The Methodological Challenges of Researching Education and Skills Development in Africa

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Educational research in and on the African continent continues to experience a strong Northern influence. Doctoral research is often conducted by Northern and Southern candidates through awarding institutions in Northern countries. This leads to a spatial disconnection between students’ ‘home’ and ‘field’ locations; between Northern offices and Southern classrooms. This can isolate the student from the reality and experiences of the education system and environment which they are studying. Compounding this dislocation, the relative scarcity of Africanists and especially Africanist educationalists, serves for many to make the Northern academy a place of separation and loneliness – a series of isolated ivory towers.

The papers contained in this collection were commissioned for a postgraduate workshop held in Edinburgh in 2004. Instigated to address these challenges and attended by researchers from across the UK, as well as South Africa, this provided an opportunity for dialogue among Africanist educationalists. The rest of this introductory chapter provides an overview of the current focus of doctoral research on African education and expands upon a number of discussions that emerged as key concerns. This is a conversation we hope will continue.

The Workshop and Participants

The workshop focused upon providing PhD students with an opportunity to discuss their own work and focus on methodological challenges. Participants were asked to submit a short summary of these challenges along with a brief outline of their research. There was a wide variation in the contexts and issues being investigated by the participants but common concerns emerged, many resulting from the nature of PhD research. All stages of the research process were discussed, from the formulation of research questions, to the technicalities of conducting research in the field, and how research can influence policy and practice.

The counties of study, whilst predominantly Anglophone, were well distributed across Sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa and Tanzania were particularly well represented. The educational histories of these two countries, with apartheid education in South Africa and Education for Self-Reliance in Tanzania have tended to attract research into the legacies of these policies. Ghana was also the subject of a number of studies, with other countries represented including Nigeria, Somaliland, Botswana and Mali. Approximately half of the
participants were African nationals, most of whom were studying their own countries either from academies in the UK or in South Africa.

Many of the doctoral studies are focused on formal education, stretching from pre-primary (Monika Odinko) to teacher training systems (Eugenia Ukpo) and University (Abdulai Abukari). Some of these focus in at the classroom level, looking at pedagogy (Monika Odinko, Ruth Wedgwood). Others look at wider aspects of the school such as teacher professionalism (William Sambo) and the way that parental involvement effects teacher morale (Myra Maboya). Students, especially those belonging to particularly vulnerable groups are the subject of a number of the studies. These included children affected by HIV/AIDS (Thelma Majela), those involved in child labour (Amanda Berlan) and child offenders (Joel Mambolo). Mahlapahlapana Themane is trying to assess the influence of health on academic achievement. Some studies take the form of evaluations of specific programmes such as teacher training by distance education in Nigeria (Eugenia Ukpo) and ‘safe schools’ in South Africa (Thomas Mabasa). Other PhD students were considering education systems at a policy level, for example, Mohamed Omar looks at post-conflict policy making in Somaliland and Jeff Makora looks at South Africa’s experiences of using a national qualifications framework. This workshop recognised that schools, colleges and universities are not the only sites of learning, and that academic education alone is unlikely to bring about economic development. Jose Cordoba, Matthias Grossmann and Robert Palmer are all researching in the field of skills development.

Several of the studies took a wider view of the interaction between education, culture and society. Elizabeth Bishop looks at how education influences the livelihood of pastoralists. Clair Pooley looks at the phenomenon of child migration which can be a result of scarcity or regional inequity in educational provision. Both Daniel Hammett and Carolyn Petersen look at the influence of education on identity. Hammett concentrates more on the formal education system whereas Petersen looks at the role of adult literacy programmes on identity formation. A key part of any society’s cultural identity is their history, partly encapsulated in physical artefacts. Charlotte Joy’s work looks at a very particular form of education, the sensitisation of people to their own cultural heritage in order to mitigate the plundering of historical artefacts. In the North we tend to preserve our historical artefacts in museums or in situ in the case of archaeological or architectural sites, but should other cultures be pressurised to do the same, and if so how?

Only two of the doctoral studies were explicitly comparative by design. One of these involved intercontinental comparison (Angeline Barrett’s work on teacher identity in Tanzania and the UK) whilst Matthias Grossmann’s was an intracontinental comparison of business training
programmes in Namibia, Ghana and Senegal. Comparative qualitative research on education is fraught with methodological problems, not least the practicalities of limited time and money that is a common aspect of PhD work. These are issues which Michele Schweisfurth (1999) discusses in her work on primary school teachers’ experiences of changing educational systems in the new democracies of South Africa and Russia. Schweisfurth’s methodological paper provides a brief insight into the challenges and their resolutions in her comparative case studies.

While most of the doctoral studies are not explicitly comparative, the researcher generally comes from a different educational background to those being researched. We tend to measure new situations by our own experiences. All researchers have had to pass through extensive education and training of their own, so none are able to approach the research as a complete naïve, free of pre-conceptions of what the educational experience entails, or should entail. In such cases there will be an inevitable comparative bias. Coming from a privileged academic background it is easy to become overwhelmed by the deficiencies in African education and to become blind to the positive aspects that may have been lacking or undervalued in our own education.

With ethnographic work there is an inevitable trade off between the depth of data that can be gained from spending a prolonged time in one context and the extra insights that can be gained from comparison of two or more contexts. When research involves familiarisation with a very different culture and learning a new language then there may not be enough time for a doctoral student to immerse themselves into two different settings within the traditional three year timescale. There are also more fundamental problems with comparison. How do you compare education and training systems when they are set in totally different contexts? Is it possible to consider institutions, processes or even different linguistic terms as being ‘equivalent’ in different contexts?

**The Northern Ivory Tower**

The dominance of academia by traditionally prestigious institutions of the North is manifest in the allure of Northern doctoral programmes and in the concentration of literature emanating from these same institutions. Both local and foreign researchers of African education and training systems find that the research literature and analytical tools of social research are still predominantly Western in origin. Locally based paradigms for research methodology are absent in most cases. Several of the participants raised this as a concern. Charlotte Joy, for example, asked “What are the best ways to start thinking about knowledge transmission and identity theoretically? Will the current literature be appropriate in an African context? Is the African
literature merely replicating Western assumptions?” Jansen (this volume) points out that searching in the past, or even the present for an ‘indigenous African methodology’ is fruitless. It is better to look forward to building up local research capacity for the future.

The development of a local research capacity is hindered by the current distribution of resources which favours Northern institutions. The financial and material resources available through Northern universities are scarce in the South. Southern universities struggle to attract and retain the services of academics in a culture which Jansen (this volume) outlines as failing to provide the incentives to academics to remain in the public education sector. The skew of resources favouring the North means that the development of the next generation of Africanist educationalists remains focussed upon the North. The location of this workshop illustrates in itself where many of those new academics are based, and where financial capital is accessible for advanced training.

Even within the Northern institutions which are perceived as being amongst the most prestigious there can be a lack of engagement for researchers working on the South. Methodology and research skills courses are now a requirement of many post-graduate programmes. Usually generic, they are firmly focussed upon the needs of the Northern researcher working in the Northern research environment. As such the training received immerses the research student in the discourse of the Northern academy, reflecting and reinforcing a history where “in its formative days, educational ethnography was tied to the development of applied anthropology, which has tended to be focussed on “others” at home over “exotics” abroad, and to the increasing application of ethnographic methodology to the study of institutions “at home”.” (Yon, 2003: 424). For those researching across the African continent the cultural milieu and associated research issues are inadequately addressed.

The key texts for many of these courses hardly touch upon the issues of cross-cultural research, translation, race or difference. For some students, they may be fortunate to find a specialised course on offer dealing with educational research methodologies, or with Africanist research methodological challenges. But these will be the exception. The required research methodology courses will draw upon texts such as Blaikie’s (2000) Designing Social Research, or Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) Handbook of Qualitative Research. Whilst useful introductions to many of the methodological issues and skills required for research, neither pays attention to many of the issues facing Africanist educationalists. Of the 41 papers in Denzin and Lincoln’s book, only two refer to educational research and none refer to non-Northern based research.
Even key texts on ethnography, including Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1983) *Ethnography: Principals in Practice* often touch only slightly on either the non-Northern or the educational research environment. Those texts aimed at educational researchers also often fail to address issues of cross-cultural research. Hammersley’s (1990) *Classroom Ethnography* is a highly useful, if slightly dated, text on educational ethnographical research. Yet, it remains focused upon the changing methodological discourse within British based research. Daniel Yon’s (2003) useful review of educational anthropology acknowledges this same weakness in his own article from the outset. Whilst generic lessons can be drawn from it there remains a gap between the North and the South in the theoretical literature.

A number of texts do exist which are explicitly aimed at the methodological challenges of working in cross-cultural educational environments. Two of the better known texts are Crossley and Vulliamy’s (1997) *Qualitative Educational Research in Developing Countries* and Vulliamy, Lewin and Stephens’ (1990) *Doing Educational Research in Developing Countries: Qualitative Strategies*. *Doing Educational Research* provides examples and insights of working cross-culturally in Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Nigeria. However, the recent expansion of work on “colonial, postcolonial, and late neoliberal contexts... in which ethnographic research draws attention to the operations and enculturating projects of schools as unique institutions in their respective social landscapes and historical experiences” (Yon, 2003: 412) has not been accompanied by an expansion in methodology texts for this field.

Even specifically educational methodology works such Hitchcock and Hughes’ (1993) work *Research and the Teacher* remain focused upon the Northern research environment. The vignettes presented in the introduction to the chapter *Ethnography, fieldwork and the teacher* all depict a Northern researcher in a Northern (British) environment. The work of Cohen and Manion (1994) and Travers (1969) on educational research methodologies reflects theorists’ Northern pre-occupation. Whilst there are generic elements to all these works that can be translated and transposed into the Southern research environment, there is a lack of material which informs Southern contexts specifically.

Translating research practices across continents and cultures problematises the research process for the Africanist scholar. Solutions which may seem commonsensical for working in the UK suddenly have significant failings when transposed to a different cultural environment. As many have encountered during their own work, and in the papers presented at this workshop, the difficulties of working across cultural divides are immense. Terry Allsop’s (this volume) observations about Gambian classrooms illustrate several issues, including the problems of language (for researchers and
second-language learners) and resources. Serious under funding and overcrowding in such schools mean that teachers are battling against the odds to provide a class of potentially 50 or more students, without paper and pens, a lesson in maths or biology. How can the effectiveness and methods of teaching in such an environment be compared to those of a teacher in a relatively well-funded school in the UK? Notes on the facilities available, on the eagerness of students to access schooling, and on the resources available are required to contextualise the research.

As Jansen (this volume) notes, research topics thought up in Northern offices often bear little relevance to the environment and culture of the South. What is viewed in one way by researchers in the North can be construed very differently when considered through the cultural lens of the local environment. In the North, non-attendance at school and repeated re-enrolment at different establishments is seen negatively, the assumption being that the pupil is poorly behaved, the parents move frequently, leading to the pupil being considered as a ‘drop out’. As in Jansen’s example, when pupils leave one school for another frequently, this may reflect their family’s lifestyle and actually be a positive sign of the child ‘dropping in’ for education as and when the family have found an area to stay. This need for a culturally sensitive research approach is central to all the papers in this collection, a process which David Stephens (this volume) seeks to outline.

**Language and Translation**

A frequently cited methodological challenge of non-African participants was that of language. In this area, the ‘insider’ researcher holds a huge advantage over the ‘outsider’. The Anglophone focus of the workshop meant that English is the medium of instruction in the formal education system in most of the research contexts. Frequently elites are fluent in English. For the native English speaking outsider researcher there is therefore a strong temptation to conduct the research in English. However, this may exclude them from informal discourses taking place outside the classroom. It can also lead to a bias in selecting respondents if only English speakers are selected for convenience. In the case of informal education and training and primary or pre-school education systems in some countries (such as Tanzania), the option of carrying out research in English is not available and the researcher has to decide whether to attempt to become fluent in the language or whether to rely entirely on an interpreter.

A PhD student may have more freedom to commit time to language learning than a ‘professional’ researcher. Some funding schemes such as Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) studentships allow for extra time and funds where language learning is deemed
necessary for research. However, even if the researcher commits themselves fully to learning the language, it could be unwise and arrogant to assume that one's fluency was sufficient to accurately capture all the nuances of qualitative data collected. An effective approach used by several of the participants was to use both belt and braces, to learn the local language as far as possible to enable informal discussion and comprehension, but at the same time to employ a local research assistant, fluent in English, to either conduct interviews or to assist in the translation. In the education sector, as Allsop (this volume) observes in relation to Mbembe's comments, language is at the heart of what takes place in the classroom. The development of language skills are essential to building rapport and establishing research relationships.

Even with high quality translation, there can remain an issue of conceptual equivalence where a word in one language and cultural context carries meanings and inferences that are not captured by the 'equivalent' word from another language. But in such cases language can provide useful data in itself, rather than acting as barrier. Serpell’s (1993) work on the local words used for ‘intelligence’ in Chewa culture are an excellent example of this.

A Sensitive Arena

Many participants anticipated or had experienced problems with access especially, but not exclusively, those working on highly sensitive or political issues. Some were dealing with contentious issues such as teacher misdemeanours (William Sambo), living with HIV/AIDS (Thelma Majela) or coloured identity in South Africa (Daniel Hammett, Carolyn Petersen). However, even when a research topic appears relatively ‘harmless’ to the researcher, the subjects may feel threatened by the research and unwilling to be interviewed. Even when the main topic of research has been consented to, this can lead on to other issues and events which the informant may find intrusive or invasive. For instance, when conducting oral history research an informant may reveal traumatic events from their past which can dramatically alter and disrupt the research dynamic.

As Jansen (this issue) points out, ministry officials in Africa can be surprisingly protective of data and documents, even when it is already in the public domain. Several of the researchers envisaged problems with access to interviewing children. Achieving informed consent in the context of African school children can be practically difficult and easily misunderstood in cultures that may be very different to the ones where most guidelines on ‘research ethics’ are generated. The researcher also has to consider that the customary relationships between children and adults, and between genders, may be different from their own culture and will inevitable influence the quality of data collected through interview.
During a recent educational research seminar series at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa by the respected oral historian Alan Wieder, many of these issues were also raised. The proliferation of research into the impact of HIV/AIDS in education places many researchers in highly sensitive situations. Continuing shame and silence around HIV/AIDS means that interviewing and exploring this issue raises numerous ethical issues. These are further exacerbated when dealing with learners who are HIV-positive, or with educators who are HIV-positive. For those whose consideration was focused upon the sensitive and problematic issues of race and identity, similar problems emerge. Key to exploring any of these sensitive areas is the need to enter the research ‘field’ well versed and prepared for the issues one will be dealing with. To develop the information required, the need to establish rapport and trust is vital. Underlying this is the need to develop an understanding of the local culture and being equipped with the tools and methodological knowledge that are culturally appropriate.

**Collaboration**

Behind the rationale for most PhDs on education and training in Africa is an underlying desire to improve the lives of those studied. Jansen (this volume) warns against the folly of doing research as development. At the same time many researchers aim for reciprocity in the research process and hope that their research will contribute to improving practice. As Gari Donn (this volume) points out, the potential for research to impact on practice depends on how the problem is conceptualised. The framing of the research question will locate the research process within the tensions of policy-directed and curiosity-directed research (Vulliamy et al., 1990: 228-229). The researcher must therefore position themselves within this discussion and use this to inform the dissemination of their findings. Donn (this volume) suggests that the most effective ‘dissemination’ can often take place during the data collection process, especially during interviews with policy makers. Donn makes clear that dissemination should not be left as an afterthought, but that the relevance, utility and potential influence of research should be considered throughout.

The process of dissemination can be viewed as intertwined with reciprocity. The act of returning information and data, directly to a school or contributing to policy debates can help reduce a perception of the research process as extractive. An ongoing, co-operative process of dissemination during research can also provide feedback to the researcher on their work and focus. For ‘outsider’ researchers, a major methodological problem concerns seeing things distorted by their own western lenses. Non-national researchers can be distracted by the exotic whereas local researchers may be blind to the familiar. Ongoing dialogue during the research process can assist in addressing this
issue, and collaboration between local and foreign researchers can take this further.

One way on integrating research with practice is through participatory action research. The potential of this mode of research was explored by Carolyn Dyer (this volume) with reference to training of teacher educators, and by David Stephens (this volume) in a number of settings. Very few participants envisaged using action research in their studies. The nature and conventional progression of a PhD study makes it very difficult to coordinate with individuals or institutions in the country of study when the student is based at a university in another country. The systems of funding and training mean that the initial conceptualisation and proposal stage of many doctoral theses is far removed, both geographically and temporally, from the site of study. Negotiation of the problem at this stage tends to be between researcher and supervisor rather than between researcher and the research subject. By the time the student has secured funding and fulfilled training requirements, the research problem may have become so specific that it becomes difficult to integrate it into practice on the ground. Aspiring doctoral students could be encouraged to consult potential partners at the formulation stage of the study. For researchers based in Europe, this may mean visiting the country of study at a very early stage in the research, before any details of the research problem or methodology is established to sort out the proposal.

One of the major areas with potential for enhancing the quality and quantity of research on African education is through the provision for academics, at all stages of their careers, to spend greater time conducting research in the African continent. Concurrent with this is a need for increased investment in African academics and academies to bring their levels of resources, facilities and skills to a comparable level with their European counterparts. By encouraging and fostering these developments, increased co-ordination and co-operation between researchers in different institutions and countries would facilitate expanded collaborative research.

Within such network developments and co-operations, it would be vital to ensure that all parties hold an equitable stake in the process regardless of any disparity in financial provision between the stakeholders. Genuine partnerships, based upon joint-designs, two-way transfers and placements of researchers, and a commitment to make the end result accessible to readers in all stakeholders’ countries, would provide for more engaging and insightful work.

Towards Methodologies?

The outcome of the workshop was to raise a series of questions and provoke conversations around Africanist educationalist research. With
the huge variety of languages, cultures, and educational systems found within the African continent, it was never the intention to assert a universal research methodology. What is apparent though is the need for the development of culturally sensitive and reflexive methodologies and teaching. The spatial, and theoretical, dislocation of the 'home' and the 'field' heightens this need. The playing out of field roles can highlight the distance between the 'home' and the 'field' locations, as outlined in Hammersley and Atkinsons's discussion of Elenore Bowen’s account of African fieldwork. Her sense of “alienation and 'strangeness'” and feelings of incompetence (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 89) are common to those working in a dislocated environment. Perhaps one of the key means to overcoming this distancing – the loneliness of the long-distance doctoral researcher – would be the encouragement of collaborative research between African and European institutions and doctoral candidates.

A fully reciprocal collaborative research design could involve a researcher from Europe being paired with one from Africa. They would carry out research together in Africa and in Europe; both would experience the position of the insider and the outsider. This type of research has been carried out in the field of comparative education by Tobin (1999). But is this type of research possible at PhD level? The mechanisms for PhD funding tend to encourage independence rather than collaboration. International agreements would have to be made between universities and funding bodies. According to Jansen (this issue), many African universities are very open to collaboration. Those involved in comparative education research need to consider how to facilitate collaborative PhD studies. The collaboration would have to be from the initial conceptualisation stages of the research. Funding structures would need to be more flexible to allow this. Close coordination would be needed between senior academics in terms of supervision. But it would be possible and would be very valuable in providing good research as well as developing the capacities of the individual students undertaking the research. At an institutional level such an exercise would help to build research capacity of African universities and to mitigate ethnocentric tendencies of their Northern partners.

The experience of many PhD students studying education and training in Africa from Universities outside of Africa is often to find themselves in a department where few other students or staff have an interest in issues relevant to Africa. In their second year, the doctoral student heads to the field, armed with a research design, research questions and methodologies all derived in a context alien to their site of study. They then face a period of isolation from their academic peers whilst studying “in the field”. In their final year they return to their Northern University, write up their findings and have their thesis bound and stowed in the library. How much more productive would it be for students to engage with local researchers and practitioners at an early
stage of their study and to maintain these links throughout? The development of academic contacts in the ‘home’ and ‘field’ environments would help mitigate these cases of isolation. The work of inter-disciplinary Centres of African Studies also provides a location where students from many backgrounds and approaches are able to come together to discuss methodological, and other, issues. For those students without links to such a centre, there is the need to provide a space within which such discussions can also occur.

To heed the cry from the participants of the workshop, the key issues facing those doctoral students working in the field of African education is the need for increased dialogue. The facilitating of greater links and co-operation between institutions, both in the North and South, would provide immense benefits to the doctoral researcher. Exposure to a wider range of approaches, ideas and critiques and helping to embed the work in the local context, inter-disciplinary, inter-institutional and inter-continental collaboration would seem to offer a great potential to assisting and improving doctoral work in this field. In this spirit we would like to thank our funders for this workshop - the Economic and Social Research Council, the Royal African Society and the British Association of International and Comparative Education, as well as the Centre of African Studies and Moray House, School of Education at the University of Edinburgh – for enabling such interactions to be initiated through this workshop and we hope that the links developed here will continue.

References:


Introduction

In one sense, researching education in Africa is not unlike pursuing research in any other context: the intellectual demands of generating powerful questions, the problems of adequate sampling frames, the challenge of dealing with large data sets, and the inevitable lack of time and resources define what is common in the enterprise of (educational) research everywhere. Yet it is undeniable that there are powerful political, theoretical, methodological, procedural and logistical problems that create very different contexts for the conduct of research in third world settings generally, and in Africa in particular. This paper will reflect on such contexts, their meaning and significance for those who conduct educational research in Africa, and to point to possible (though certainly partial) strategies for engaging if not resolving these challenges.

But an immediate caveat is in order: Africa is a large continent with more than 50 countries; it remains a continent in constant flux through social and political change; it is home to a vast complex of languages, customs, traditions and belief systems; and its educational sites cover a wide range of institutions in terms of purpose, organisation, resources and infrastructure. I will therefore not attempt to speak about or for this complex and diverse continent beyond the range of my own experience which, for one, is limited to those countries in Southern Africa and, with the exception of Mozambique, those countries with English as one of the main languages of instruction in the schools. Such experiences include the supervision of doctoral students from almost every country on the continent, and the actual pursuit of research projects in much of the continent. With these limitations in mind, I wish to discuss some of the most important problems constraining educational research in Africa. Let me begin, however, with the positive—the incredible opportunities available for those serious about pursuing educational research on the continent.

The Joys of Doing Educational Research in Africa

African scholarship is “thin” on most subjects, and the unique contexts of education in Africa make the continent a fascinating place for advanced educational research. There is very little local research in most countries and even in South Africa, with large universities and

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1 This paper, originally presented as the Royal African Society in Scotland Lecture, has been amended in the light of further reflection and interaction with students and academics at the University of Edinburgh during May 2004.
(in relative terms) a heavily funded research enterprise, there is so little understood about problems of education and change in almost any field, from educational psychology to policy studies to curriculum theory. While the lack of local research could be seen as limiting for “literature reviews” on African education, the opportunity to be among the first to open up new layers of inquiry is surely an advantage to those who choose to do their research on the continent.

As enticing is the fact that little is understood in African contexts about the relationship between culture, language, identity, politics and education in much of Africa. These are “burning issues” everywhere and, in a continent which is being transformed, albeit unequally, under new pressures such as globalisation, terrorism and new kinds of interstate relationships (like the New Plan for African Development, or NEPAD), such concerns enjoy new salience in development and change. The decidedly ethnocentric character of educational research emanating mainly from Europe and North America can be challenged through the vast opportunities for educational research in African contexts under these changing conditions.

One specific example of opportunity lies in the transitional contexts of many African states. The dramatic social changes in post-conflict societies such as Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa and, it now seems, the Sudan offer unique contexts for understanding how education is constructed and contested under conditions of transition. For example, little is known about how the end of apartheid created new patterns of student and teacher migrations within the Southern African region; or how international research funding has been recast to create regional opportunities for advanced research and study (e.g., Mozambican researchers trained in South Africa) rather than placements of SADC colleagues within Europe; or how the curriculum is conceived in transition states after the collapse of socialism and the end of the Cold War; or how AIDS has impacted on pedagogy and provision of education in highly infected areas; or how new universities have emerged despite the economic and political malaise that has inflicted institutions in East and West African regions. All of these examples suggest fertile ground for education and transition studies under new conditions.

Another significant advantage of studying education in Africa is that there is now much greater accessibility to areas once rendered dangerous and inaccessible due to conflict and instability. The dearth of educational research in countries like Angola or Eritrea or the Sudan is well-known. The advent of peace and stability in many such states signal new opportunities for landmark studies in areas where the literature is either non-existent or outdated except for the routine

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2 The Southern African Development Community.
consultancy reports which still dominate in the form of “country reviews” rather than original, empirical research in such contexts.

Yet another advantage of researching education in Africa is the willingness and openness of African universities to engagement with overseas researchers. Sometimes this is motivated by interests in bringing-in new ideas and resources into often poorly resourced institutional environments; and often such openness enables the kind of partnerships and exchange that benefit African students and academics in the long term. There are very few universities in Africa, therefore, where new researchers would not find ample opportunities for research and research collaboration, and this is a decidedly positive aspect of pursuing educational inquiry in Africa.

**Inside Africa: The business of doing educational research**

Unfortunately, the opportunities for doing research in Africa are matched by the problems and challenges of conducting systematic studies in education.

A common problem new researchers to Africa are likely to encounter is that of accessing official data. There remains an unusual level of political sensitivity towards data of all kinds—even routine data, resulting in part from either new or unstable democracies, on the one hand, or undemocratic regimes on the other hand. Data does not travel well in such contexts. In Zimbabwe, almost ten years after independence, I found it difficult to obtain routine examination data (like the O-level examination papers) even though this could be purchased from the shop across the road from the Ministry of Education. Unwittingly, a lower level official returned my written request for this information with seven different officials—including the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education and the Permanent Secretary—having written their comments on my original correspondence. What they wrote was fascinating. As this letter travelled up and down the hierarchy of the education bureaucracy, there was concern among some that I was a South African agent of the apartheid state, while for others there was “nothing to hide” in sharing these examination papers. In South Africa, exactly ten years after the formal installation of democracy, it is very difficult to gain access to government’s own data on HIV/AIDS with words like “embargoed” or “sub judice” or “moratorium” frequently being mobilised to cut off access to what in most democracies would be regarded as routine data readily available for public consumption. These conditions in new or unstable democracies, or in authoritarian regimes, pose particular challenges to doing research in Africa.

The low numbers of competent and qualified researchers within the African continent on whom to draw present another problem. The most competent researchers have either been drawn into well-paying
Western universities or international agencies (like the World Bank), or they have been drawn from doing educational research into the business of short-term consultancies for the myriads of agencies requiring local legitimacy for that species of “quick and dirty reports”—from project evaluations to sector studies. Few African universities have high levels of professorial competence to train a competent core of new scholars and, even if they did, there is little chance of retaining these graduates within national universities. Even in South Africa, with a handful of excellent universities, one finds that the leading scholars are ageing white males with relatively low levels of productivity. This affects the external researcher wishing to work in Africa in two significant ways: limiting both the core of indigenous scholarship on which to draw for purposes of educational research, and the possibilities for genuine partnerships in the conduct of such research in African contexts.

Stemming in part from this lack of competent researchers, remains the question of the quality of data that is available for research purposes. Finding reliable databases either to guide original empirical work or for purposes of secondary data analyses is rather slim. And even when data is routinely collected for bureaucratic purposes—such as the 13th day school surveys—such data could simply accumulate in offices without any attempt at analysis. The main problem however lies in trusting the data. As Joel Samoff and others have shown, official data is never neutral and, in contexts where the political stakes are high, bureaucratic systems are underdeveloped and available resources slim, such data is invariably contaminated by political interests (see for example Samoff, 1991; Jansen, 2003). But that assumes that the first problem has been resolved: the capacity in African education systems to design adequate systems for data collection, to manage and analyse large data sets competently, and to monitor and evaluate performance through data on a regular basis. There is little capacity for these complex functions in many states, especially in underdeveloped contexts. The attempts by international agencies such as the United Nations to collect reliable data in Africa consistently show up in the innumerable tables with “missing data” on everything from child health data to primary school enrolment data to teacher qualifications data. It would be infinitely more complex an enterprise when qualitative measures such as the quality of teaching or the nature of learning were to be pursued, as some of the cross-national studies of achievement have found.

For both African and visiting researchers, the poor quality and low volumes of essential library and bibliographic resources critical for the literature review or the theoretical frameworks that form the scholarly foundations of any advanced study constrain the development of detailed research. Most libraries are underdeveloped and interlibrary loans often take forever to arrive at the point of request. The apparent solution is the internet and internet-based electronic retrieval
systems, but such systems are often off-line, unavailable, slow and expensive to operate and maintain. A crucial issue is of course the lack of current issues of periodicals and this can be frustrating to researchers eager to locate their research within the broader field of inquiry. It is not uncommon for African researchers based at institutions who can afford such travel to do their “fieldwork” in their own countries and conduct their literary studies in Europe or North America; the same logic would obviously apply to Western researchers doing their fieldwork in Africa but buttressed with research proposals whose literary foundations and preparation developed in their own regions.

The volatility of the research environment in Africa raises a series of concerns over the stability of researching in the African context. Some very interesting conceptual papers are emerging from within the developing world about research and disruptions. These consider how the lack of order in economic, political and educational systems, which often differ greatly from the stable and predictable environments of the Western experiences of many researchers, pose severe challenges to those entering such arenas for purposes of social inquiry. Our theories and methods are often designed with order, stability and predictability in mind. We choose samples in advance and often specify respondent characteristics with considerable precision. Yet in much of the third world such expectations of precision and predictability can easily frustrate the doctoral candidate with a university-approved research proposal and whose task is simply to “implement” the well-described plan. What Valero and Vithal argue, instead, is that our research designs need to anticipate disruption rather than treat such instability as odd and disturbing; in other words, those doing research in Africa should bring flexibility and change into their designs so that research focus and research integrity are not unduly disturbed by changes in the environment.

Perhaps the most common problem is the persistent and facile practice of “merely applying” Western constructs within African contexts. It would be a mistake to take this important observation too far since, in parts of Africa, there is beginning to develop a sense of African-centeredness that borders on some extreme notion that within the continent there is an indigenous cultural and intellectual essence that waits to be discovered through the facility of the African Renaissance or some latter-day negritude scholarship; this is not only desperate but misleading, and caution must be exercised against such naïveté when talking about educational and social research in, and out of, Africa. However, it is clear that the domination of, and dependency on, received (‘Western’) constructs, concepts, frameworks and theories has undermined innovation and ingenuity within African scholarship. Unfortunately, this situation will not be reversed by eloquent rhetoric or grandiose policies but by building local capacity systematically, consistently and strategically in ways that allow an
African intelligentsia to flourish on African soil and through strategic linkages with higher education institutions on other continents. South Africa has a unique opportunity for making this happen, but it remains to be seen whether there is the leadership in higher education to take advantage of such chances. The kind of scholars that make this possible share two traits: one is competence in the discipline, the other is confidence in scholarship. Only this kind of person will realise that (and this is a real example) studying the problem of drop-outs in rural Namibia among the San is in fact a misleading though common Western concept for children who leave a school; what indigenous scholars of the kind I described will realise is that drop-ins is more appropriate in such a community as migrants people move from one area to the next in search of better grazing for their herds, with children simply changing the school address on rotation. Such a scholar will also realise that studying the deskilling of rural teachers in Zimbabwe is in fact an inappropriate concept when the skilling of these teachers was in question in the first place.

Related to this concern are the donor-driven agendas in academic and development research throughout Africa. Sometimes such donor driven research and evaluation agendas are interesting and provide immediate and funded opportunities for young scholars. More often than not such research has a transient quality, being distorted by the immediacy of consultancy-based questions rather than the more long-term and theoretical concerns of the academy. Yet this is where the money is and the research follows the resources, with negative consequences for academic inquiry, as the low wages of academics and the lucrative opportunities offered by short-term consultancies combine to undermine academic research in Africa. It is inconceivable, then, that in such a context critical research on donor interventions would emerge unless the funding support base lay outside of these agencies and their influence.

Developmental activism parading as scholarly inquiry is understandable but is simultaneously potentially damaging and misleading. Clearly, the developmental problems facing African states are at times overwhelming and invite research that solves practical problems with some urgency. This is understandable but also potentially damaging and misleading. First of all, educational research seldom solves developmental problems; or at least not in immediate and obvious ways. Second, developmental research floats free of the theoretical depth, methodological invention or intellectual nuance that characterises good scholarship anywhere. Whilst those committed to developmental research would argue that this need not be the case; doctoral research in education, often undertaken by senior professionals, often contain strong (and understandable) urges to seek immediate and practical solutions to pressing problems at the expense of what has been called disciplined inquiry.
The lack of conceptual and methodological innovation in African research and scholarship—whether such research is pursued by African or Western students—acts in conjunction with other constraints to hinder educational research. It is a matter of deep concern to witness the mundane and routine titles of published research by both insiders and outsiders on African education. The research is typically about the training of teachers in a remote area of an African country; about the evaluation of a donor-funded project in another; about the resource limitations in curriculum implementation; or about examination failure in yet another state; or about Western cultural dominance or capitalist contrivance to undermine local education; and about the attitudes of one or other group of teachers or principals towards the new curriculum, and so on, producing stories that typically lack analytical depth or critical insights or theoretical richness—a veritable dumbing down of African research. The published pieces often repeat familiar tales from the postcolonial period about dependency and deprivation. Too much of this research is still a reflex reaction to colonialism and apartheid, and too little takes us through and beyond such writing into the 21st century. Occasionally, a PhD student from a Western setting might publish novel findings or pursue innovative designs within an African setting, though often lacking the authenticity of research from within. But by and large the single most important weakness of African scholarship is its lack of innovation in design, its lack of inspiration in the questions posed, and its lack of intellectual foundations as the immediacy of development problems displace serious engagement that characterises sound scholarship anywhere.

The final concern to raise has to do with language—both as a matter of translation as well as a matter of politics. It remains too easy for English scholars to ignore the wealth of literature in French or Portuguese for example. The experiences and scholarship to be found in these literatures would enhance much of the writing and thinking that is currently circumscribed by academics working in one language. Too little attention is paid to the ways in which instrumentation (questionnaires, interviews, observation protocols etc) are framed within English and that much is lost in the richness of expression that is possible in and through indigenous languages, especially when the research respondents are not formally educated or articulate in the language of the researcher and her ‘instruments.’ Few Western researchers apart from anthropologists, perhaps, take this seriously as constraints of time and logistics conspire to frame research within the outside language. In short, much I suspect is lost in translation—culturally, linguistically, socially and intellectually. And this further adds to the impoverishment of education research in Africa.
Creating New Frameworks and Alternative Understandings for Doing Research in Africa

Therefore, how can one enable, within and outside of Africa, the kind of students, the kinds of researchers and the kinds of scholarship that begin to address these concerns?

The most immediate need is to identify new ways of building and sustaining African capacity for research and innovation in educational scholarship. It is clear that despite millions, if not billions, of dollars invested in “building capacity” for research in Africa, over the past decades, there is very little to show for such investment in the volume and quality of research emanating from the continent. The reasons for this are obviously complex. The dominant model of training for the PhD fails to address the reasons why many potential academics are dissuaded from following this path. The conditions under which PhD candidates are required to work, and the conditions of the academy, within African institutions does little to encourage fledgling academics. Large teaching loads, heavy administrative commitments, and poor research support and infrastructure combine to make the academy unattractive, forming a vicious circle of decline in African academies. What I have suggested elsewhere is that this cycle can only be broken by dramatic interventions in the first three years of appointment by taking the new PhD candidate out of this environment for a few months every year to systematically build the capacity in the key domains required for excellence in scholarship; academic writing and publication, the development of a research programme, advanced skills in design and data analysis, the creation of research support communities, and the formulation of large funding proposals.

A second priority is to create and sustain productive relationships between universities in the North and the South that begins to strengthen the academic quality and social relevance of African education research. There is much experience to indicate how not to establish such relationships and why most of these so-called partnerships fail; the lack of reciprocity in these research relationships, and the taken-for-granted assumption that the research expertise, the framing of the research ideas and the funding resources comes from the wealthy partner. With such an institutional posture or attitude, the problems that a partnership intends to redress are exacerbated. When the mutual benefits and contributions of both partners are realised (such as in a long and productive relationship between Sussex University and its MUSTER\(^3\) partners, for example), then publishing priorities, lead authorship and problem identification is a matter of agreement and negotiation with local interests being fore-grounded in such research. I am convinced, by the way, that

\(^3\) The Multi-Site Teacher Education Research (MUSTER) programme.
comparative studies in education will only mature in postcolonial contexts if and when African researchers begin to problematise education policy and practice in the North, rather than simply turn in on their own education systems.

It is essential to review the scope, quality and significance of African educational research in a systematic manner. Such a review would describe and assess both the methodological and theoretical repertoires that characterise education research in Africa—in terms of adequacy, relevance, power, elegance and utility. This workshop is special and valuable because it begins, in my view, to set such an agenda. But it would be most useful to commission such a study with a high-profile panel and to then draw out the implications for postgraduate training and advanced research in African education.

A fourth priority, and linked to the proposed review, is to create new conceptual frames for studying education in Africa. The decidedly ethnocentric character of Western research in Africa has done severe damage to the capacity of African researchers to generate grounded frameworks and imagine new conceptual horizons for educational inquiry. This will require, in the first place, that received categories are rendered problematic by African researchers; for example, external research tends to reinforce racial and ethnic categories (such as in South Africa) thereby sustaining social constructs as political realities in the research imagination. It will also require that symbolic categories are taken seriously; by this I mean that the significance of the symbolism that often accompanies education policy and political positions be taken seriously, rather than to assume that what governments say they intend to do, they actually mean. And it would require that exotic categories are deconstructed, rather than assume that what happens in African education is so incredibly unique and special that it deserves the kind of intellectual gaze that elevates such experience to a status of the exotic other.

A final priority (and flowing from the second) is to identify research programmes that in fact combine subjects of common interest to universities in the North and South. The reach of globalisation in theory and practice offers powerful opportunities for comparative research on subjects ranging from surveillance systems in education, to the transfer of standardising technologies and ideas in assessment, to teacher migration studies, to inter-state studies on the impact of AIDS on teacher supply and demand, to the differential impacts of the new terms of trade involving educational services. These are singular examples invoked merely to demonstrate how the changing world should in fact inspire changing research programmes that break with tired tales of the past.
References:


Culture in Educational Research in Africa: From the Methodological to the Practical

David Stephens

Introduction

The United Nations World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997) had four aims: to acknowledge the cultural dimension of development; to enrich cultural identities; to broaden participation in cultural life; and to promote international cultural co-operation. For the purposes of this paper a fifth aim is suggested: acknowledgement of the importance culture can play in improving the quality of education research in the developing world, which is also important, and seriously undervalued.

The purpose of this paper is to argue this case, and specifically to address two questions:

First, in terms of critique, a fundamental question concerns the philosophical traditions upon which research traditions are based. Is research, in other words, an essentially Western form of intellectual enquiry or is it possible to carry out research in the South that draws upon Western and/or non-Western intellectual and epistemological bases?

Second, in terms of possibility, how can we practically improve the quality of such research by incorporating the cultural dimension?

Before we explore the nature of these questions it is worth remembering from the start that ideas of critique and possibility set out in this paper are themselves a form of cultural activity shaped by matters of tradition, context and experience. To what extent these matters are universal or situated is also worth remembering as we examine issues of research epistemology and practice.

Let us begin in critical mode and briefly address the first question before going on to look in more detail at the more practical issues concerning the nuts and bolts of the research process.

The epistemological question: is educational research an essentially Western activity?

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 12) puts it bluntly:

...to a large extent theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and systems of representation, by views about human nature, human

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morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race. Ideas about these things help determine what counts as real.

The Western cultural system rests, to a large extent, upon technological-scientific forms and ideas shaped, since the Reformation, by the transformative forces of scientific rationalism and industrialisation. The link between science and industrialisation was asserted by Max Scheler in 1926 when he argued that of the:

‘three ideal types of knowledge’ (knowledge of salvation, cultural knowledge, and knowledge of domination), it is only the last type of knowledge, the ability to control and produce effects, that has, ‘ever more exclusively been cultivated for the purpose of ‘changing the world’ in the West while knowledge of culture and knowledge of salvation have been successfully relegated to the background’ (Scheler, 1926 in Stehr, 1994:26)

This Western techno-rational scientific tradition, accompanied by a Rostovian model of development, have prevented – so it is argued by Odora Hoppers (2002) – the development of endogenous, context-specific knowledges.

Stehr (1994) takes a different but related view when he suggests that we must not fall into the trap of overstating the hegemony of scientific rationalism.

A more balanced perspective would be aware of the limits of the power of scientific knowledge in modern society and would not commit the fallacy of an over-reliance on rationalization or tradition. (Stehr, 1994:26).

Perhaps it is not only an epistemological question, but also an ideological and political one involving questions of ownership and purpose? For Tukiwai Smith (1999) research in the South is certainly about two issues: ‘frustrations in dealing with various Western paradigms and the reclaiming of control over indigenous ways of knowing and being.’ For Edwards (1989) the dichotomy is less to do with Western or indigenous forms of knowledge and more to do with dominant and alternative forms of research. Echoing ideas espoused by Paolo Freire, he calls for international development research to be based upon participatory, empowering traditions in which local knowledge and local research agenda setting are the norm.

The employment of qualitative research methods, for example Action Aid’s development of REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) and Oxfam’s use of participatory research techniques when evaluating development assistance needs and programmes, are a step in the right direction.
If we take up Stehr’s *balanced perspective* it should be possible to steer a course that is both critical – of Western and other epistemological stances – and practical, in that it allows something *actionable* to occur. Pickett and Scott (in Odara Hoppers, 2002) support this approach when they suggest that the way to the future is one towards political and epistemological co-determination and *rapprochement*, an integrative coming together of world-views that is not just one of pluralistic tolerance but one that effects the emergence of a new synthesis that incorporates the new diversity.

On a more practical level: the development of a strong sense of researcher reflexivity, a fore-fronting of the purposes of the research, and a recognition of the importance of context and culture in the framing and carrying out the research – from initial idea through to publication – would at least go some way to reclaiming research as an ethical and moral activity.

The *methodological question*: Taking Culture into Account in the Research Process

When considering doing research in the South a useful place to start is to pose the question: why is culture important in the research process? This fundamental question necessitates an examination not only of the content of any research activity but the processes involved in moving from design and purpose (‘where’ and ‘why’ dimensions) through to writing up and disseminating the findings (the ‘who’ and the ‘how’). We will return to these dimensions later in the paper.

Steven Seidmann writing in 1990 emphasizes the importance of cultural analysis well when he notes that,

> the most significant intellectual movements of the last two decades – hermeneutics, symbolic anthropology, semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism, critical theory, and feminism have placed cultural analysis at the centre of the human and literary disciplines. The most significant political and moral struggles of our time, at least in the industrial West, focus on cultural issues concerning personal identity, community building, social legitimation and inclusion, moral order, and everyday ethics (Seidemann, 1990: 235)

It is somewhat strange, therefore, to discover that in the areas of international economics and development studies cultural matters have, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Verhelst 1987, Epskamp 1992, Klitgaard 1994, Alexander 2000, Crossley and Watson, 2003, Stephens 2004) been sidelined. Though the culture concept has established itself as a central component of anthropological and
ethnographic research, it is probably fair to say that in educational development research it is still struggling to establish its legitimacy.

Perhaps the problem is a ‘chicken and egg’ one, namely that with few examples of ways in which culture might be used to frame and analyse research most researchers – particularly those pressed for time and perhaps trained in more traditional ways of carrying our research – fall back on the tried and tested approaches? What is needed therefore are models of good practice: examples of types of research and research methods that offer interesting and appropriate ways to research issues of education and development from a cultural perspective.

Looking at the literature – and there is a growing body of material coming out of UNESCO’s activities worldwide, as well as some interesting work in multi-cultural education – it is possible to gain a picture of what high quality, culturally-appropriate research might look like. It seems that we can identify the following four key variables:

- **Where**, in terms of locus of control, will the research and publication be carried out?
- **Why**, in terms of linkage to development goals will the research be done?
- **How**, in terms of methods and tools will the research be done?
- **Who**, in terms of personnel will be involved in the research, how will the research be carried out, and to what extent will research be both empowering and reflexive for researcher and researched?

In terms of *where* research is best carried out it is worth remembering that, ‘all cultural data ... must be considered as belonging to somebody’, that in dealing in the realm of values and meanings, one must go ‘over to the other side’, to take up, return, and then contextualize the other points of view insofar as possible, even to risk assimilation with those studied (Rose, 1990).

A proper use of context therefore needs to be all pervasive – to allow cultural factors both to describe and give meaning to the research environment. Pareek (1990) in discussing his research within Indonesian culture identifies ten dimensions of that culture which he argues are not just ‘contextual’ but shape the very research environment within which he worked. In other words these or factors like these provide both background and foreground in the design of the research project.

*Why* research is being done is a question that is curiously seldom asked, perhaps because truly honest answers might make for some uncomfortable reading. Perhaps the answer to this question needs to be phrased in Freirean terms i.e. educational research should have as its end, a total change in the way individuals and groups relate to and deal with each other (Elliot, 1987), the consequence for researchers
being that they must accept that they will be changed by the results of their research; must be accountable to the people who form the subjects of their work; and must be prepared to see the worth of that work judged according to the relevance it has to the lives of the community in question (George, 1984).

**Figure 1:** Ten dimensions of culture shaping the Indonesian research environment (Pareek, 1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Fatalism vs. scientism.</td>
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<td>2. Tolerance for ambiguity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Contextualism. In a high-context culture the meanings of events, phenomena, and behaviour are interpreted in terms of the contexts in which they occur. In a low-context culture, all events are judged by one standard and there is an attempt to evolve universal rules and explanations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Temporality, the tendency to live in the present vs. concern for past and future.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Collectivism vs. individualism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Particularism vs. universalism. Strong group identities, based on ethnicity, religion, caste, region, etc., characterize particularist cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Other directedness vs. inner directedness. This dimension is often framed in terms of shame cultures vs. guilt cultures. In the former, honour and reputation are critical, while in the latter, inner worth and a concept of sin are said to guide behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Androgyny. Hofstede (1994) uses a masculinity vs. femininity dimension. I see the poles of this dimension as sexism (in which social roles are determined by men, and they impose their values of competitiveness and toughness as highly desirable) vs. androgyny (which recognizes both competitive values and humanistic values).</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Power difference tolerance (studied by Hofstede, 1994, as power distance).</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Use of power. Using the idea that external or internal power can be used to strengthen oneself, or to make an impact on and strengthen others, four cultural power orientations were proposed: expressive, conserving, assertive, and expanding.</td>
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</table>

*How* the research is conducted – the third variable – is in some senses easier to consider in that there are now many more research methods textbooks that take serious account of research being conducted in contexts unfamiliar to the researcher. See, for example, our own account of carrying out doctoral research in three Southern contexts (Vulliamy, G, Lewin, K and Stephens, D 1990) and the recent work by
Alexander (2000), which in chapter 1 discusses the ‘comparative context’ of the five nation study and importantly the relationship between context and method. Further discussion of culturally appropriate methodology and methods is to be found later in this paper when we look at ‘ways forward’.

The fourth variable, who, raises the question of ownership and voice. It has been suggested by a number of commentators (Klitgaard, 1994, Verhelst, 1987) that to begin, ‘activities aimed at development we must first critique our own culture and ideas about development, our own preferences and capabilities, values and assumptions, ends and means’ (Klitgaard, 1994:14). Such reflexivity, Klitgaard suggests will enable the researcher to act as a cultural conduit, ‘coming from one culture but trained to penetrate another, they can serve as interlocutors – telling them, telling us, what each other really cares about, is good at, can contribute’ (Klitgaard, 1994:18).

Research carried out by the author in Ghana and Laos in the mid and late 1990s respectively is illustrative of the importance, particularly, in foregrounding ownership and voice in the research process.

The Ghana research referred to earlier (Stephens, 2000) – which examined girl dropout from primary schooling within a cultural framework – showed that by privileging the voices of the schoolgirls and women teachers (through a predominantly life history approach) the cultural context of the study informed all aspects of the research from the initial question posed to the framing of policy recommendations.

Participatory Action Research conducted in Laos (Geeves, et.al. 2001) by the author a few years later focused particularly on the question of ownership as interpreted from a broadly cultural and more specific Buddhist perspective. A major finding of this study was the importance for Western researchers to understand that concepts such as ‘action research’ and ‘participation’ take on very different meanings when viewed through the eyes of a teacher educator whose professional life is informed by experiences in the temple and communist party.

This people-centred view of development with its research corollary in giving voice to those so often marginalized, particularly in larger development projects, has implications for research methods and the sort of pre-requisite training that is necessary for any research to be culturally sensitive and participatory. For example, it was clear from the Ghana research mentioned above that life history seemed the most appropriate method for seeking both reasons why respondents no longer attended school and perhaps more importantly their interpretation of the whole struggle to attend school from a cultural perspective.
Adopting a cultural perspective is not, however, without its difficulties both at a methodological and practical level. Five potential hurdles come to mind:

First there is the philosophical problem of cultural objectification and relativization (van Nieuwenhuijze, 1987). Faced with an alien culture researchers from another easily fall prey to the tendency to objectify the new, perceiving the confronted culture from ‘some mental distance’ (van Nieuwenhuijze, 1987) and in so doing create a situation where, two cultures in encounter, both operating as frames of reference in their own right, inevitably vie for pre-dominance as the provider of the criteria for the validity of the imponderables involved in their interaction (van Nieuwenhuijze, 1987). Relativization is a possible solution though, in research terms, weakens the case for the production of analyses that are transferable to other settings or are in some way ‘universal’.

Second there is the problem of anthropology itself. The past association of this discipline with reaction and imperialism (Cohen, 1974) and the tendency for the relatively rich and powerful to study the relatively poor and powerless or marginalized and low status groups has resulted in many Third World states viewing with suspicion the wishes of those eager to probe into the cultural recesses of the nation (Nelson and Wright, 1995). Jonathan Jansen (2004) echoes these sentiments in his efforts to establish the Academy of Science of South Africa. For him it is not only a question of who is researching whom but the disparate level of financial resource available to scholars North and South.

Associated with this is a third problem of the possible misuses of culture in the research process. Cultural data can often feed stereotypes, endorse a static and uniform view of culture and even promote segregation (Klitgaard, 1994). In South Africa in the 1950s many (white) South African researchers argued forcefully for education to be tailored to local cultures (Kuper, 1987). This meant taking more seriously issues of language differences, levels of ability and cultural traits. The resulting Bantu Education Act fortified apartheid and instead of tailoring education to student needs, it tried to tailor children to a racist society’s needs. The normative dimension of cultural analysis is, therefore, both valuable and worrying when applied to sensitive development issues.

Current international efforts to promote ‘Education for All’ – and in particular to tie this to notions of quality, though laudable as an aim in itself, raises a number of important questions about the relevance and appropriateness of the ‘education’ being promoted (Stephens 2003). The Ghana research highlighted the direct relationship between difficulties girls faced in staying in school and the academic and
examinations character of the formal education system inherited from the colonial era.

Consultancy work carried out by the author in post-Taliban Afghanistan (Stephens 2001) on strategies for the reconstruction of education, particularly for girls, revealed plans by the Western development assistance agencies that took little account of Islamic traditions and practices.

A fourth problem concerns the very real danger of paying lip service to terms such as ‘participatory research’ or ‘beneficiary assessment’. As Edwards (1989) points out in his paper, ‘The irrelevance of development studies’, the term ‘participatory’, politically correct and currently in vogue with agencies such as the World Bank, is often actually viewed as a mechanism for cost recovery in projects initiated from the outside; of reducing the costs of building and infrastructural programmes planned by governments; and of improving the accuracy of research carried out by and for external agencies. As Edwards says, the crucial point is to see who sets the agenda and who controls the research process. Participation otherwise tends to be used as a technique to improve the efficiency of research or programming, rather than as a means of facilitating people’s own development efforts. Used in this way, it becomes merely another form of exploitation, serving the purposes of outsiders who have their own agenda but who know they cannot gain a complete picture of the problems that interest them through conventional methods alone.

Two possible ways forward here concern the focus upon indigenous capacity building as integral to the research activity, and a strengthening of the communication channels between the subjects of the research and the researcher. The former raises serious questions about the capacity of Southern universities and research institutions not only to receive sufficient funds to train researchers but also to hold onto them once trained. The latter issue of improved communication between researcher and researched is more easily addressed when considering the appropriateness of the research methods to be used. In the next section of this paper we highlight life history as an example of a research method that has the potential to improve this communication. Implementing these as potential ways forward raises a number of practical questions that we address in the third part of this paper.

A final problem concerns the paucity of research evidence illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of taking on board cultural issues in the research process. The symposium on international perspectives on culture and schooling at London University’s Institute of Education (1994), and this workshop in Edinburgh, have gone some way in bringing together researchers who recognise the importance of culture in international educational development and are developing
methodologies that reflect the cultural traditions within which they work.

Terezinha Nunes (1993) work on Cultural Diversity in Learning Mathematics, a perspective from Brazil (which examined the ‘gap’ between school mathematics and street mathematics) and Bob and Jennie Teasdale’s (1993) fascinating study contrasting perceptions of knowledge and learning strategies among Australia’s aboriginal communities are two such examples. In the United States, where cultural issues appear to being taken increasingly seriously, a study by Trueba, et al (1990) of cultural conflict and adaptation among the Hmong children in American society is valuable both for its focus upon the centrality of cultural factors in the education and development of these people, and the recognition of the role of what they call ‘intervention-research’ in the process of helping a minority people gain the rights that are theirs.

It is important, therefore, for models of good research practice, case studies, applied ethnographic studies and the like to be more widely known, and for the research community to make clearer its commitment to utilizing such work for development purposes.

Ways Forward to Improve the Quality of Educational Research in Developing Countries

Being aware of the ‘landscape of the argument’ is one thing, generating an array of practical strategies and ways forward – drawn from research experience – is quite another. What follows is a modest attempt at a research manifesto that has at its centre a desire to utilize the cultural dimension for the purpose of improving the quality of research in education and development.

We are concerned with three, inter-related strands:

First the identification of a research methodology which is culture-appropriate and suitable for the task of development; secondly the development of existing methods and techniques which come out of or are sensitive to the cultural arena; and thirdly, the generation of practical solutions to a number of subsidiary problems concerned with such things as the training of counter-parts, the support of grassroots research organisations, the promotion of indigenous publishing.

1) Towards a More Culturally-Appropriate Methodology

My own research in a number of African cultural settings fuels my belief that it is within qualitative research methodology where we will find a more suitable way forward. For example when researching the promotion of child-centred health education programmes in Uganda and India in 1993 it soon became clear that any success would need
to be predicated upon a platform that took sufficient account of cultural ideas of the notion of childhood and cultural interpretations of health and well-being (Stephens, 1993; Pridmore and Stephens, 1999).

The research carried out in these two countries – and elsewhere - was largely qualitative in character and paid attention to the cultural nature of both the content of the research and the processes involved in carrying it out. It is possible to identify six major characteristics of this kind of enquiry:

The first characteristic focuses on meanings and the attempts to understand the culture of those being studied predisposes researchers to work as far as possible in natural settings (Denzin, 1971). In terms of methods this suggests, for example, a preference for participant observation rather than experiments under artificial conditions, and preference for informal and less standardized interviews rather than for more standardized and formal ones.

Rather than testing preconceived hypotheses culturally sensitive research is also characterized by a desire to generate hypotheses and theories that emerge from the data, in an attempt to avoid the imposition of previous, and possibly culturally inappropriate, frames of reference (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). There are two important implications of this. First, it implies a greater degree of flexibility concerning research design and data collection over the duration of the research project; and secondly, it implies that the process of analysis often overlaps with the process of data collection.

The third characteristic focuses on the processes of social interaction and the stress qualitative research gives to the ongoing collection of data rather than collection of material at discrete points in the research process. Culturally appropriate research in development is therefore more likely to be concerned with the process of implementation than with innovation outcomes.

Fourthly, qualitative, culturally appropriate research is characterized by holism, in the sense that it attempts to provide a contextual understanding of the complex interrelationship of causes and consequences that affect human behaviour (Goetz and Le Compte, 1984). As stated earlier, the focus needs to be more on context as research environment rather than context as background to the study.

A consequence of this holistic emphasis is that qualitative research within the development field tends to incorporate a wide variety of specific research techniques, even within one research project. As we shall examine later a case can be made for increased use of research methods that relate specifically to patterns of local knowledge and the
transmission of cultural meanings (Vulliamy, et al., 1990, Crossley and Vulliamy, 1997).

The fifth characteristic of qualitative research concerns the researcher's ability to understand the relationship between macro- and micro-analytical levels of data collected, and to establish cross-cultural comparisons and contrasts. To a certain extent this resolves the earlier problem of objectification.

The final characteristic concerns the goal of qualitative research in making explicit links between macro- and micro-structural levels of data collection and analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective that can assist policy makers and practitioners (Trueba, et al., 1990 Harber and Davies, 1997).

2) Towards More Culturally-Sensitive Research Methods

During the past few years the international research community, particularly again those employed within the NGO sector, have paid significant attention to the development of research techniques and strategies (clusters of methods if you like operating under a particular methodological umbrella) that are sensitive to the research cultural context.

It may be useful at this stage briefly to look at one research method – life history – that seems well suited for use in culturally sensitive contexts.

Life History.

"The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community ... do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such disassociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of others."

(C. Wright Mills The Sociological Imagination. 1995)

The importance and value of life history and biography as a research method is now well established in educational research, particularly in the Western, so-called developed world. Life history and biography have been used to good effect for example in an understanding of, individual-collective praxis and socio-historical change (Bertaux, 1981), in the organisation of individual life data (Mandelbaum, 1973), and more specifically in the interplay between the teachers’ individual identities and the socio-historical context in which they work (Goodson, 1992; Ball and Goodson, 1985; Woods, 1981, 1987, 1995).
Essentially life history research concerns the relationship between two inter-dependent worlds: that of the individual with their unique life story and that of the past, present and future contextual world through which the individual travels. Life story is ‘the story we tell about our life’ (Goodson, 1992) whilst life history is that life story ‘located within its historical context’ (Goodson, 1992). Given the emergence of these methods over the past decade or so it is surprising to discover how little impact they have had on educational research in the developing world. There seems, however, to be the stirrings of interest in applying these approaches in Third World settings (e.g. Osler, 1997). Let us start by looking a little closer at the nature of life history as a method and then its potential application to Third World settings.

What defines a life history has been a matter of some debate (see Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995) though it seems possible now to identify four broadly accepted characteristics.

It is firstly a qualitative research method similar to the closely allied method, narrative enquiry, and focuses on, ‘the individual, the personal nature of the research process, a practical orientation and an emphasis on subjectivity’ (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995). Secondly it is a mix of ‘life story’ as told by the individual to the researcher and, what Goodson (1992), calls ‘genealogies of context’ which in turn becomes a ‘life history’.

Thirdly, it can be characterized as essentially a personal type of research enquiry with priority for success being given to the establishment of rapport between researched and researcher. The dialogical, discursive nature of life history and narrative work raises a number of questions, both ethical and ideological particularly when involving outside researchers investigating problems in the developing world.

Finally it is concerned with ‘voice’ and ‘ownership’; emphasis is given throughout from design to publication to what the individual researched has to say, how it is said, and the meaning made by the speaker to what has been said. As such it has great potential for imbuing the research process with a liberating, democratic ethos.

These characteristics, in turn, give rise to two parallel sets of tensions: First in the balance that needs to be struck between the individual and the contextually situated nature of their individual experience. Recognising that ‘no individual is an island’ means that a major task in carrying out life history research is to present a view of larger, macro-issues through the lens of an individual’s life experiences. The author’s recent research in South Africa (Breidlid & Stephens, 2002), which looked at the relationships between cultural values and schooling in the Black and Coloured communities of Eastern and
Western Cape, found that life history provided the ideal vehicle for exploring values from a macro and individual perspective.

If one views individual life experience’s as always in relation to the immediate social environment (which is particularly so in the developing world) and in relation to comparative experiences of those in similar situations, it is possible to present an analysis which is both particular and universal.

Second is the balance between the subjective and objective. In many ways life history and narrative methods reveal both the strengths and challenges of these forms of qualitative enquiry. Those who use life history have no problems with extolling its strengths. Ayers (1989: 84) summarises the strengths well:

Life history and narrative approaches are person centred, unapologetically subjective. Far from a weakness, the voice of the person, the subject’s own account represents a singular strength. Life history and narrative are ancient approaches to understanding human affairs – they are found in history, folklore, psychiatry, medicine, music, sociology economics and of course, anthropology. Their relative newness to us is a reminder of how often we tail behind.

Challenges to these methods are those addressed by all qualitative research: validity and generalizability. In terms of validity Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) provide a useful checklist for intending life history researchers:

- Note the circumstances surrounding the recording and collection of the data.
- Consider the relationship between researcher and subject.
- Are there any 'facts' in the accounts, which are easily checked on?
- Compare statements in one section of a life history with statements in another section of the same life history.
- Compare the statements in one life history with those in other life histories from different people within the same setting.
- Compare the statements in the life history with data from other sources within the same setting.
- Compare the statements in the life history with other statements in published life histories of teachers and pupils.
- If possible get a second opinion on the materials by showing them to colleagues.

The problem of generalizability takes us back to Goodson’s (1992) idea of developing ‘genealogies of context’ with the emphasis placed firmly upon the teacher or pupil in situ. There is an argument too for asking
not 'how generalizable are life histories?' but 'how useful are they?' in coming to an understanding of how broad macro issues affect the individual 'on the ground'. We need to ask questions of our data that go beyond the standardized notions of reliability, validity and generalizability: how useful are the data? How authentic is it? How persuasive are they (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995) and of course how culturally sound are they?

Thematic analysis has been suggested as a useful way to analyse life history data. Mandelbaum (1973) takes three aspects to focus upon:

- Dimensions of life that include the individual’s general social, cultural, psychological experience organised in a chronological fashion.
- Turning points that refer to moments of change, for example departure from one level of schooling to another, promotion, marriage.
- Adaptations that involve experiences of coping with change, accommodation and assimilation of new experiences and circumstances.

Mandelbaum’s schema – used in his life history of Gandhi – seems to have merit when considering, for example, the lives of teachers and pupils in circumstances of rapid change.

Life history has a potentially valuable role to play in the study of teachers' lives. Education is essentially concerned with what happens to people. Remembering this fact can guide us in making decisions about how to collect educational data and the purposes to which research should be put. There is a strong case to be made for research into policy and curriculum for example to take much greater cognisance of voices of teachers and pupils who daily experience the effects of decisions usually taken at a distance and by individuals at least once removed from the chalk-face.

Looking at the literature on life history I am struck by how little has been carried out in Southern settings. There are a number of reasons for this: the predominance of traditional empirical forms of research, the establishment of large teaching universities with little opportunities for research, and the recruitment of indigenous researchers by development agencies concerned only with macro, survey style evaluations seem to be three. Though some good qualitative research is now being carried out by doctoral students around the world, little serious effort is being made to promote the incorporation of small scale, qualitative studies into the political and financial agendas of Ministries of Education and donor organisations.

One exception is the fascinating research by Robert Serpell (1993) into 'the significance of schooling' in one Zambia community. Significantly,

In his collection and analysis of the life histories or ‘life journeys’ of students from his Zambian community, Serpell sets out to explain the significance of schooling held by those represented in his reflexive triangle. He makes the important point that he is not only trying to explain how the author views the educational values of his subjects i.e. school children, but how the various parties to the explanation view their own values, perceptions, attitudes. This reflexive approach to the gathering of data means that ‘culture’ applies equally to the framing of the Zambian data as it does to experiences, knowledge and insights brought to the research from the outside.

Let us look for a moment at a rationale for using teacher biography as a culturally appropriate research method. Firstly, by focussing on the lives and stories of teachers we are providing an antidote to dominance of educational change by the manager and administrator. For a number of reasons, notably those of power, access to funds, and prestige it is the ‘voice’ of the ministerial bureaucrat and ‘expert consultant’, which predominates. A result is that we hear a great deal about prescription and very little about the implementation (or attempt to) at the chalk-face.

Secondly there is an important body of literature (e.g. Lortie 1975) which suggests that by understanding the socialization of the teacher throughout their career, but particularly during the early training period and experiences during their own schooling, we will have a much better idea of what influences teacher decision-making in the classroom.

A third rationale concerns the marginalisation of teachers’ experiences in the writing of ‘public histories’. It is suggested that in educational development little is heard from the perspective of the female teacher, the beginner teacher or those working in the non-formal sector. Given the fact that more time these days seems to be spent on project evaluation than research of any kind, it is not surprising that when research is done it tends to focus on the project or the system rather than the lives of those engaged in teaching.

Finally, as Goodson (1992) argues in his book, ‘Studying Teachers’ Lives’ a focus on teachers-in-situ will generate much needed research into the relationship between ‘school life’ and ‘whole life’, it will provide us with important insights into the rewards and problems teachers face; and, maybe, tell us something about the impact upon teachers of educational cuts and changes in public esteem. For researchers in the developing world such information would seem vital for improving the quality of the system at a time of austerity. In
raising the profile of this approach it is now worth considering some of the inherent dangers.

In taking up this approach we are emphasizing two dimensions of cultural importance: that the teachers’ stories and narratives be told in their own words and in their own terms; and that these stories or biographies be embedded in genealogies of context.

3) The practical question: Towards implementing more Culturally Appropriate Research

Taking forward these ideas requires a radical re-thinking of how researchers conduct educational research in the so-called developing world.

It would be naive to believe that by wishing things to happen we can transform research practice overnight. However, there are a number of practical things we can do.

It seems we can start by giving more priority to the training of those involved in research projects. It is not enough to ask teachers to become participants in the research process without more hands-on experience in the design and use of strategies and techniques.

We can also strengthen the communication process between research and researched, giving more priority to the exchanging of drafts in terms of design and early analysis of data; and to require research subjects to play a more informed role in the whole process of research.

Identifying models of good research practice, which illustrate much of what has been advocated in this paper, is another practical step forward. An important job of university departments, North and South, can be in the collection and publication of research studies which emphasize the cultural dimension of development and which give greater prominence to what can be learned, in terms of methodology particularly, from the allied fields of development studies, anthropology, and sociology. This conference is a good example of such an identification.

Specifically in the field of educational development we can also give greater prominence to research projects that are action-oriented and to research methods that take more account of culture-specifics and the participation of the teacher in the collection and analysis of data. Such an approach has implications for the training of teachers-as-researchers.

We can give more recognition to cultural factors in our work in educational research and development work. If we are working in the
University sector we can encourage postgraduate students to take up this area, and to be more adventurous in their selection of methodologies and methods.

Finally we require a more concerted commitment to the local publication of research that is carried out in the field. Again we can argue that all funded research projects should include a proviso that monographs and papers coming out of the field should be made available for publication within the local community. Any call for increased respect for 'local knowledge' sounds hollow unless it is supported by an increased commitment to local publishing.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have stressed the importance of context, reflexivity, and appropriate research approaches in the designing of a culturally sensitive research methodologies. I have also touched upon the contribution that research of this kind can make to policy formation. Robert Klitgaard (1994: 28) states the challenge well when he calls for 'new ways of combining cultural knowledge at local and international levels' and for 'new research across disciplinary lines...new processes of policy analysis and participatory management...what might be called pedagogical experiences for decision-makers at all levels, experiences that will ‘include’ the cultural dimension of development'. Such a renaissance in applied cultural studies will, he argues, ‘combine scientific advances with new methods for bringing what we learn down to earth.’

In the three decades in which I have traveled between the North and South in the quest to understand and contribute to educational development I have come to realize that the aims and objectives of research are inextricably bound to not only the way in which that research is carried out but also to the mindset of the researcher doing the work. Encouraging reflexivity towards the relationship between ends and means, and context and processes offers the international research community a real opportunity to make a difference.

This, I believe, is the major methodological challenge of researching education and skills development in Africa.

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Challenges of the Field and of Field Research, with particular reference to the Informal Sectors of Africa
Kenneth King

Introduction

By contrast with the days when the first generations of post-independence Africanists in Edinburgh and other centres were doing their initial research and writing during the 1960s, and when there was frankly very little attention to methodology\(^1\) – the current generation must experience something very different. Within the UK, a number of British and EU doctoral students, but by no means all, are supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), but it has been the ESRC that has been responsible for privileging research training in the preparation of younger social scientists in the UK. Many doctoral students who come to pursue the PhD from outside the UK will be attending universities and particular courses which have received the stamp of recognition by the ESRC for covering both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in social science research. It would be fair to assume that in Britain today, the very great majority of doctoral students are formally obliged successfully to cover coursework, including a good deal of discussion that purports to prepare them for the challenge of field research.

Certainly in Edinburgh, it is not possible nowadays for a doctoral candidate to go to the field without passing through a rather rigorous process of reflection on the relevant theoretical literatures that might touch on their chosen research; they must also present and defend a very detailed account of what they actually intend to do in the so-called field. Even with all this exposure to the riches of research training, I suspect that there is still a genuine culture shock when doctoral candidates return for their fieldwork to their own country or to a third country of research choice, or in the case of UK and EU students when they arrive in the African country of their choice.

We have found, in African Studies, that those who are fortunate enough to be supported by the ESRC have benefited enormously by being able to go on what we might term a preliminary research safari.

This is a deliberate trial period of the ideas that they will have been turning around since they first applied in those key 1-5 pages of application for the ESRC or other funding body. In the case of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, the initial requirements are only some 300 words to outline the proposed thesis area; so there is a

\(^1\) The author did his PhD in Edinburgh between 1965 and 1968, and was obliged to follow no courses at all on methodology. He elected to take an undergraduate course on African history, but this was not examined in his case.
huge gap between these very brief original statements of their ambitions and aspirations and what they later have to do – in the field. Students who have had the funding to undertake these preliminary research trips have found them hugely beneficial. They have not had to start immediately on data collection or the analysis of context, but, rather, they have had the luxury to feel their way into the field of their choice.

For those students who have had to raise their own very considerable funding to undertake a doctorate in the UK, it will not be possible to go for a trial period of a month – to test out their ideas – and then return to discuss them with their supervisor. They will only have one airfare – and they may have funding for as little as 3-4 months in the field rather than the generous language training, supported by the ESRC, followed by some 9-12 months of further time in the field. In other words, there is a huge difference between such ESRC doctoral students and those whose fieldwork can only be as long as their budget – not defined by the timeline of their ideals – or of getting thoroughly to know the context and the local politics – but by the hard fact that they only have enough money to be in the field for a few brief months. In the language of consultancy, these students will have to ‘hit the ground running’. Shortly after their plane touches down, they will have to be engaged in fieldwork.

**Research Training Proposition One: The field is not only out there**

I want to suggest something that may help those who are just about to make the transition from the world of courses - including courses of advanced research training methods – to the world of the field. This may help those who only have the funds for a very short period of field research. My advice is to consider rethinking the gap between the UK university, where the coursework and research training are delivered, and the field. This can be a rather misleading contrast, UK and the field, and it can put those on a tight budget - under huge pressure. What I mean to suggest is that the field can actually also be here in the UK - in Edinburgh, London, Sussex and elsewhere.

Let me illustrate: in April 2004, I was external examiner for a thesis that was concerned with one of the better known examples of non-formal education and training in the whole of Africa. The Village Polytechnic had developed in Kenya in the late 1960s like many other alternatives to formal primary schooling in other countries. I soon discovered that the doctoral candidate had not read at firsthand any of the original reports, education commissions, and consultancies by NGOs, governments and donors. These documents - or many of them – were cited in the bibliography, but a close examination of the textual references and quotations revealed that they had actually been derived from secondary sources which had used the originals. Classic
documents such as ‘After School What?’ which led to the development of the Village Polytechnics by the National Christian Council of Kenya had only been visited through a summary in a master’s thesis. The Ominde Report, the Kericho Conference and much else had been also visited – but only through the eyes of another masters or doctoral student. Even the very recent Koech Report had not been handled personally.

So my first plea is for doctoral students to be sure – before they go ‘to the field’ that they have adequately researched the key sources that exist in their own universities or deposit libraries. In other words, ‘the field’ may be in Edinburgh – or in York or Birmingham. And these key resources are not just documents but may include people, and these people, some of them retired, others still working in universities, may be intimately connected with the very conceptual world that students are trying to research.

Here is an example from the topic of one of my own research themes – the informal sectors of Africa. How many articles and theses when they are discussing the informal sector refer, in a passing sentence, to the fact that Keith Hart first used the term – the informal sector - of the situation in Accra, Ghana, in an article on ‘informal income opportunities and urban employment in Africa’ (Hart 1973). But it is not at all common to research the unpublished thesis that Keith Hart had actually written about the situation of urban and rural income generation in Ghana, and from which this single phrase, the informal sector, was eventually derived. Too frequently the conceptual apparatus on which our own research may be based is not itself analysed through a careful revisiting of the original documentation and the original personnel – whether local or expatriate – who were responsible for the terminology. One of our doctoral students has illustrated this approach I am advocating in a recent piece of analysis – before going to the field. This work, which has been published in the CAS Occasional Paper series (Palmer 2004), may help to underline the fact that the field for research can start right here in the UK – before students get to the field! This particular piece of work is based primarily on a very careful analysis of the original documents surrounding the concept of the informal sector but it could just have easily combined this with a series of interviews with Keith Hart himself – who actually teaches in the University of Aberdeen – or with others who were crucial in defining the character of the informal sector in West Africa.

For students’ own chosen research themes, are there perhaps parallels to what I have just mentioned? Are students going out to analyse an institution or an education or a training practice whose intellectual origins they are taking for-granted?
Research Training Proposition Two: The documentary history is also the field

One of my prejudices about research is that the historical background to what students are about to research is absolutely fundamental. Research training in the social sciences often talks about the importance of culture, but for the particular topic, location, population or institution that doctoral students are researching, have they really examined sufficiently the relevant history? And what are the borders and boundaries of that history? It may be argued that if they are examining some very contemporary issue like private sector training initiatives or national qualifications frameworks, or community-based skill centres, surely they don’t need to go very far back to put these into context! Not so.

Some examples of the importance of this could be drawn from a series of Edinburgh students. Caroline Dyer’s thesis was on a very topical and controversial basic education thrust in India – called Operation Blackboard. But one of the first pieces of ‘pre-fieldwork’ she did was a long paper or pre-chapter on the rise and fall – over the period of some 50-70 years of central government initiatives in the field of education (Dyer 1992). Similarly, Simon McGrath called the first chapter of his dissertation something like ‘A century of South African Education and Training’ training initiatives (McGrath 1996). Steve Kerr (2005) who has written about what sounds like a pretty contemporary topic – teacher unionism in Tanzania – has made his first chapter a detailed analytical account of the nature of work, formal and informal, and of employment that goes back beyond the end of the 19th century. And Barbara Trudell (2004) who completed a thesis on multilingual education and literacy in Cameroon spent several weeks before her fieldwork in country doing a detailed search in the colonial history archives of the Rhodes House library in Oxford. Embedding the research topic in its local political and even colonial context may be essential to understanding what is really happening today to a chosen location or institutional field.

This does not, of course, mean that all doctoral students have to research the colonial history of their subject – though that may be vital. But it could mean that if they are looking at rural and vocational education and training in the modern period, they may well want to examine with great care the vocational school assumptions, fallacies and initiatives of 10, 20 or 30 years earlier – in the post-independence period (See for example King and Martin 2002).

Each student will have to be the best judge of how far back they need to go in order to understand the traditions, character and assumptions about education and training that are perhaps central to what is driving the particular institution or phenomenon they are researching. But they should not forget that in the UK as in Africa,
history may be people. I would prefer not to call such critically knowledgeable people 'key informants' in the jargon of research training courses and manuals. Such people may well be able to offer a graduate student who is a good listener – not just information – but knowledge and insight grounded in years of experience with the very phenomena that the student is planning to research.

**Research Training Proposition Three: Researching the ordinary rather than the project**

What we are alerting doctoral students to in this proposition is the temptation to link their research to the extra-ordinary. For example, Sub-Saharan Africa is full of projects – delivered by NGOs and every other kind of agency imaginable. It is tempting to link their research to one of more of these projects, for lots of reasons. There are, of course, genuinely good reasons for looking at innovations in education and training, and of course we cannot be too Jesuitical about the distinction between a project and the ordinary. Village Polytechnics, for example, were a project in their early days, as were Brigades in Botswana. Now they are part of the ordinary landscape of training.

The dangers associated with researching projects are that the very nature of the project approach may mean that there are additional funds attached to the project, and that students end up researching something whose very progress and 'success' are being encouraged by exceptional funding. That is fine, of course, if students are researching aid projects themselves. But if they are researching rural training in Sierra Leone, they will get a rather particular, and arguably distorted view by using a project lens.

The attraction to researchers of studying projects is that they can shelter under the project umbrella. This may help with securing research permission; it also helps with access to clients and customers, pupils or trainees. If the researcher is seen to be somehow linked to a key project, then, quite suddenly, data collection, interviews and connections to the relevant ministry can become much easier. Especially if the project is actually aided externally, there may be all sorts of additional benefits from researching its impact – and not least the better access to transport and communications.

**An illustration from the informal sector.**

Like many subjects in Sub-Saharan Africa, researching education and training for the informal sector can be done through the project lens, or through an ordinary lens. A very large number of foreign NGOs, bilateral agencies and multilateral organisations have their ‘informal sector’ or ‘income-generation’ projects. By focusing on one or more of these well-funded projects, the doctoral students may face a double problem; in addition to the question of how they select their own
samples, they will have to face the history of these particular projects: how were they generated? Why did they locate in this location? What were their patronage relations? Whose future is linked to their success?

This is not to say that projects are not worth researching – they most certainly are – and especially at the point when they are becoming part of the ordinary landscape. There are also some very large donor-funded projects on the informal sector which really ought to be researched, and not just evaluated by the agency. But the difference between – say – researching a UNIDO project on technological development of the informal sector and trying to understand technological change in the informal sector is as different as chalk is from cheese. The one project has a manager, a compound, a telephone, a set of clients, a project document and – of course – a mission statement. It may actually want to be researched, which is a huge help to the poor researcher. By contrast, the informal economy, outside these many tiny project islands has few of these things, and – unlike the UNIDO project - it may actually be involved in production and income generation, and there may therefore be little time to talk or entertain visiting researchers.

Another Edinburgh researcher illustrates the importance of researching the ordinary in the informal sector; Tom Molony (2005) has been researching ICTs in small scale enterprises in Tanzania for the period 2002-2005. It would have been entirely possible for him to do this via the project approach, as there are any number of ICT projects in Tanzania, many of them genuinely interesting and creative, but most of them are supported by short-term external funding from NGOs and other agencies. Instead he chose to look at the adoption of ICTs in the ordinary world of getting agricultural products to market, in construction and in wood carving. This was almost certainly much more demanding than working with a series of tele-centres supported by external development partners. But the result may well be a better sense of how ICTs, and especially the mobile phone, is penetrating both rural and urban small enterprise.

**Research Training Proposition Four: Consider the counter-intuitive**

In approaching their chosen topic and the site for field work, research students may want to be aware of their options – for a short time – to think about their topic from a different perspective than the usual. For instance, almost all studies of the informal sector are done in towns or cities. Why not study this in the rural economies of Africa? The process of understanding why there has been an urban bias in the research on the informal sector may well lead a doctoral student to formulate a new and fresh approach to this topic.
Similarly, studies of education and training in the informal sector are tempted to apply some of the frameworks which come from thinking about skills development in the formal sector. So questions are carefully constructed about experience of informal apprenticeship, and of on and off-the-job learning, as if these terms can be applied routinely across countries in East and West Africa. The same can be said of the generalised use of terms such as public and private sector training (Caddell and Holmes, 2002). Instead, a period of preliminary field work will suggest the kinds of question that will capture the particularity of training in the informal sector.

**Concluding Remarks**

I have offered just four research training propositions. I could offer many more – and they would include the difficulty of getting the right balance between what we might call pre-service research training, and in-service research training. Arguably it is only in the field itself that the real challenges of method are actually met. In the coursework, some of these standard research training elements may just seem like so many exercises to be passed; and by the time they are met, there is little chance to discuss the options facing the researcher.

An even more basic challenge is that many of the standard research training courses assume a uniform (western) world and a single fieldwork context; in other words the research training courses are seldom themselves contextualised in the way we have mentioned above. This is one reason why the Centre of African Studies, back in the mid 1990s, introduced a research training course entitled, *Africa: methodological and practical issues* (CAS 2005). Its purpose was precisely to deal with a whole series of very particular issues that face especially western researchers when they seek to apply their newly learnt skills in settings in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these are ethical issues, and others are about the power relations of western research in the extremely poor fieldwork settings that are met in both rural and urban Africa.

In other words, not only is the field not just ‘out there’ but also in one’s home university and home country; but there are many fields - African, South Asian, and Latin American. And within those areas there is again enormous diversity; so that working in Rwanda or Sierra Leone cannot be similar to working in South Africa or Ghana. Even within a country such as Kenya, researching the informal sector whether in rural or urban areas is a very different exercise from researching formal small scale enterprises in the industrial areas.

The sheer complexity of what one is attempting to do today as a young researcher is probably communicated by the best methods courses. But even the best of these courses cannot provide a powerful research idea or theme that can justify 3-4 years of a young person’s time. So
the last issue that needs underlining is that there needs to be an appropriate balance struck, in course design, between an overwhelming focus on method on the one hand and substantive courses on the other that engage students in the crucial debates in education, about quality, quantity, outcomes, financing, the nature of work, aspirations, the public and the private spheres. There are indications that course design, influenced by the ESRC, has pushed the balance too far towards method, with important consequences for students’ exposure to substantive issues and the crucial debates that should be at the heart of African and Development Studies.

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THE CHALLENGES OF EXPLORING HOW SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS WORK IN UNFAMILIAR CULTURAL SETTINGS

Terry Allsop

Introduction

Researching classrooms and schools within one’s own national context can be a daunting challenge. Even with an apparently rooted familiarity with the context, assumptions about the meaning of classroom events and actions require scrupulous testing and regular exposure to critique. How much more cautious should we be then, when trying to understand what happens in classrooms in very different cultural, philosophical and economic settings? Research methodologies, by contrast, generally travel well enough, but still need the most careful tuning to local contexts and norms. This paper is written around a series of observations and studies, mostly from work carried out in sub-Saharan Africa by different researchers. The reader is invited to respond to many questions posed in the text.

Reflection 1

Quite a drive up the Gambia River from the capital Banjul is the small town of Sololo. The box below records the notes I made following a quite brief visit there in early 1998; I was probably in the school for not more than two hours.

Sololo Primary School

I arrived unannounced as a result of a failure of communication at this new primary school with six classrooms. The head teacher was clearly very ambitious for his school and wanted me to see everything.

Within five minutes, I found myself in the classroom of a woman teacher in the Grade 1 class [45 students] who was teaching a lesson on ‘Plants’ – it could have been called a science or environmental studies lesson. Throughout the lesson, she developed the theme – the different parts of a plant and their functions – by questions addressed to individual members of the class by name. She questioned girls and boys equally and thanked them for their answers. She used both English and Mandinka. She had a living plant with her and she asked individuals to come out to identify the different parts and to write the names on the board. Her classroom had charts on the walls which displayed children’s work.

Why did it seem worthwhile recording her lesson like this?

What can we imply about the model of teaching used by the teacher?
What will the likely sources be for her approach to this lesson?

Who decides whether or not it was a ‘good lesson’?

*Commentary:* Perhaps my unannounced arrival was really useful, as the lesson I observed could not possibly have been rehearsed for my benefit. The teacher was in no obvious way put out by my insertion into her lesson, nor, more surprisingly, were her students. What were my thoughts after the lesson? Well, I was confident that the children had learned a good deal about a plant, partly because of their articulate responses, partly because of the accurate records in their exercise books. I felt that the teacher made good judgements about the structure of the lesson, her use of teaching material, and particularly in the way in which she posed her questions and valued the children’s responses. Her use of two languages was clearly very skilled. Above all, I felt that she put communication with her students as individuals at the heart of her teaching approach. The reader will note that this commentary contains no context dependent technical terms regarding pedagogy – the lesson just happened to take place in a school in The Gambia. This preliminary conclusion may give cheer to the neophyte researcher.

*Reflection 2*

In the second half of 1986, I spent a sabbatical researching the practice of science teaching in middle (secondary) schools in Beijing and Tianjin, in China. I wanted to be able to say that I had reached a reasonable understanding of what was taking place in science lessons, so restricted myself to working with two teachers in each of four schools. There was no suggestion that these were ‘representative’ schools – they were clearly an opportunity sample based on accessibility, which included two very highly regarded schools and two middle-of-the-road ones. My Chinese language skills were basic, but I did have some familiarity with the Chinese technical language involved, and chemical equations are represented identically the world over. On some occasions I was accompanied by a science education colleague from Beijing Teachers’ College or Tianjin Normal University, but was also sometimes left alone. The lessons were presented in a very standard format, typically with variations and reiterations of the sequence:

- Teacher presents new idea/concept/content
- Teacher initiates extended question-answer session with students (who all have their textbook open in front of them and often read out the answer direct from the text)
- Teacher carries out simple demonstration experiment or uses model
- Students write notes given by teacher
- Students answer questions posed in their textbooks.
A pretty standard science lesson you may say. So, what was I able to make of what went on in these lessons? Perhaps immodestly, I would say that I missed very little, and was often able to predict for my science education colleagues how the sequence of question-answer might run. My colleagues often expressed surprise, until they realised that many of these routines were pretty universal. What I was observing, of course, was a highly rehearsed and practised lesson sequence, prepared in the finest detail by a teacher who might have taught the same lesson two or three times that week already, to other classes. I was looking at science teaching at a time when practical experiments carried out by students was a rarity in China, even in the upper classes of middle school. The notion of a student managed investigation or project was completely absent, as was the idea that students should carry out book-originated study of new concepts. The teacher was always director of learning.

What I was able to understand, from my wider reading about Chinese education, was the continuing importance of the Confucian principle of bei shu, meaning ‘back to the book’. The authority of the text was paramount whether from the perspective of the teacher or the student. And, unsurprisingly, that was reflected in the approach to assessment through the national middle school examination.

Did I miss anything important here?

Commentary: Clearly, my reading of the nuances of the events in these science lessons would have been significantly enhanced if my language skills had been more robust, but it would surprise me if I missed much of significance in the verbal interactions of teacher with student, and what was recorded in exercise books was confirmed to be always close to a reproduction of the characters in the open textbook. What was closed to me was the students’ performance in out-of-class written assignments, which would have given me clearer insights into the depth of understanding of the concepts being learned. Incidentally, even though the lessons were highly structured, and the classrooms often freezing cold, they were never boring. The Chinese teachers were, in turn, stunned to hear that science teachers in Britain might teach as many as twenty different lessons per week (of one hour equivalent length); they might well have much more difficulty understanding a week in the life of a British science teacher.

Reflection 3

In Ngugi wa Thiongo’s seminal novel Petals of Blood (Ngugi, 1977), set in Kenya, the chief character is a primary school teacher, Godfrey Munira. The following extract illustrates what occurs when he takes them outside the classroom:
“He took the children out into the field to study nature, as he put it. He picked flowers and taught them the names of the various parts: the stigma, the pistil, pollen, and the petals. He told them a little about fertilisation. He was pleased with his explanations.

But then the children started asking him awkward questions. Why did things eat each other? Why can’t the eaten eat back? Why did God allow this and that to happen? He had never bothered with that sort of question and to silence them he told them it was simply a law of nature. What was a law? What was nature? Children, he told them, it’s time for a break.

He swore he would never again take the children to the fields. Enclosed in the four walls he was the master, aloof, dispensing knowledge to a concentration of faces looking up at him. But out in the fields, outside the walls, he felt insecure.”

What do you feel are the origins of Godfrey’s uncertainties when confronted with a stream of tough questions from his class? Do they derive from his training as a teacher? Or from his own lack of personal self-confidence? Can we not, as teachers, relate universally to his predicament?

Commentary: It may be worth your while to reflect on the differences between this fictional example and the Sololo case mentioned earlier. Why was one teacher at ease with her approach whilst Godfrey experienced high levels of stress? Which teacher came closest to achieving their aims? Which make the most realistic judgements about their own capabilities as a teacher working with a class of young children? Godfrey’s attempts to use the environment very directly backfired when his children asked questions way beyond the parameters of a ‘normal’ science or environmental studies lesson. Our Sololo teacher had presumably made her own assessment of how best she could manage her 45 children. But Godfrey’s is only a fictional tale after all.

Working in African Schools and Classrooms

Let us move now, for most of the rest of this paper, to African contexts, and restrict ourselves to the earlier years of schooling, not least because to spend a long period of time researching subject-oriented, teacher-dominated classrooms in many African secondary schools could diminish the investigative spirit of even the most intrepid researcher. At least there is usually something interesting and worthy of note happening in primary classrooms. First, we should record some general contextual notes:

1. The classroom that you are investigating owes its origins to the model of the ‘Western primary or elementary schoolroom’, which
has proved from the mid-nineteenth century onwards to be a
durable and much-reproduced creature; a rectangular room
equipped with a teacher, a blackboard, a variable number of
students sitting on functional furniture, supplied with basic
materials required for teaching and learning. It may, sadly, be a
rather feeble parody of such a schoolroom. Though sited in an
African village, town or city, it will have taken little obvious
inspiration from its immediate environment, apart perhaps from
the materials from which it is constructed.

2. A significant proportion of the students will be first-generation
school attendees, coming from homes where there is no
tradition of written literacy, no books other than the Bible or
Koran, and where there are many other prioritised tasks for all
members of the family. For context, you will need to ascertain
over a period of time, how many of the children in the classes
you study have: had a reasonably nutritious meal before coming
to school; walked a considerable distance to school; worm
infestations or are just recovering from a bout of malaria; lost
one or more parents to AIDS or other sickness. All of these
factors will have huge implications for their learning.

3. Unless some bright-eyed donor agency has prioritised this
village for a new school, the infrastructure will range from
modest to decrepit, and may well comprise just a tree, which is
not necessarily the worst of learning environments. Print
materials will often be in very short supply, as will be pens,
pencils and paper. The classroom walls will be bare and there
will be no evidence of teaching/learning materials.

4. The language used in the early primary grades will be a bit of a
lottery, depending upon – official government policy, the
language competence of the teacher, and the degree of
homogeneity of her/his classroom. What is likely is that you, as
researcher, will not have ready access to the niceties of the
language of the classroom, and this may make it much harder
to understand than in my Chinese example given earlier. You
may need to work with a colleague who can assist you in
understanding dialogue until you develop your own language
skills. But despite Mbembe’s gloomy comment from a different
context, that: “It should be noted, as far as fieldwork is
concerned that there is less and less (concern with the issue of
language). Knowledge of local languages, vital to any theoretical
or philosophical understanding, is deemed unnecessary.”(2001),
isn’t language at the heart of the primary classroom?

5. Then there’s the teacher, who is not a Godfrey Munira look-alike
but may be similarly cautious regarding his/her classroom
skills. In most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, primary school
teachers are not natural enthusiasts for the job, having typically joined a primary teacher-training programme as a way of staying on the educational ladder after rather indifferent results in high school examinations have restricted their choices. As the MUSTER research in Ghana has shown (Akyeampong and Stephens 2002), they have weaker than average grades in the key subjects for primary teaching of mathematics and language. In college they have often been subjected to a regime which treats them more like older secondary school students than as adults preparing to enter a profession. Their college tutors have rarely been recruited from the very best of primary school teachers (as they don’t have the right level of qualification), and their understandings of educational theory and practice are often very limited. We wouldn’t really expect a poorly prepared teacher, working with a huge class and virtually non-existent resources, to prioritise skills other than those relating to getting to the end of the school day. A big issue for researchers in African primary classrooms is that of identifying teachers to work with who can be pretty well guaranteed to turn up to their school and their classroom on a regular basis. Even then, there will be myriad reasons why school doesn’t happen five days per week for the specified number of weeks in the school year.

Commentary: A first reaction to the above may be to conclude that the writer is suffering an acute case of afro-pessimism, but that would not be true as all of the above are easily viewed in the primary schools of many countries. You may be fortunate and find more favourable environments in which to do your research. What is crucially important, given these contexts, should be that first your research questions, and then your methodologies, are toughly formulated and exposed to local scrutiny. Social science research, like politics, is the art of the possible. And we should be clear that one prerequisite element in the struggle to improve the quality of learning for our children, in whatever country, is a better understanding of the many contexts of schooling and what goes on within them.

Understanding External Influences

We now look briefly in this section at two key areas of education where externally generated models have had great influence on rhetoric if not practice. The need for research to document and understand how this has happened is very important.

Models of classroom practice: The educational systems of many sub-Saharan African countries are beset by imported concepts. Just think for a moment of: active learning, child-centred learning, group work, and criterion-referenced assessment. In my naive youth I found myself party to the propagation of investigational methods of practical science teaching in East Africa, derived from the Nuffield Science
movement in the United Kingdom in the 1960s. In the mid to late-1960s, most science teaching in government secondary schools in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda was done by expatriate teachers, mostly on short-term contracts from Britain. Many of them had been recently influenced by the changes in science teaching introduced under the aegis of the Nuffield Foundation, and, incidentally, by the related School Mathematics Project which introduced the ‘new’ mathematics to schools. It was only natural that they would respond positively to similar approaches as they were piloted in the three countries, supported by finance from the British aid programme of the time. Ruth Wedgwood, who was a member of the symposium for which this paper was written, is now researching that naïveté for her PhD! She will, in due course, be able to tell us whether or not that ‘Nuffield approach’ has survived in any way. It seems to me very unlikely.

This importing continues, though perhaps in more low-key and subtle form, through the multiplicity of aid activities. Rarely is the perspective of respected African educators taken into account; rarely is there a rigorous research and development phase associated with the new notions (there isn’t usually deemed to be sufficient time!). Sadly, potentially useful understandings about useful innovations for schools are often lost, as the perfectly reasonable defensive position from local educators is often “We tried such-and-such an approach to teaching and learning and it didn’t work for our country”, chiefly, of course, because it was introduced with a sharply delineated project time-line, typically around three years, and not subjected to a proper period of research and development. It brings to mind my question to a primary teacher in Malawi as to why she had her class organised around groups of desks, while the lesson was focused entirely on the teacher standing at the front presenting material to the whole class. Her response was: “We were told to set up our classroom this way on an in-service course.”

Teacher education: Not in many countries is initial teacher education seen as transformative of methodologies in schools and classrooms. We have already seen some of the reasons why this is likely to be even more the case in sub-Saharan Africa. The MUSTER (Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project) project has investigated the practice of teacher education in several African countries in some detail. The example given below is by no means extreme:

“The tutor was teaching Piagetian child development to a class of mature students, many with children of their own. The text stated that children aged 2-4 engaged first in ‘solitary’ and then ‘associative’ play, but there was no discussion of whether this occurs in a Malawian village, nor what happens when ‘the child becomes curious and asks many questions’ in a culture where children are not supposed to ask adults questions!” (Stuart and Kunje, 2000)
This suggests that there may be two parallel educational discourses going on – a theoretical one drawn largely from often dated Western conceptual frameworks, and a more practical one about the kinds of teaching, learning and socialisation that go on in the real communities, and which students ‘know’ at a different level (Lewin & Stuart, 2002). No prizes are given for identifying the model which the beginning teacher takes with them into their first teaching appointment.

Three Valuable Studies

In this section, we highlight three important, successful examples of ways of studying aspects of schools and classrooms in different cultural contexts.

Using the Cultural Dimension: Take an early opportunity to examine in some detail the work that David Stephens and his colleagues carried out in Ghana, focussing on the cultural dimensions of schooling for girls at primary level. The study uses life history interviews with women teachers and girl drop-outs from school to explore their experiences in the three interlinked domains of home, economic context and school environment. Two contrasting Ghanaian cultural contexts provide the sites for the study. We should note the relatively simple methodology, which can be used in a small-scale study. The researchers conclude that:

“The world of the school is one where for many children little is achieved in terms of doing anything or learning much that is of value. Attention to the culture of the classroom reveals a situation where issues of attitude to knowledge, teaching methods and language policy constrain efforts to implement reform. For the child, positive school experiences include being well taught in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, in seeing successful women teachers as role models, and in the avoidance of excessive corporal punishment.”
(Stephens et al, 1998)

Study ‘Culture and Pedagogy’: If there is just one key text, it must be Robin Alexander’s prize-winning opus – Culture and Pedagogy. It is perhaps the most important extant comparative study of primary teaching in the English language. It takes in primary schooling in five countries – France, Russia, India, England and the USA. No African countries are included, nor can India be in any sense categorised as a ‘typical’ low-income country. Nevertheless, the methodology of this large-scale study is important for our purpose, as it is genuinely comparative, and it relies on very carefully crafted instruments and methodologies. For our purpose, the point to highlight is the use of a very simple model of teaching, which eschews use of the school effectiveness or presage-process-product models, in favour of one
more closely grounded in teaching as it happens, working from the proposition that ‘teaching, in any school setting, is the act of using method X to enable pupils to learn Y’. This is then elaborated into a framework for observing classrooms cross-culturally.

“Our model combined frame (space, pupil, organisation, time, content, routine, rule and ritual)

act (task, activity, interaction and judgment)

and lesson form.”

(Alexander, 2000, p.535)

Simple, even technicist, this framework may appear, but Alexander and his fellow researchers are able to use it to describe significant differences in teaching/pedagogy which he then argues can be “traced to culturally specific traditions and/or theories of teaching …….” (op cit p 539).

It would be very important if some thoughtful agency would fund a similar study in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Being a teacher in a time of fundamental system change:** This is the broad area of focus in Michele Schweisfurth’s Ph.D. study, now published as ‘Teachers, democratisation and educational reform in Russia and South Africa’ (2002). At the core of her work is a series of only twelve biographical case studies of primary school teachers in the two countries, which are used to elaborate on the experiences of the teachers and their perceptions of what is happening during periods of often bewildering change in the education systems within which they work as small cogs in much larger wheels. An important general point that she makes is that much comparative work in education focuses on the analysis of systems and structures, whereas she draws insights from the experiences of a small group of individuals. In the context of this paper, the study is important because it shows how the individual researcher, working for a Ph.D. was able to develop a distinctive methodological approach, whilst maintaining realistic boundaries for the study.

**A Good Story to End**

Alison Croft was probably fortunate to be working as a doctoral student as part of the larger MUSTER team researching initial teacher education in several countries (Lewin & Stuart, 2002). The particular theme of her work was aspects of teacher education for primary teachers in Malawi. She was able to choose this focus within the project at least partly because of her own significant experience of
teaching in lower primary school classes. As a good deal of initial teacher education in Malawi takes place in schools, this made sense.

Within a much wider set of classroom studies, she finds herself focussing on the use of singing in primary classrooms, using a small sub-set of her overall data – just fifteen lessons in three schools (Croft, 2002). All records of lesson content were translated from Chichewa for her.

The use of singing as a pedagogic and management tool in Standard One primary classes hardly comes as a surprise, knowing the oral culture within which these children are immersed, but she found it being used by teachers to a significantly greater extent than indicated in the comprehensive teachers’ guides. Remember, many of these lower primary classes in Malawi have over one hundred children being taught under a tree with minimal resources.

She argues that songs are used for at least the following purposes:

1. Teaching the content of the lesson
2. Techniques for managing large classes
3. Invoking a sense of community.

She concludes that

"... the experienced, respected Malawian lower primary teachers in this study are learner-centred in that they take account of the physical, socio-cultural and emotional context of their pupils. Learner-centred practice in this context, however, has been shown to make use of the strengths of the local oral culture, and does not look the same as descriptions of learner-centred education found in the literature that generally have a more visual bias. The use of oral culture, in this instance the use of songs, is an example of how learner-centred education is context-specific." (Croft, op. cit.)

The article ends with a more general statement about learner-centred education:

“Generally, research in Malawi and elsewhere needs to look critically at definitions of learner-centred education developed in schools in Western cultures. There needs to be a greater awareness that many indicators in current use are derived from Western notions of good practice; favouring the visual and individual and ignoring the oral and collective. Much more qualitative research is needed to derive relevant indicators from practice in different contexts if quantitative research is going to accurately describe the teaching/learning process. The usefulness of indicators can, however, be over-emphasised: learner-centred education means that teachers are likely to develop different teaching styles in different situations. These styles will be related to
local conditions but not completely determined by them, because teachers make choices about the way they use available resources. Combining observation with talking to teachers to uncover their theories of learning and teaching, and then working with them to test these, should prove constructive in research and teacher education aiming to improve educational quality.” (Croft, op. cit.)

So, is good quality school and classroom research feasible in these contexts?

References:


CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH AND PRACTITIONER DEVELOPMENT

Caroline Dyer

Introduction

Although there is broad agreement that high quality education is unlikely without high quality teachers, there is a curious lack of discussion in relevant literatures about the quality and developmental needs of the teacher educators. The dominant input-orientated training model of teacher development which is briefly discussed in this paper has limitations for teacher development (Dyer et al, 2004), and appears to be even less suitable as a vehicle for addressing the professional development of teacher educators. An alternative mode of professional development that is increasing in popularity across a range of high and low-income country contexts is that of collaborative action research. The advantages of this approach are that it is able to encourage professional reflexivity and proaction (Schön, 1987); it is contextually rooted; and it validates local practitioner knowledge rather than abstract ‘expert’ knowledge. This paper focuses on methodological aspects of work using this approach with teacher educators, and identifies some aspects of action research that, in cross-cultural transition, deserve closer attention.

Dominant approaches to teacher development

Education, reflecting the social world in which it is embedded, is dynamic and constantly changing. These elements of change and dynamism mean throughout the span of a teaching career, there is a constant need for opportunities for continuing professional development. Professional development, broadly defined as ‘all types of professional learning undertaken by teachers beyond the point of initial training’ (Craft 1996: 6) is an integral aspect of discourses of quality.

Within this broad spectrum of continuing professional development, in-service education and training is one component. A broad definition of INSET sees it as ‘those education and training activities engaged in by primary and secondary school teachers and heads, following their initial professional certification, and intended mainly or exclusively to improve their professional knowledge, skills and attitudes in order that they can educate children more effectively (Bolam 1982: 11 cit Steadman et al (1995)). The internationally dominant approach to planned teacher development activity can be characterised as ‘skills-and knowledge-based’ (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992). But, in countries where primary teachers often have low professional qualifications the ‘knowledge’ component tends to focus on strengthening teachers’ grasp of the content they are to teach (Avalos 1991). Typically, INSET is packaged into programmes of several consecutive days which are
delivered off-site, using pre-designed modules which are ambitious in their range of topics, and offer little opportunity for participants to practise any new skills. This is seen from an administrative point of view as cost-effective, since large numbers of teachers can be ‘covered’ to meet training targets.

Whether they really are cost-effective or not must, however, be questioned. There is a tendency for training of this nature to make a poor transfer to classroom contexts (Dyer, 2000; Dyer et al, 2003). Making investments in training programmes that have low impact in the form of changes to practice is a developmental strategy that can only become a less attractive option for policy communities if viable alternatives can be put in its place.

Two further aspects of dominant training approaches are that they tend to impose on teachers training courses devised by external and decontextualised ‘experts’. They place little value on practitioner knowledge in the development of classroom skills and treat teachers as ‘technicians’ (McNiff 1991) who, regardless of their context, are expected to implement the ideas of others and meet externally imposed performance criteria. This approach assumes that knowledge deriving from the findings of ‘hard’, scientific research is superior to teachers’ ‘soft’ practitioner knowledge. This raises many questions about the appropriateness of such knowledge, and the values it espouses. No less important is its problematic relationship with context: do training messages take into account the teacher as a person, her purpose, and her classroom setting? (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992).

The particular focus of this paper, however, is not so much training programmes, as the teacher educators who are responsible for formal teacher development. The argument I want to make is that the approach to in-service training outlined above may continue to go unchallenged if the professional skills and attitudes of teacher educators themselves are not drawn into the whole debate of teacher development and strengthened, so that alternative models of teacher development can be realistically considered. Collaborative action research offers a potentially useful way forward in developing teacher educators’ professional skills: it is contextual, and provides opportunities for professional engagement and reflection, and developing professional agency. This paper elaborates on some of these issues, with a particular focus on the methodological challenges.

**Collaborative action research**

In many developing countries, research has been dominated by the positivist paradigm, and has thus tended to focus on the large-scale, the quantitative and the measurable, rather than processes of education in various settings (cf. Faegerlind and Hallak 1991).
Research and policy planning have also tended to be based on a systems perspective that, as Crossley and Vulliamy (1996: 443) note, ‘still neglects the realities of schooling in an everyday context’. Much of this research also adheres to the disciplines underpinning education (such as psychology) and is discussed in the technical language of that discipline. For practitioners, the findings of such research may have little immediate or practical use. ‘Pedagogic research’, on the other hand, is concerned less to contribute to theoretical knowledge within a discipline than to improve practice. Its research questions derive directly from the concerns and experiences of teachers, teacher educators, and other educational professionals. Because of its proximity to practitioners, this research approach can make very different contributions to the practice and discourses of educational quality improvement.

Within the pedagogic research tradition, action research (founded by Kurt Lewin in the USA in the 1940s) is emerging as a significant way of improving the quality of educational processes and enhancing teacher professionalism. The development of the ‘teacher as researcher’ movement in the 1970s catalysed the use of action research in educational contexts; a classroom action research movement spread in the UK, USA, Australia and in Europe, where action research has since become an established approach to school and teacher development. It focuses educators, or educators in collaboration with other research partners, on critical pedagogical issues which shape learning and teaching in classrooms. It does this in a problem-solving mode, with a commitment to taking action on what is found, and can catalyse processes that lead to permanent changes in teachers’ skills and attitudes (Lomax 1990).

Action research has more recently begun to spread into Africa (e.g. Ackummey and Stephens, 1996; Pryor, 1998; Stuart and Kunje, 1998; Walker 1993; Wright, 1988) and India (e.g. Dyer et al 2002, 2003). Wright (1988: 281) argues, from a Sierra Leonian perspective, that action research can encourage the much-needed growth of endogenous models of educational research in countries of the South and contribute to breaking down ‘the continued predominance and mechanistic replication of prescribed research models from the West...and the mould of methodological fixation’. Walker (1993), from South Africa, notes:

...action research promises much that is valuable: teacher empowerment, the generation of endogenous theories of teaching and learning; educational research which contributes to policy development and its implementation; and worthwhile working relationships between universities and teacher communities (Walker 1993: 106-107).
Stuart (1991) concurs, on the basis of action research in Ghana and Lesotho, that much of the potential of an action research framework is its ‘grassroots, development-oriented approach, dialogic rather than didactic’. She also points out that action research is much closer to the nature of teaching than other forms of research:

Teaching cannot be described in terms of ‘technical rationality’: it is a process more akin to artistry, where the practitioner interacts creatively with the situation, changing and being changed by it. Teaching is holistic: while other research methods try to study it by cutting it up into little bits, action research tries to keep it together (Stuart 1991: 150).

Collaborative action research with teacher educators

The studies cited above illustrate that action research is becoming increasingly established as a meaningful way forward for professional development in contexts with lower levels of teacher professionalism. In India, for example, action research is now a mandatory requirement for teacher educators working in teacher education institutes, District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) (MHRD 1989). The policy intention is that teacher educators can best know and respond to local teachers’ developmental needs if they carry out action research. Despite its official recognition, however, action research can be unfamiliar for educators who have been trained in the positivist paradigm discussed earlier. This was the case for teacher educators in many DIETs; many of them had some understandings of action research in the abstract, but no direct knowledge of its processes or uses. This paper focuses particularly on methodological issues that arose during collaborative action research between these educators and a cross-cultural research team.

District Institutes of Education and Training

Before considering how the research team worked to promote action research, let us briefly sketch in the context of the DIETs and the staff in them. DIETs were set up to assist in national efforts to decentralise educational management, and to improve the contextual relevance of education; their particular role was to draw all teachers into in-service training, and to be informed and proactive about teachers’ development needs (MHRD 1989). The aims of the DIETs have often, however, been compromised by recruitment policies that have sought

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1 This paper draws on data generated during the process of working with six DIETS in central and Western India. The study combined an ethnographic strand of study of DIETs with a professional development strand that acted on the ethnographic findings to contribute to institutional development and policy development. It was funded by the UK’s Department for International Development.
two Master’s degrees as well as primary teaching experience. Since primary teachers are trained in colleges and not universities, they tend not to have graduate qualifications, unlike secondary teachers. The recruitment pool of primary teachers with the specified qualifications was rather small and in the end, paper qualifications were prioritised over practitioner experience. This meant that in North India, eligible people were almost exclusively higher secondary school teachers.

A second aspect was that many such teachers were simply transferred into DIETs without applying for this post, and thus practically overnight turned from higher secondary teacher to primary school teacher trainer – with very little initial or ongoing support in making this significant career change (Dyer et al 2004). Unsurprisingly under these circumstances many members of staff were unhappy with their posting; but there were also in each Institute several others who were enjoying the challenges of their new post and sought professional development opportunities that were otherwise almost completely absent. (No strategy is yet in place for development of this large number of new teacher educators; occasional opportunities arise when DIET staff go to the State level to participate in top level cascade training for a new programme which they will deliver lower down the cascade.)

It is also worth noting that in three of the six case study DIETs most staff were unfamiliar with the DIET guidelines or the expected workings of their own or the other branches of the DIET. Only a handful of them had read or were familiar with the policy document which provided the overarching conceptual framework for the educational reforms in which DIETs were crucial. DIET staff themselves were aware of their own limitations, as is reflected in this focus group discussion held early in the project:

TT1 They have made branches for the DIETs but the [apex body at State level] is not giving the training that is required for that. Work is not going to happen just by making branches...they tell us these are the functions but to make it function we require training programmes, which we are not getting.

TT2 We have suggested and demanded many times that we need training.

TT1 We are trying to work from our experiences but we need training from [apex body at State level] or other branches from above.

Rather than operating as fairly autonomous decentralised institutions envisaged in policy documentation, we found that DIETs acted rather more like sites for the onwards transmission of training programmes
designed from above; feedback loops or evaluations of the impact of training were generally not in evidence; and teachers consistently indicated a lack of confidence about applying what they were supposed to have learned during training2.

**Research team members**

The research team consisted of six local Indian researchers, who were coincidentally all female and under 30. Each was attached to one Institute, was native to the State in which she worked and had at least a Master’s degree in education or another social science. It was the first experience for all of these team members of qualitative research, and developing their expertise through initial and ongoing methodological training and support was an explicit project focus3. Their contribution to the action research strand of work was initially through generating ethnographic data to inform possible priorities for institutional development, and then supporting staff as they carried out projects. I was the project director, and am British with at that time nearly 10 years’ experience of working in Basic Education in India. This was a second collaboration with Indian national Archana Choksi, appointed now as project manager (Choksi and Dyer, 1997 discusses previous collaboration). Choksi and Dyer led the collaborative action research strand of work, assisted by team members who provided background detail, organised logistics and were available for support and consultation throughout the AR processes.

The ‘fly on the wall’ approach of in-depth qualitative research was unfamiliar with DIET staff and each researcher had to negotiate a role that she, and the Institute staff, found comfortable. The age and gender of the research team often led to a sense of collegiality with younger members of DIET staff, who were usually female themselves; and allowed positioning of older staff members as ‘guides’ – a familiar role of the teacher in India who is widely hailed as ‘friend, philosopher and guide’. As is also often the case in qualitative research, the presence of an interested outsider offers opportunities for staff to use the researcher as a sounding board for a wide variety of issues and concerns. This ‘unofficial’ researcher role in turn demands exercise of appropriate discretion in relation to sensitive data generated in such interactions – they deeply inform a researcher’s understandings but must remain off the official record.

Formally, in contrast, the research itself was not really seen as an opportunity, but the previous professional experience and expertise of

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2 Further detail on findings, and about Surat DIET which showed positive trends and underlined the continuing relevance of the DIET idea can be found in Dyer et al, 2004.

3 Their reflections on being researchers on this project cannot be included here in detail but further discussion of this is available in Dyer et al, 2002.
the researcher was. Research can be extractive in nature, perhaps with few, unclear, or distant benefits to the ‘researched’ – such as the (subsequently unpublished) national survey of DIETs that was carried out during the research period. The kind of ‘participatory’ research we are discussing here can be an answer to this, although the extent of meaningful participation is a contested area in development (McGee 2003). All research team members felt they went through a period of ‘testing’ and they fared best in this ‘test’ if they could offer some obvious ‘value added’, such as a different teaching technique, or as someone to contribute to a teaching session.

These are familiar aspects of the tightrope of role negotiation for qualitative researchers, who must justify being there in ways that are legitimate for participants, and at the same time manage to stay on task with generation of data to throw light on the research questions. The AR strand was helpful with all of this, since it clearly was driven by participants’ concerns; it offered a development opportunity that otherwise was absent; it demonstrated the importance of trust; and the ‘fly on the wall’ detail visibly helped the AR facilitators know the issues concerning staff, and so deepen discussions that might have been more superficial without such ethnographic insight.

**Initiating collaborative action research with DIETS**

The initial ethnographic work was invaluable in establishing relationships with the DIETs. Three DIETs were very interested in pursuing AR; the fourth was interested but had some internal tensions that presented challenges to its ability to respond at an organisational, rather than individual, level; a fifth allowed access for data collection but did not engage with the idea of engaging in collaborative action research; and the sixth DIET joined the project too late for the AR strand to be initiated, much to everyone’s regret. The four DIETs participating in the AR recognised and were concerned about their lack of technical skills in action research. This emerged as an area where the research team could make a positive contribution to the institutional strengthening that was indicated by the ethnographic data generation strand of research. It was agreed in discussion with DIET staff and Principals that the DIET would work collaboratively with the project team, who would provide technical support in the investigation through action research of ideas chosen by the DIET.

The project team hoped that action research would play a part in DIET staff engaging more proactively and directly with their role in teacher development in the District and that this would be more productive for them than continuing to deliver programmes they sensed were not appealing to teachers. The professional learning for DIET staff lay in the way in which DIETs approached the challenges of identifying issues in their own practices that might be changed, designed and
implemented the changes, and evaluated the results; and for the project team it lay in making research an enjoyable and productive experience that helped to provide a clearer sense of institutional purpose.

The first two day workshop in each collaborating DIET was an introduction to the terminology of action research, its processes and how it can be used. The term ‘action research’ emerged as a false friend: it was a familiar one, but the action aspect was interpreted as ‘field’ or applied research, in contrast with a desk study. This understanding of action research is reflected in the DIET guidelines (MHRD 1989), which also seem to conflate action with applied research. Importantly, key elements of reflection on action, and commitment to taking action on research findings, were not recognised as integral to action research. At the conclusion of this workshop, one participant commented:

The second thing you said is that action research keeps going on - that was not in my mind at all. Mainly we do research and results come, but here it is the next step for a second one. [...] This is something which never stops. In the faculty of DIET, it’s about us and teachers, us and teachers [...] I am block coordinator for Gurujis - so I will be there, Gurujis will be there, them and me, me and them, time after time. So it’s my gain if I can find out how much change I could bring in them. We would have documentation of how much improvement has come because of us, and what we did to get it. This is necessary. I liked this point in today’s workshop. I came to know action research is not about a degree, this is for us, and only us.

Box 1 shows some of the understandings that members of one DIET in the sample had of research in general.

Methodologically, the process of identifying a research topic was very challenging. Much discussion focused on issues that were not within the DIET’s remit to address, but affected the outcomes of what they tried to do. Staff: student ratios that exceeded the national norm of 1:40 is one example; another was a perceived lack of motivation and interest among teachers in implementing training messages. Because these were seen as issues over which DIET staff had no control, they felt they could not do anything about them. Yet there were aspects of this that were clearly within their remit (for example helping teachers develop pedagogical strategies for coping with large class sizes). This also reflected unclear understandings of the institutional role, and a legacy of centralised bureaucratic educational administration that has not encouraged local ownership in educational problem-solving.
Managing such discussions productively required skilful facilitation and negotiation, often focusing on gently turning things that had been taken for granted to things that deserved investigation (in which the ethnographic strand of research played an invaluable role). This would be the beginning of a much longer process, initiated through action research, of encouraging DIET staff to develop the sense of agency that is central to effective institutional functioning, yet continues to be compromised by strong centralising forces within the system.

**Box 1: Understandings of research in Indore DIET**

**What is research?**
The plan you make to solve problems in our area of work is called research. To discover new things or a method in an untouched subject or principle or problem is called research. Research is a process in which a person says some new things about which people don’t have information. To find out problems in a particular area, and to find out solutions for the problem; to use new methods in the field and find out their impact. To find new methods for solving a very old problem and to solve those problems – to some extent by finding the cause of the problem one can remove it. To do analytical research on anything is research. Research is helpful in removing the problems in the way of related subjects.

**What is the importance of research?**
To increase scientific thinking through new research findings. To know whether or not to continue the work. To contribute to the achievement of society and country. To know problems and solve them. To see the quality of a work plan.

**What is the difference between action research and other research?**
No degree required for doing action research while for doing other research one needs to have master’s degree like M.Sc. or MA. Action research is done on a small problem. Other research is done in different areas while action research is done in a particular area in a time period.

The result of these discussions was, in three DIETs, a research agenda that had been generated entirely from discussions of their own concerns, focused with the help of the research team on areas in which staff could be proactive and were within their remit. Topics across DIETs included investigating transmission loss in the cascade training model (so DIET staff could try and generate data about what was going missing and why, and try to bring this information to bear on their training programmes); teachers’ attitudes to change (to try and understand how training messages had been internalised and put into practice, and the implications of that for training delivery); time management (to try and balance workloads among DIET staff). Leadership in the fourth DIET was not strong enough to support an institutional project despite the project team’s efforts to provide platforms for discussions that led to such development in other DIETs. In this DIET, individuals opted for support with personal projects but the vagaries of the transfer system led to their re-posting before they were formally completed.
We all agreed that it was important to strengthen our knowledge, as teacher educators, of the needs and views of each DIET’s constituency; this was part of a growing awareness among DIET staff of the expected role of the DIET, and of the project team’s understanding of bringing about change. Methodologically, the DIET’s agenda was best served by the tools of open-ended questionnaires, unstructured interviews (perhaps better seen as ‘purposeful conversations’) and diaries. By jointly developing these tools, the research team introduced DIET staff to qualitative methods of data generating within the interpretive paradigm, which was entirely new to them. They were encouraged and supported during the data collection phase by the on-site researcher and several subsequent workshops were held with Dyer and Choksi on thematic analyses of data, and implications for DIET practices. This was the first action cycle, and was designed to help identify with better precision points where action would needed to be taken in a second cycle of action - reflection.

Successful research methods included open-ended questionnaires, and discussions with teachers. The questionnaires provided very rich data and many issues for DIET staff to follow up, and teachers were pleased with the opportunity to express more detailed views. One of them commented:

> We have filled in so many questionnaires by those university professors. They get someone to come and he just ticks the boxes. It never makes any difference to us. But the way you have been asking us questions, asking us to write our opinions...you have made us think for the first time.

This action research project was affirming for DIET staff, in that teachers often expressed their wish that DIET staff would interact more with them in the field, and provided many leads on areas where teachers felt unsure, or sought more support with making changes to their practices.

DIET staff were not able to keep the diaries they suggested as a tool for investigating transmission loss. This was partly due to time constraints during the top level cascade training in which they first participated. Literacy histories of teachers in other parts of the world (e.g. Ames 2003) suggest that the repertoire of teachers’ own literacy practices may not support this kind of activity. In India, certainly, most teacher record keeping is done to satisfy the visiting inspector, and the capacity of such a record to be a useful tool for those who write the records is largely unrecognised by teachers (personal communication, Sharma 2001). Who actually suggested diary writing is lost in the mists of time, but there had been agreement that a written record would facilitate accurate analysis of how ‘transmission
loss’ might be occurring. Another issue that probably played a part was the DIET staff’s own conviction that they were not at all responsible for transmission loss, which they saw as occurring exclusively further down the cascade with those they had trained: this was the outset of a process of learning how to turn a reflective lens on oneself, and describe and reflect on one’s own practices.

The cascade research design, then, struggled with DIET staffs’ perceptions of themselves as knowledgeable ‘experts’ by virtue of their hierarchical status, and with the associations of written record keeping with external inspection. Interestingly however the diary idea flourished in the DIET that used diaries to keep track of daily doings, as a tool to settle disputes about workloads which was the subject of their action research. These staff members recorded in impressive detail what they did and as they read them out in a group meeting, any perception that anyone else was not pulling their weight dissipated immediately.

**Methodological issues**

All staff who attended the workshops and participated in the research gained technical skills relating to the purpose and nature of action research, questionnaire framing, thematic analysis, and relating findings to future action steps. Project workshops also helped members of staff who had needed clarification make more sense of their roles, and relate more positively to their posting. None of the DIETs with whom collaborative action research was taking place held staff meetings, so the workshops provided a rare opportunity for staff to hear from each other and feed back, and to develop a stronger group and institutional identity.

**Assumptions and reflexivity**

The action research projects contributed some DIET empowerment as they were actively involved in work directed towards understanding some of the constraints they experienced. The workshops, in bringing staff together to discuss issues, generated a discourse about education that went beyond constraints, and set DIET staff onto a track of reflexivity that had not been characteristic before the collaborations. Reflexivity is a very important aspect of developing the capacity to work as a decentralised Institute, able to think through and respond appropriately locally, without recourse to authority figures who are too distant to be effective. It is, in the educational literature, also seen as a crucial professional attribute in Northern contexts (e.g. Hall and Schultz, 2003) – pragmatically, we saw reflection on and in action (Schön, 1987) as the only realistic way forward for teacher educator development in the current circumstances. Since the colonial imposition of formal education had initiated a view of teachers as technical subordinates in a
bureaucratic hierarchy, departing from this perception of what being an educator means is, of course, a challenging and also risky proposition. Reflexivity needed much prompting and encouragement (see Table 1), and a deficit view of teachers had not gone away:

AC  Do you feel this will be useful for your District?
V   We do feel so.
J   At least we will be face to face with the bitter truth. More than that what can happen?
AC  Don’t take it as a bitter truth. What we have to think is OK, we have to start from here. My teachers are at this point now what can I do?
Y   To minimise their lacking.

For the project team, supporting these processes was a process of learning about what was required of the more research-experienced colleagues who were providing a ‘scaffolding’ for the DIET colleagues. Technical inputs aside, some of the attitudes some DIET staff had towards teachers really could not pass unchallenged. We tackled this most effectively by the characteristic qualitative tactic of simply seeking clarification of some such comments. Often this simple questioning was sufficient to reveal an assumption as just that; sometimes we drew on the senior project team members’ exposure to other education systems to posit alternative scenarios as worthy of consideration. It was in keeping with the spirit of the research enterprise we were jointly engaged in to suggest that assumptions would benefit from empirical investigation!

Table 1: Reflection on teacher responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue raised by teachers</th>
<th>Corresponding prompts for action / reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous turnover of schemes, yet a lack of evaluation of their success</td>
<td>Have teachers got a point?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How can the DIET assure teachers that these are bits of change that fit together?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How can we improve evaluation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[in relation to lack of evaluation]</td>
<td>a) why don’t we go to the field?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent mention (directly or indirectly) of the lack of DIET presence in the field</td>
<td>b) do we know clearly what we should be doing if we do go?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High proportion of responses praising teaching by pictures - no reasons given</td>
<td>why might this be? Could it be related to language problems in this tribal area?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Think more about language problems – possibly more AR on this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some teachers seek further simplification / reduction of curriculum. Don’t say why.</td>
<td>What might be their thinking? Further research by DIET to find out what Ts mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers remarks about tribal children are often very negative - is this a cause for concern? What might we do about it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Context and institutional conditions

There were many powerful reminders of how context shapes the ‘action’ part of action research. One such issue was the systemic changes which affected funding for one externally supported DIET in Rajasthan (the diary keepers), and the remit of two DIETs in Madhya Pradesh (doing the cascade transmission loss and teacher attitudes to change projects), a State which was rapidly decentralising all educational management. These resulted in an unstable environment for the action-reflection cycle because in both cases, changes would impact heavily on staff but little information was available to them about their futures.

The Principal’s role in the collaborative action research work was highly influential. His or her sanction was required for project participation and establishing AR within working routines. But much also depended on the Principal's vision of the DIET and its role in the District: if the Principal was administratively rather than academically inclined, it was difficult to persuade him/her of the project’s potential to develop the professional quality of the DIET’s work. The stance of the Principal was a major factor in shaping the level of ownership each DIET developed towards the action research projects and clearly impacted on time made available and commitment to following through processes. The fourth sample DIET, for example, was fragmented and had many issues around leadership so although the Principal was in principle keen to encourage AR, as part of the institutional remit, there was in this DIET an absence of mutual trust between staff members, which was not a congenial climate in which to engage in anything involving collegial reflection and critique.

The culture of orders in the bureaucratic system also presented logistical barriers to project activities. Orders were frequently issued without warning and the DIET was expected to respond immediately, which meant that other planned activities took lower priority. Since the research was external to the government system and thus depended on will and finding the time, accountability to the research process was very low compared with accountability to government - even though DIETs opting in to it valued the research process and the opportunities highly. From this point of view, the real power in the project belonged to the distant apex organisation that could at a stroke ruin a carefully planned local workshop.

Becoming autonomous: tensions of decentralising

The collaborative action research projects made small beginnings in demonstrating to DIET staff that they had the autonomy to carry out research, and use findings to inform the DIET so it could understand and respond to the District’s needs. As this sense of agency grew, so too did concerns about how findings could be fitted into the
framework of programmes designed at the State level. The potential for action research was much higher where decentralisation was really being pursued through changes to legal and operational frameworks, as the wider context itself was changing in ways that supported the development of autonomy and agency, and immediate application of findings at the source of data generation.

The collaborative projects were also a reminder that the emergence of autonomy and agency had to be nurtured and encouraged as part of a development process. Teacher educators had become used to externalising the locus of accountability for concerns and using this as a legitimation for low programme impact. The will to make changes could not be taken for granted: rather, with some staff, cultivating that will was an important aspect of the collaboration – and it was not always possible. While the traditional action research cycle begins with problem identification, in this context the work began earlier, as there was an initial need to work consciously with some staff on developing a sense that they could take action (see also Pryor, 1998).

**Collaborative action research as professional development: concluding reflections**

The methodological challenges associated with using collaborative action research as a vehicle for teacher educators’ professional development are, as the preceding sections have illustrated, multiple and complex. They relate closely to enduring themes of comparative education, and qualitative methodologists: culture and context.

When AR moves into new contexts, its underlying cultural assumptions are unmasked through the ways in which they shape AR processes. The claim, for example, that action research builds directly on what teachers are already doing because they are already critical and reflexive is problematic where cultures of primary teaching and teacher education do not embrace a professionally self-critical, reflective and proactive stance. Action research may be an innovation that is much more radical than the familiar term acknowledges.

A collaborative action research approach to professional development has an inherent methodological stress on the development of autonomy and critical reflexivity. This is in almost complete opposition to the ‘input’ and programmatic approach to professional development that is well established in many low income contexts. But there seems to be widespread agreement in the growing AR literature, some of which was cited earlier, that collaboration of this nature offers practitioners spaces to review their own practices and attitudes that, while initially unfamiliar, are welcomed. The enthusiasm for AR projects reported in this case study is further evidence that despite the many methodological challenges, AR can provide a developmental platform to which practitioners respond positively.
Although reflection on practice can be incorporated into normal routines, extra time is required for training in research techniques and meetings. Professional development needs to be timetabled within a busy calendar of activities where it will compete with other demands – for example, the bureaucratic culture of orders from above that serve as constant reminders of the barriers to the development of institutional autonomy. Although the research project enjoyed official support, it was not part of the official timetable and this made it uncomfortably prone to the vagaries of the system. Methodologically speaking, qualitative research is often about making, and taking, opportunities as they arise – this project tried for example to make a virtue out of such interruptions by encouraging reflection on their impact on the Institute and whether such missives were in fact as urgent as they were perceived to be.

The initial action research phase – problem identification – appears simple – but is highly complex for practitioners who have been accustomed to coping with situations by externalising responsibility. Becoming more professional in this context demands changing this pattern. When the dominant response to the poor performance of the schooling system is to blame others (illiterate, uncaring parents, lazy teachers, uncaring administration, corruption...to name but some of the routine ‘explanations’) it is inevitable that locating oneself professionally as part of the cause, and thinking reflexively about one’s own practices, is unfamiliar and perhaps also uncomfortable territory. Problem identification cannot proceed without some element of this repositioning. At the same time as reconceptualising their own role, participants may well be learning new responses at a practical level. One such new response, in this case, was how to offer criticism that is professional and not personal, as part of a process of engaging in unaccustomed ways with people who may be longstanding colleagues. Social constructions of seniority and gender also play parts in how actors feel about engaging with colleagues in such ways. The responsiveness to these challenges demonstrated by many DIET staff is an indication that with appropriate support, such patterns can be both recognised, and changed.

Collaborations need to be set up on the basis of trust and respect, and this takes time to cultivate. In this research, where this was successful, we were able to use collaborative AR as an opportunity to engage with practices in ways that depart from what has gone before. All engagement, however, takes place within a wider context that, however strong the collaboration, can either support, or place limitations on action research processes themselves, and on the action taken on what is found. The idea of continuing professional development (CPD) that is a regular part of the landscape in some country contexts has yet to take root in others. Given the importance of the teacher educators’ role, and how little this is apparently
recognised internationally, it seems important that policy communities in their different contexts work towards developing strategies for professional development of teacher educators – for example using a collaborative university – institute link such as this one. The methodological challenges of such development work are complex, as this paper has begun to illustrate; yet collaborative action research with teacher educators appears to be a promising approach to meeting the challenge identified at the outset of this paper: finding ways of improving the quality of teacher education.

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THE CHALLENGE OF RESEARCHING EDUCATION IN COMMONWEALTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Gari Donn

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century global thinking makes education the cornerstone of efforts not only to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for education but also to raise quality in education even where MDGs have been achieved. Global gatherings have placed Education For All (EFA) and quality and standards in education at the heart of strategies to enhance social, economic and political development. Education and development are integrally related, one without the other is impossible: like education, the purpose of development is the expansion of freedom. Development consists of the removal of the various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency (Sen 1999).

However, to maintain the commitment for policy initiatives directed towards achieving the MDGs and EFA, it is important that Commonwealth governments and Ministries of Education are advised of current research findings and relevant data on progress and problems in the education sector as a whole as well as within the various sub-sectors. For example, net enrolment ratios to basic education in most Commonwealth developing countries are either on the point of attaining – or have already attained – the goal of universal primary education. As Daniel notes, this is important because research by the World Bank and others shows very clearly that getting most of the population to complete primary education of decent quality, is the foundation for economic development (Daniel 2002).

Education, therefore, is a central plank of the global sustainable development agenda. Policies for high quality education are key mechanisms for human capital development in all Commonwealth countries - whether of the North or South, whether developed or developing, whether predominately industrial or predominately agricultural. This is especially the case for Commonwealth countries in Africa.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a network of 53 countries, each committed to and with mechanisms for peace building, deepening democracy and good governance (Bown 2003). Some of the 53 countries have large populations - such as India, Nigeria, Malaysia - and others (32 in number) have populations under 1m people - Jamaica, Fiji, Papua New Guinea - are Small States.
Yet whatever the size, the Commonwealth in the 21st Century, is characterised by unacceptable levels of poverty. Nearly 650m Commonwealth citizens live on less than 60p per day, and 75m Commonwealth children (of whom more than 60% are girls) do not have access to education. Nearly 60% of persons infected by HIV/AIDS and one half of all AIDS deaths in the world are from people in the Commonwealth.

Participation in education has been identified as the most significant developmental challenge. Education provides individuals with the power to reflect and enjoy a better life: it has powerful synergistic effects on the other developmental objectives of empowerment, protection of the environment, better health and good governance.

But the 2002 Global Monitoring Report of UNESCO (UNESCO 2002) and the Commonwealth Secretariat’s own research paint a bleak picture concerning Universal Primary Education, gender equality and literacy: only 83 countries (34% world’s population) have achieved or will achieve the three goals by target date 2005 for gender and 2015 for UPE. Further, 28% of countries (28% world’s population) are not on track to achieve any of them. Yet education is a force for poverty eradication, so access to education must be a first priority for any country.

Whilst significant progress may been made in developing education for all, and particularly universal access to education, disparities exist in enrolment and performance between localities and provinces, between educational provision in the metropolis and the rural area, between schools in the same locality, between genders and within and between socio-economic groups. There are gaps between countries of the Commonwealth and those of the wider world with 65% of the shortfall in countries achieving the MDGs coming from the Commonwealth (UNESCO 2002). Within countries there are also disparities – in Australia, for example, 15% of all 15 year olds have insufficient literacy to pursue further education. In Scotland, 30% of children are classified as living under the poverty line, yet EFA goals are achieved and access to education is not considered a particular problem.

Gaps also exist between teachers, their pay and conditions of service and the pay and conditions of service of other workers. All too frequently, to make a living wage, teachers are forced to undertake two, even three and four, other paying jobs. Teacher absence from classrooms and even emigration to other educational systems, is a worrying and continuing problem.

There are other gaps also: there is a disconnectedness between family, school and community – where the cultural capital acquired through schooling is not matched by home and community or where home and
community have demands not met by unattractive and inadequate schools. There are gaps between education and work where expectations raised by schooling cannot be met by employment opportunities or where economic and commercial developments require levels of skilled personnel not yet provided through countries’ educational systems; and there are gaps between what is taught in schools – the curriculum content - and what is needed for effective living, in societies impacted upon by fast moving and changing global pressures.

‘Development’ therefore is not an absolute but a relative concept which works in different ways in different geographical, regional, economic and social contexts.

The Commonwealth African Context

Nowhere in the Commonwealth are these gaps as explicit as in Africa. Of Africa’s 53 countries, 17 are Commonwealth countries. According to UNICEF, over the past decade, almost 2 million children have been killed in wars, over half in Commonwealth African countries. All of the 15 countries (of which 12 are Commonwealth countries) identified under the UN Special Initiative on Africa as requiring urgent support because enrolment rates have been less than 50% have been or still are undergoing serious civil conflict. In these countries the enrolment for girls is just 13-31% and 23-49% for boys.

It is recognised that these gaps and disparities in Africa require urgent action. Although there have been attempts at closing the gaps in education in Commonwealth African countries, since the mid-1980s the share of public expenditure on education in Africa, for example, has decreased in 15 countries (9 of them Commonwealth countries) and the share is less than 3% in 12 countries (8 of them Commonwealth). A joint UNESCO-UNICEF survey revealed that in 10 of 14 countries, one third of pupils were being taught in classrooms without usable blackboards. Over 30% of pupils did not have a desk or chair and one third of pupils were attending schools without access to safe water supplies. It is difficult to focus upon ‘achievement in education’ when such essential facilities are missing.

In 2000 the UK Government established the Commonwealth Education Fund. This is a fund into which the Government placed up to £10m matched funding. Ministries of Education in the 17 delineated Commonwealth African countries can apply for strategic funding.

Yet accessing funding and achieving quality education are not necessarily synonymous. Finance alone may not produce what is required by policy-makers or advocated by evidence-based research. Further, whilst one of the most important outcomes of primary
education is effective literacy, this cannot necessarily be assumed by focusing on nationally-derived enrolment statistics. Since 1995 literacy rates have increased substantially in all Commonwealth developing regions but there are problems still: for example, in sub-Saharan Africa adult literacy rates are just 60%, leaving many issues concerning policy and practice still to address. How do we, as educational researchers, deal with these issues? What are the challenges facing researchers of education in Commonwealth African countries?

**Researching Education: Challenges in Commonwealth African countries**

It is apparent from any reading of these statistics, that evidence-based research is needed urgently to inform policy making and thereby to help to close these gaps. It is needed if policy makers, teachers, educationalists and students are to work towards developing visions for alternative futures. Minority ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups, nomads, those with special needs, criminals, refugees, those in conflict-torn societies all must have their needs addressed.

As the EFA 2000 assessment exercise in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated, there is great potential for partnership between Africa-based organisations, institutions and experts. Educational researchers, working in Commonwealth countries are well-placed to explore and examine educational activities, determine ‘what works’ and communicate these examples of ‘good practice’ to the widest possible Commonwealth audience.

Indeed, there is evidence all around Commonwealth Africa of successful implementation of educational policies. We can see the imaginative and successful programmes for nomads in Zambia; for open and distance learning in Mauritius; for improved language development in teacher training in Mozambique; for curriculum reform in South Africa; for free and accessible primary education in Kenya; for early childhood institutional development in Nigeria and for increased numbers of secondary school inspectorates in Uganda. The Commonwealth is well-placed to act as a global pioneer to assist in replicating in Commonwealth countries those policy initiatives that work.

Nevertheless, the achievement of Commonwealth values of good governance and democracy require and depend upon support for education at all levels whether directed at globally-defined goals or at national educational targets. Goals and targets only have meaning if there is possibility of them being achieved. It becomes a cross to bear if the country is far from reaching the target set by remote international development organisations.
Whilst governments introduce policies to empower more girls and eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary schooling, around the world women still earn only 75% as much as men: ‘glass ceilings’ often come to mitigate against and even prohibit female advancement at work and in careers. For all countries, the Gender Development Index (GDI) is lower than the Human Development Index (HDI) indicating general inequality everywhere. Although female access to education may be an encouraging sign of growing equality between the sexes, there is little evidence of similar equality in employment. Therefore, although in some circumstances, access issues have been addressed, problems in achievement and employment remain.

Increasing girls’ and women’s participation in education has been identified as one of the most significant developmental challenges facing many – but certainly not all - countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In these countries, enrolment of girls remains lower than that of boys, their dropout and absenteeism rates are higher and their achievements and performance poorer (UNESCO 2002). Once in schools, girls often have high repetition, failure and drop-out rates, resulting in low primary completion rates. Globally, girls still constitute 2/3 of those excluded from Basic Education, with the largest number of excluded girls being in South Asia.

But gender disparities do not impact on girls alone. Evidence is fast accumulating of boys’ underachievement in education. For some countries of the Commonwealth there is a growing ‘laddism’ at work: boys appear to be removing themselves voluntarily both mentally and, with increasing frequency, physically, from classroom and educational activities. This ‘male under-enrolment and achievement’ in schools and universities, can lead to the marginalisation and alienation of male under-achievers in their adult lives.

The issues of male under-achievement have become an emerging cause for concern among policy makers, educationalists, academics and gender and development experts. There is clearly a need to broaden the gender agenda in education beyond the discussion of girls’ education. A deeper appreciation of the gender transformations taking place in education and society is required for the elaboration of a more holistic development policy approach to addressing the issues.

In these countries, boys exit schooling after five, six, ten years of formal, basic education with few, if any, qualifications, questionable levels of literacy and little of the cultural and social capital usually associated with schooling.
Research Challenges: HIV/AIDS and Education in Commonwealth Africa

In supporting policies to enhance social capital through education, the Commonwealth Secretariat is aware of the need of evidence-based research on which Ministers may come to make policy decisions. In some countries this may involve research on and with refugees and migrant children. The Commonwealth, as an international organisation, supports all efforts to include in education, the migrant and refugee child and adult, the student in war-torn and conflict-ridden situations, the person suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Although it is difficult to measure the full impact of HIV/AIDS on the system, it is evident in the high mortality rates of teachers and education officials at all levels, frequent absenteeism due to sickness and funerals, and the huge increase in the number of orphans in the country.


Countries are gradually developing strategies to contain the spread of the virus and minimise its impact in both the short and long term. Ministries of education see the role of education in addressing HIV/AIDS by helping to develop tools and strategies that will facilitate prevention and control of HIV/AIDS in the education sector and beyond.

The ability to retain cultural understandings has been seen as essential in driving down the current rapid rise in the spread of HIV/AIDS (Nath 2001). Recent evidence points to young girls as being specifically affected by HIV/AIDS (Barnett and Whiteside 2002), in part caused by an absence of understanding the crucial importance of changing cultural behaviour. However, although such problems are global, it is apparent that there are specific and greater difficulties for the countries of Africa.

(The continent has fallen behind the rest of the world (World Bank, 2000: 1). Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 32 of the UN’s 40 ‘least developed’ member countries. Its foreign debt has trebled from US$84.1 billion in 1982 to US$235.4 billion (World Bank, 1997: 202).

The HIV epidemic is a result of these processes of decay and will push the people of Africa into further marginalisation and poverty. Africa bears the major burden of the epidemic. Of the estimated 34.3 million people living with HIV/AIDS in 1999, 24.5 million or 71.4% were in sub-Saharan Africa; of the 2.8 million deaths in 1999, 2.2 million were Africans; and of the
13.2 million orphans generated by the epidemic 12.1 million are in Africa (UNAIDS, 2000: 124).

(Barnett and Whiteside 2002: 124)

Whilst many countries have adopted policies to share information, identify education sector interventions to assist teachers and learners to cope with risks of HIV/AIDS and to facilitate professionals to develop behaviour change strategies that have proved successful against HIV/AIDS, the immense negative impact on communities of HIV/AIDS continues (UNAIDS 2002). This is particularly seen in high rates of teacher deaths and, through ill health, low attendance of both teachers and students at schools.

Access to adequate health education and facilities, therefore, must be seen as central to halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS. This has become the number one priority in many Commonwealth African countries (Whiteside and Sunter 2000). In addition, it is crucial that those with the disease feel able to speak about their experiences, not only for their own sense of identity but also to help inform others (CFAR 2003)

‘When it was first known that I had HIV, people started telling my brothers and sisters they would get AIDS by living in the same house. Now, I am well recognised in my country. A lot of young people come to me for counselling. I have helped to break the stigma.’

Matthew Miti, Coordinator, Young Ambassadors of Positive Living in Zambia

The Young Ambassadors of Positive Living is a project of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), in which young people living with HIV educate others about AIDS prevention. They also set up networks of support among HIV-sufferers and give dietary advice and psychological support. Ambassadors meet with their peers in schools, youth groups, churches and military establishments in East and Southern Africa.

Through persistent advocacy and campaigning, the Ambassadors for Positive Living have raised awareness among ministries of youth and health; the programme is being replicated by the government of South Africa. It is now also being launched by CYP’s Asia Regional Centre and by the CYP Caribbean Centre – such replication being encouraged relatively easily within the ‘family’ of the Commonwealth of Nations.
The Challenges for Research: Education in Difficult Circumstances in Commonwealth Africa

In addition to HIV/AIDS, the countries of Commonwealth Africa have immense problems with disability – often quietly forgotten and unspoken of. Yet of the 150m disabled children in the world, 100m are in the Commonwealth, 65m in Commonwealth Africa. And with less than 5% enrolled in schooling, they, in the main, remain deprived of learning opportunities. And even for those within schooling, support for their special educational needs remains unlikely. In addition, poverty and lack of access to basic services, including education, creates considerable social, economic and emotional cost to disabled children, their families and to the wider community.

In the 1990s, almost 1% of the world’s population was displaced in conflict or other disasters: children under 18 years make up half that figure. UNESCO estimates that in the decade over 2m children were killed in wars. By the beginning of 2001 the UNHCR was concerned with 22m people – including refugees, asylum seekers, returnees and internally displaced people. In Africa alone, more than 120,000 boys and girls under 18 years are currently participating in armed conflicts. Some of these children are no more than 8 years of age. There are 300,000 children enrolled in armies and many of these are in Commonwealth countries. Refugee camps could provide education for children and adults: yet UNESCO (2002) found that only 1m children and young people receive any education.

In Sierra Leone and other Commonwealth countries coming through times of armed conflict, gender divisions may be polarised, with young men being kidnapped or otherwise persuaded into joining armed groups, and women and girls being targeted for gender based violence. As part of post conflict rehabilitation and peace building initiatives in war torn countries, the Commonwealth Secretariat’s peace and citizenship education programme offers opportunities for the development of new social values with regard to the status of women, men, boys and girls that will contribute to the promotion of more equitable and sustainable peace necessary for economic development.

Therefore, as well as being a human right for those in difficult circumstances, for those with special needs, for those who are gifted and for the remaining vast majority, the Commonwealth Secretariat views education is a key factor in the achievement of economic, political and social goals.

However, such goals are beset also with macro-economic and political influences. Currently, many Ministries of Education are concerned with the impact on domestic education policy formulation and implementation of the General Agreement in Trade and Services (GATS) on the services provided through education.
The US proposals, if successfully negotiated at the WTO, would severely limit the capacity of host governments to exercise any control, including quality control, over foreign higher education providers operating within their territories. Since the US government does not regulate higher education provision, even in the US, such providers can literally get away with anything, including issuing certificates for degrees not earned.

Professor Munzali Jibril 2002

The Methodological Challenge of Developing Practical Research Questions

It is central to research on these wide-ranging educational problems and developments – of gender, HIV/AIDS and Education, Education in Difficult Circumstances - in Commonwealth African countries, that carefully crafted research questions along with appropriate research methods are interwoven into the cultural nuances of the specific country. The challenge for researching education in Commonwealth African countries is therefore multifaceted: it is important to know the country, the educational problems and the most appropriate means for gaining access to respondents in the field.

It may be that in some circumstances, questionnaires – usually seen as the least attractive instrument for the qualitative researcher – may be appropriate. In the case of HIV/AIDS and education, for example, questionnaires to students in school, in further or in higher education, may elicit responses whereas ‘in depth’ unstructured interviews may produce long silences. Indeed, questionnaires have been used with some success for large-scale sampling on HIV/AIDS and Education by WHO, World Bank and UNESCO.

When generating methodological approaches, it is also important to delineate instruments appropriate for the intended end reader/user of the Report or thesis. If, for example, the Report is to be sent to Ministers of Education, a researcher may be raising questions such as -have mechanisms been put in place to create demand for education? If so, why, what and how? Are these gender-related? Do they take account of problems associated with HIV/AIDS and those associated with disability?

In these circumstances, wide-ranging methodological approaches would be most appropriate: perhaps case studies, in-depth interviewing and also – possibly – focus group interviews. But as with all methodological approaches, it is important to use cross-referencing and triangulation so that responses in one sphere do not contradict those uncovered in another.
However, perhaps as important, is knowledge of how to present the research so that it does impact on policy making, implementation and practice. It is quite apparent that one of the least effective ways of impacting upon educational policy and practice is to deliver a research-based report to the Ministry of Education. That may not find its way to the Minister, or to the person in charge of the specific sector or policy area. Much better is the tried and tested approach of making time for an interview or many interviews with those in the Ministry, getting to know persons within the sector and gaining their support – and interest – in all stages of the research.

But for most researchers, the end reader/user will not be a Minister of Education, rather another student, researcher, academic or policy analyst. Research questions may include ideas such as have alternative modes of education been constructed to enable attendance by children living in difficult circumstances, be these through armed conflict, HIV/AIDS, refugee status etc? To address these questions, it may be preferable to have a period of living in-country with those involved in education, non-formal education or community-wide support for education. Through subjectively understanding the ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’, it may be possible to revisit the ‘questions’ and thereby a more coherent and robust thesis may develop. In addition, through living in-country and participating in the daily lives of people affected by the problems outlined above, the researcher may discuss ideas and options with those who know so much more about the specific problems and possible ‘solutions’.

Although it is not the aim of a researcher writing a thesis to specify ‘policy solutions’, nevertheless, it may be possible for the post-graduate, on becoming post-doctoral, to make a contribution to knowledge in the policy community. The researcher/writer may quickly see that more policy-oriented questions – e.g. have policies been enacted to address gender disparities be these in terms of access to education, inclusion in schooling or achievement into employment? – require searches of Government and Ministerial documentation. Only after this thorough data collection and collation, can attention be turned to raising more concrete questions and undertaking interviews.

This approach is being supported, currently, by the Commonwealth Secretariat as research is undertaken to ask whether specific approaches to early childhood education have been developed to address and extend quality in education. This raises the question, what is considered to be ‘quality’, who benefits from this ‘quality’ education, how and why? To answer these questions, initial bibliographical collection and collation of official data on ‘quality’ and its meaning in different Commonwealth contexts becomes crucial.
Concluding Comments

It has been seen that whilst significant progress has been made in developing education for all and, in particular, universal access to education, disparities still exist in enrolment and performance between localities and provinces, between educational provision in the metropolis and the rural area, between schools in the same locality, between genders and within and between socio-economic groups. There is therefore much work still to be undertaken in not only supporting education policy but, specifically, in researching education and its development in Commonwealth Africa.

So the challenge for researching education in Commonwealth Africa is not only in defining the researchable questions and in delineating the necessary and appropriate methodological approaches and instruments, but also in developing strategies for dissemination of any thesis or report - so that the research comes to make a difference.

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