added value of actually visiting Zambia, for Simon, was in beginning to see the history and policy outlined in the module lecture (given by the Principal of the College, visiting the UK at the time) from multiple Zambian perspectives, by immersing himself in the culture:

> 'This was quite a genuine, authentic experience. The knowledge we gained (from the placement) was so much deeper, and is reflected in the way we can now talk about our experiences. If we attempted to talk about it after the lecture we would have some idea, but we can now give a fuller, deeper account of the system and how it works.'

He participated wholeheartedly in the placement, taking every opportunity to observe lessons, read government documents and talk with lecturers, teachers, students and pupils in rural Zambia. He was a strong advocate for the experience on his return; one of two students who volunteered to talk to the following year's cohort, urging them to participate in this 'life changing' experience.

Discussion

Through their diaries, assignments and during interview, Simon, Lynn and Tracy have each begun to reflect – at different levels of depth – upon the cultural contexts within which their classroom and other observations have been made. Simon appears to have been able to 'stand back' from the experience and analyse his own perceptions to a greater extent than the other two, though all three have experienced some difficulty in applying a critical framework of development issues – colonialism, racism, globalisation – to their observations. The four main themes to emerge are:

1. The extent to which stereotypes were challenged or reinforced

All three claimed to have had their previous views of Africa altered by the placement, yet several strong stereotypes – such as the idea of 'poor but happy' Africans – seem to have persisted. Where has the 'poor but happy' stereotype come from, and why is it so strong? It may be that because many of their interactions were with children, whose emotional states tend to be more instant, and also because their presence elicited a joyful response from the children they met – because they were new and different – thus their very presence tended to confirm their preconceptions. This relates to Shih's findings (2002) concerning Western views of people in developing countries as 'humble', 'deferential' and 'appreciative'.

Another curious mixture of challenge and reinforcement appears to have taken place in relation to poverty. Although Tracy claims that poverty was not as 'bad' as she thought, and all three were surprised at the evidence of a middle class from the private schools visited, they also evidence some 'shock' at the poverty they encountered around some of the community schools. Their reactions can perhaps be located within a typology of Western responses to different types of poverty:

– 'Picturesque' rural poverty of the type these students observed in and around the community schools, which appears to the Western eye as 'benign' in that people seem relatively happy with little and are making few demands on the visitor. Those who had reached the status of being able to send their children to private schools may have been viewed through the 'minority success thesis' (*ibid.*).

– 'Grim' urban poverty in which the surroundings are distasteful and the activities children are driven to (prostitution, begging, drug trafficking) are disturbing to Western moral viewpoints.

– Poverty which affects the Western visitor directly, in which the poor are making direct demands on them – by asking for things, by stealing from them – which can induce feelings of anger and indignation. Tracy's horror at being asked for things by the children at the instigation of their teacher begins to move towards this type of response.

One other area in which perceptions appear to have shifted little is in relation to the differences between African countries. On the one hand these students profess that they have learnt more about a particular African country, but on the other hand their expectations of other African countries return to a more naïve conception of homogeneity in Africa, which may be linked to Shaw and Wainryb's (1999) observation that Western views of the 'Other' tend to homogenise cultures. This is interesting, since the boundaries of countries such as Zambia and its neighbours are themselves colonial constructs, whilst the structures of colonial education have tended to impose a degree of uniformity on African countries' educational systems, such that the students might actually find their expectations supported to an extent.

In some respects the persistence of these stereotypes is disappointing given the aims of both the module and placement in challenging pre-conceptions, but perhaps it is unsurprising in the light of Finney and Orr's (1995) critique of school linking schemes. It appears likely that the taught module and visit have been too content-focused, without requiring participants to reflect in sufficient depth upon their prior beliefs and stereotypes (Vermutten, Vernunt and Lodewijks, 1999).

2. The extent to which learning from the placement had added to their experience of the taught module

All three acknowledged a considerable 'added value' to their learning brought by the first hand experience of actually visiting Zambia. At one level this is hardly surprising, yet it is also significant that it led them to value the more abstract, content-focused learning of the taught module in providing them with a framework through which to begin to make sense of their observations. It was clearly easier for them to recognise the skills developed through the placement – communication, teaching, interpersonal – than the more intrapersonal skills of analysis and reflection that we intended to be developed through the taught component of the module. However, as discussed under heading 1 above, the attitudinal dimensions of learning central to development education appear to have lacked depth in all three students, raising questions concerning the preparation for and debriefing from the study visit, which will be considered under 'implications' below.

3. The extent to which the experience had enabled students to reflect upon their professional and personal identities within the UK system

The placement appears to have strengthened the sense of 'vocation' for all three students and helped them reflect upon the value of education and educators through observations of dedicated professionals within a culture which appears to value education more overtly than Britain. They have appreciated the fundamental role of education for development, describing a 'stripped down' pedagogy without the technological complexity of the UK model as somehow recapturing the essentials or 'basics' of classroom practice. Whilst this elicits a keen admiration for the teachers concerned, there is the sense that these teachers are succeeding despite numerous constraints, rather than drawing out any advantages of the Zambian system from which educators in England can learn.

In relation to their own lives, Lynn and Tracy talked about a sense of 'gratefulness' for what they have and take for granted, which appears to be based on the 'deficits' they had perceived in the Zambian context, although Tracy reflected on the 'simplicity' and seeming lack of stress in the Zambian way of life, and seems prompted to take some big decisions in relation to her own life, suggesting that she had engaged with some aspects of critical global citizenship (Andreotti and Warwick, 2007). Simon recognised the value in community spirit within the Zambian context and had some appreciation of how the Zambian system 'works'.

The benefits of a similar placement undertaken by student teachers from Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK 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 [initial teacher education] students which enhances their perspective of the 'developing world'.'

Although our students are not on a teacher training programme, many subsequently undertake a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), and the impact of the first group to visit Zambia in 2005 was evident in their school practice. The schools in the Copperbelt had pre-existing links with schools around South West England, but new links have been forged on the initiative of these students. They have also contributed to a Global Learning day for local schools, 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). Even though the three students in this study appeared to be relatively unaware of the injustice and exploitation at the root of Zambian poverty, they have been motivated to social actions such as those described by Hine and Montiel (1999).

Conclusions and Implications

This small-scale study of the reflections of three undergraduate students on a three-week study visit to Zambia suggests that the experience had several benefits to them as individuals, and led to different kinds of learning from those associated with the university-based module of which the visit was a part. In particular, there is some evidence of gains in awareness, understanding and appreciation of Zambian culture, as found by Kambutu and Nganga (2007).

However, the study has also revealed a number of limitations of the visit, including the persistence or even reinforcement of ethnocentric stereotypes (Finney and Orr, 1995) and a tendency to over-simplify complex issues of inequality (Shaw and Wainryb, 1999). Evidence from previous studies (e.g. Burr, 2008; Andreotti and Warwick, 2007; Martin, 2008) suggests that in order to remedy some of these deficiencies, two substantive changes are required to the programme. The first of these is to include a stronger critical literacy dimension to the preparation for the visit, to provide students with a framework informed by post-colonial theory through which to make sense of their experiences. We aim to achieve this through re-casting the 'Education in Africa' single-semester taught module into a new longer module entitled 'Education and Development, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa'. This will run for a full academic year to facilitate much deeper student engagement with development issues such as colonialism; globalisation and neo-colonialism; the politics of international aid; inequality in world trade; access of marginalised groups to education; Southern perspectives on development and the post-colonial

perspective of the 'other'. These issues will be considered in a number of different contexts, including case studies based in Zambia to help students understand how the international aid agenda (e.g. Millennium Development Goals, Education for All) and the pressure on the Zambian Government to implement structural adjustment, poverty reduction and other neo-colonial policies has impacted upon the education system as a whole, individual schools, teachers and children. Participating students then need to use these perspectives to frame their own enquiry questions about education in Zambia (Disney, 2008).

The other substantive change required to bring about attitudinal change in participating students is a greater emphasis upon reflection and self-examination before, during and after the visit (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students' stereotypes, prejudices and misunderstandings about the Zambian context will need to be elicited through questionnaire and discussion before they set out. During the visit, the Zambian coordinator and accompanying tutor will encourage them to voice their impressions, enabling these to be discussed within a broader educational and political perspective. Including a debriefing interview after the visit, or as part of a follow-up module taught in the following academic year would help participants develop a more critical perspective on their learning from first-hand experience. This will inevitably lead them to question the unequal power balance within the relationship between the UK and Zambian institutions; particularly the lack of reciprocal visits. Applications to national and international funding agencies for joint research and development projects involving both partners could help to re-balance this relationship, though inequalities will inevitably persist.

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