



Dissecting the teacher monolith: Experiences of beginning basic school teachers in Zambia



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted experiences of beginning basic school teachers in Southern Province, Zambia, through a qualitative study comprised of interviews with 35 basic school teachers. Our research examines the uniqueness of beginning teacher experiences in the global South, and points to the need to recognize the implications of 'Education for All' for this particular sub-group of the teaching population. We found that these teachers faced significant personal and professional difficulties, while receiving little support. Nevertheless, teachers expressed a commitment to the profession. Recommendations are provided to suggest improvements to the transition and socialization process for future beginning teachers.

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1. Introduction

International educational development initiatives since the 1990s have focused on expanding access to primary schooling in particular, and to education more generally. The 'Education for All' movement *writ large*, along with its influence on the programming of individual NGOs and government initiatives, serves as a prime example. The expansion of educational provisions in developing contexts has enabled massive increases in enrolment, particularly at the primary level, and therefore created educational opportunities for millions of students formerly denied the right to learn.

As nations have moved ever closer to 2015, some scholars and practitioners have turned their focus to 'Learning for All' rather than 'Education for All', suggesting that attending low-quality schools merely serves to accredit rather than prepare students for their future roles in society (Ginsburg, 2012; Klees et al., 2012; World Bank, 2011). While this shift is not necessarily new, it has crystallized into a more unified emphasis in recent years. Indeed, attending to issues of quality is incredibly difficult amidst remarkable enrolment increases. In Zambia, for example, student

enrolment in Grades 1–7 in government schools grew from approximately 1.6 million students in 2002 to 2.8 million in 2010 (UNESCO, 2013). This policy focus on quantitative expansion in Zambia, like other nations in the region and beyond, necessitated hiring a considerable number of teachers in a relatively short period of time and therefore introducing large cohorts of beginning teachers into the education system.

As a significant part of this global movement toward educational expansion and 'Learning for All', teachers around the world are expected to provide relevant and beneficial educational opportunities for a growing number of students. However, as Ginsburg (2012) argues, despite the extreme importance of teachers, they have been treated largely as human capital, "a resource or input that is required for the process of producing student learning outcomes", with little attention to their lived experiences or professional growth as educators (p. 84). Consequently, teachers in all stages of their careers struggle to meet growing demands. For beginning teachers, it is especially difficult to provide high-quality learning experiences because they face a number of challenges specific to their status as recent entrants into the profession of teaching: transitioning to new geographic settings, navigating school and organizational cultures, assessing the ability levels of their students, and honing their pedagogical practices. Quantitative expansion has the potential to limit qualitative delivery for all teachers, but in this article we argue that beginning teachers are often particularly constrained and left unsupported as a result of these larger global shifts, using

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research on beginning basic school teachers in Zambia as a case study.

Beginning teachers in Zambia often face many of the challenges noted above, but also some that are unique to the educational context in Zambia, such as learning a new language of instruction and finding adequate housing when it has not been provided by the government or school. Despite these occupational difficulties, many beginning teachers in Zambia communicate their enthusiasm and commitment to the teaching profession. Thus, this article aims to explore the multifaceted experiences of beginning teachers in Southern Province, Zambia, to pose several questions focused on increasing instructional effectiveness for new teachers, and to work toward improving the transition and socialization process for teachers who enter the profession in the future. The contributions of this research include new understandings of beginning teacher experiences in the global South. Moreover, it addresses broader questions related to the interplay between expanding access and the challenges individual teachers—particularly beginning teachers—face as they work in ever-growing classrooms and shifting policy contexts.

2. Experiences of beginning teachers

A proliferation of literature from the global North documents the experiences of beginning teachers. Research studies laud the importance of pre-service field experiences in establishing a link between university coursework focused on educational theories and pedagogical practices witnessed in the classroom (Boe et al., 2007; Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Korthagen, 2001; Zeichner, 2010). Recent studies in the United States recognize that beginning teachers may lack self-confidence in their teaching and the ability to evaluate accurately their skills (Kruger and Dunning, 1999; Roehrig et al., 2008). They may desire more feedback than other teachers regarding their classroom performance, seeking out mentors with whom they can collaborate to improve their teaching strategies (Kutsyuruba, 2009; Nolan and Hoover, 2008; Steffy, 1989; Sullivan and Glanz, 2000). The benefits of mentoring relationships, in which veteran teachers and mentors are sources of knowledge, support, and encouragement to beginning teachers as they hone pedagogical practices, are well documented (Angelle, 2002; Cherubini, 2007; Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Le Maistre and Pare, 2010; Portner, 2008; Olebe, 2005; Stanulis et al., 2012). Furthermore, research conducted in the global North states that teachers who have satisfying and fulfilling experiences during their first years of teaching are more likely to continue in the profession (Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Smith and Ingersoll, 2004).

In contrast to the vast number of extant studies of beginning teachers' experiences in the global North, there exist few investigations of a similar nature conducted in the global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Comparatively few researchers have explored experiences of both student teacher trainees and beginning teachers in various countries. The existing studies have found a lack of systematic supportive mentoring between student or beginning teachers and veteran teachers in Kenya (Ong'ondo and Borg, 2011), Malawi (Kunje and Stuart, 1999; Mitka and Gates, 2011), Swaziland (Mazibuko, 1999), Tanzania (Bermeo et al., 2013), and Zimbabwe (Maphosa et al., 2007). Studies among South African teachers reveal similar concerns among all teachers, who wished for a more collaborative school culture (Steyn, 2010) as well as increased professional development through the use of peer evaluation (Msila, 2009). Additionally, Hedges (2002) stated that newly trained teachers in Ghana had a difficult time adjusting to teaching positions in rural schools because of the occupational challenges that exist outside of the

classroom, such as finding funds for food when government salaries are delayed. These and other factors further complicated the transition process for new teachers.

Although some of these research studies shed light on the experiences of beginning teachers in SSA, this vital area of research remains underdeveloped. Studies concerned with classroom practices and other aspects of educational systems in SSA often treat teachers as a monolithic unit, instead of teasing out differences that may exist for teachers who are new to the profession and therefore adapting to unfamiliar contexts and demands. Furthermore, to our knowledge, no studies of beginning teachers have been conducted with basic school teachers in Zambia, or with any teachers in Zambia, for that matter. Thus, the purpose of this article is to fill this gap in the literature and contribute to the continued development of teacher education and educational administration in Zambia and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Because teacher socialization and development are interrelated with teachers' perceptions and experiences (Zeichner and Gore, 1990), it is particularly valuable to explore the experiences of beginning teachers, as these "neophyte" teachers "must resolve the complexities of this socialization into the school culture" (Cherubini, 2009, p. 87).

We investigated the experiences of Zambian teachers during their first two years of teaching, taking an inductive approach to this research that would yield unique insights appropriate to the local context. We sought to answer four questions about their experiences: How do Zambian teachers who have been teaching full-time for one or two years evaluate and reflect upon their experiences in the classroom? What challenges do they face during this period of socialization and how do they navigate the many responsibilities placed upon them? Are there unexpected realities they felt unprepared to handle? And, perhaps most importantly, if challenges exist, are there feasible initiatives that could mitigate beginning teachers' frustrations and assuage their concerns? Before addressing these questions in greater detail, it is necessary to first explore the educational context in Zambia, which is discussed in the following section.

3. Educational context in Zambia

Zambia gained independence from Britain in 1964 and immediately began instituting changes in its educational policies. At independence, the state acquired full control of the education sector and expanded it. New initiatives were based on development assumptions rooted in human capital theory (Bajaj, 2010), which posits that investment in human capital can produce economic growth and national development (Schultz, 1971). This theory served as the foundation for the development of new educational programs; only two years after independence, the first university in Zambia was established, with the intent of educating men and women who could assist in developing the nation (Kelly, 1999). The Ministry of Education (recently renamed the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, or MESVTEE) later issued an Education Reform in 1977, which continued the focus on capacity building and human capital evidenced in earlier years and emphasized education as an instrument for personal and national development (Carmody, 2004) amidst declining copper prices and national economy (Bajaj, 2010). This educational reform was also grounded strongly in functionalist ideology, in which schooling was regarded as a means to meet the needs of modern society through the socialization of students (Feinberg and Soltis, 2004), a role that fell largely to teachers in Zambia (Musonda, 1999).

Several other reforms also influenced the evolution of Zambia's education sector. *Focus on Learning*, a 1992 educational reform policy, maintained the emphasis on capacity building and poverty

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