

‘I have big things planned for my future’: the limits and possibilities of transformative agency in Zambian schools

Monisha Bajaj*

Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, USA

This article explores the extent to which participation in alternative human values education affects students’ conceptions of agency amidst the economic and HIV/AIDS crises in Ndola, Zambia. Drawing on the concept of transformative agency as developed by critical research in education, this study examines conceptions of agency based on data produced through interviews, focus groups and diaries given to pairs of siblings from lower to middle income families one of whom attended a government secondary school in Ndola and the other an alternative school run by a non-governmental organization. This study found that transformative agency was enabled by alternative schooling that attempted to disrupt the reproductive tendencies of state schooling. After graduation, however, students were forced to renegotiate their sense of agency vis-à-vis the larger structural constraints of Zambian society. As such, the limits and possibilities of alternative pedagogy and school structure towards educational equity are analysed and discussed in relation to the field of international and comparative education.

Keywords: African education; student agency; critical research in education; educational innovation

Introduction

Educational innovation, often enabled by transnational links and donor funding, manifests itself in myriad forms throughout the global South (Mundy and Murphy 2001). This study presents an alternative low-cost school operating in the marginalized townships of Ndola, Zambia through differential conceptions of agency presented by students at the focal school and their siblings in nearby government secondary schools. Ndola was once the center of a flourishing copper industry, allowing Zambia to be considered a middle income country for much of the 1960s and 1970s (Ferguson 1999). Following the global decline in demand for copper Zambia, since the 1980s, has faced a shrinking economy, growing debt and the onset of an HIV/AIDS pandemic that now has a 17% infection rate among its population (UNAIDS 2004). Amidst this context, an unusual school opened in 1992, founded by two retired African educators seeking to impart an educational model based on non-sectarian ‘human values’ such as peace, truth, social justice and non-violence (Bajaj 2005). Given the different curricular approaches utilized by government and alternative schooling and the larger context in which both are operating, this study sought to address the following question: to what extent did participation in

*Email: bajaj@exchange.tc.columbia.edu

Umutende School affect conceptions of student agency amidst the larger crises of HIV/AIDS and economic decline?

Agency in educational research

This section surveys studies of student agency in educational settings as well as recent studies of African youth agency both within and outside school settings. Studies of student agency have largely examined two forms of resistance to schooling through oppositional or transformative/strategic agency (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993; Giroux 1997; Willis 1977). Here, I utilize the terms ‘transformative agency’ and ‘transformational resistance’ as functionally synonymous given their similar expressions of the ability of students to develop a critical consciousness (Freire 1970) and respond to schooling in ways that express individual and collective action towards positive social change. The research carried out with secondary school students in Ndola, Zambia presented in this article focuses on transformative agency and suggests that once cultivated, it may not be a fixed characteristic, but is instead situational. In particular, my research suggests that agency is a complex phenomenon, limited and informed by a variety of factors both temporal and ideological.

While scholars have suggested the situational nature of agency with regard to structural constraints (Bourdieu, cited in Reay 2004), this study explores how transformative agency is enabled by alternative schooling and how this attempts to disrupt the reproductive tendencies of state schooling in Zambia (Bajaj 2005). I assert that after leaving the sheltered school environment graduates must then renegotiate their sense of agency based on the dynamic interplay between internal beliefs and external situations. In order to contextualize the findings within the larger literature on student agency and studies of African youth it is important to understand the ways in which scholars have explored the possibilities and limitations of agency.

Largely in response to the highly deterministic nature of reproduction theories (Althusser 1979; Bowles and Gintis 1976), resistance theories emerged in the 1970s in educational studies suggesting the multiplicity of ways in which students, teachers, parents and communities can contest the process of social reproduction through schooling (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993; Foley 1991; MacLeod 1995; Weis 1996; Willis 1977). Sociological studies of school resistance in Europe and North America largely equated agency with opposition to dominant cultural discourses and practices that often resulted in ‘self-damnation’ (Willis 1977, 3). Recognizing the existence of agency in marginal urban US communities, O’Connor (1997) argued that these ethnographies of student opposition acknowledge only a ‘partial’ resistance because ‘these same resisters willingly accommodate other aspects of the dominant discourse and become active participants in their own subordination’ (601). While some resistance theorists cite student opposition to domination, it is important to note that domination does not always result in opposition, that not all oppositional behavior is a form of resistance and that not all forms of resistance are socially deviant. Hence, a transformative sense of agency that involves a larger critique of one’s social realities and a willingness to act upon them has increasingly been discussed in educational research in the United States (Giroux 1988; Noguera 2003).

Scholars have asserted that individual consciousness and community resistance through collective action have some role to play in transforming schools from serving only the dominant class to serving the interests of other sectors in society as

well (Apple 1982; Foley 1991; Freire 1970; Aronowitz and Giroux 1993; Noguera and Cannella 2006). Through the cultivation of an individual and collective consciousness based on a critique of social inequities belief in one's present or future agency may ensue. Departing from resistance theorists who see agency as opposition, critical theorists Aronowitz and Giroux (1985, 105) asserted that 'the concept of resistance must have a revealing function that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation'. Akin to Freire's (1970) assertion that education must heighten students' critical consciousness as they come to analyze their place in an unequal world, critical theorists highlight the cultivation of a transformative sense of agency that can lead to individual and social change.

Transformative agency can be fostered among students in various settings and empirical research in the United States has identified such agency-enabling factors as participation in activist-oriented after school programs (Kwon 2006), knowledge of and personal contact with those engaged in collective struggle (O'Connor 1997) and deliberate efforts to foster agency through school discourses and practices (Miron and Lauria 1998). These studies have examined the process of agency cultivation, but have not focused extensively on its renegotiation after youths leave school or in non-formal educational spaces. Additionally, while most studies of student agency have examined schools in western industrialized nations, it is important to examine studies of youth in the global South to utilize the construct of transformative agency in understanding contextually diverse educational experiences.

Youth agency in Africa

Increasingly, the concepts of agency and resistance have been explored in studies of African youth and their realities inside and outside school (Abbink 2005; Argenti 2002; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Diouf 2003; Honwana 2005; Sharp 2002; Twum-Danso 2005). Declining enrollment in state schooling in countries throughout sub-Saharan Africa, including Zambia, has been attributed to the introduction of user fees for previously free services such as health and education as part of the implementation of structural adjustment programs upon which loans from international financial institutions are conditioned (Saasa 2002). Thus, while some African youths remain in schools, others have been recruited into other activities, such as agricultural production (Lungwangwa 1992), licit and illicit work on the streets of urban centers (UNICEF 2005) and paramilitary combat as part of armed rebel groups (Honwana 2005). For those youths who remain in school despite the odds, the concept of agency in studies of African education provides a new direction for exploring how youth are experiencing this aspect of their social lives, namely schooling, and what it means for their futures (Sefa Dei 2005; Sharp 2002).

Sharp (2002) approached youth agency in Madagascar through participation in schooling as a transformative possibility, drawing upon authors such as Freire (1970) and Giroux (1983). Sharp's (2002) research on the personal and collective memory of Malagasy youth highlights actions and attitudes that fostered students' political consciousness in the school environment as well as outside the school. Her study rejected 'portrayals of youth as inevitably lost, helpless, and lacking political awareness or agency' (Sharp 2002, 20). Instead, she asserted that youth exercised a great deal of agency during the socialist era in changing their political consciousness. Given Madagascar's current move towards democratic capitalism, Sharp (2002)

noted that these youth, who developed a nationalist political consciousness while being schooled under socialism, are now ‘willing victims of the post-independence era’ in which their nationalism cannot change the adverse forces of the global economy that are shaping their lives (p.6, original emphasis). Her work offers an example of how the concept of agency can be utilized in examining African youth’s responses to crisis, in this case to the crisis of economic decline and under-employment in Madagascar. While Sharp’s is an historical look at the development of political consciousness and student agency, it sheds light on how one can study the situational nature of student agency in times of economic decline and HIV/AIDS.

From this theoretical body of literature on student agency an operational definition – belief in one’s present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one’s society – is constructed to guide the study of youth experiences in the Umutende School vis-à-vis government schools in Ndola, Zambia.¹

Research methods

The information collected for this article came from a larger study of youth experiences in Ndola, Zambia that included interviews, focus groups, surveys and student diaries for a total of more than 500 respondents, including teachers, administrators, parents and students. The larger study, carried out from July 2003 to August 2004, attempted to trace the impact of HIV/AIDS and economic decline on students’ experiences inside and outside school in the middle sized town of Ndola, Zambia (Bajaj 2005). In this article I present data collected through the diary–interview method in which students wrote responses to various questions. The themes presented emerged from the larger data set and were identified as significant using tests of validity such as member checking and triangulation (Stake 1995). The student responses presented in this article are consistent with the findings of the larger ‘parent’ study. As with qualitative research in general, the question of generalizability can best be addressed through the methodological rigor with which a study is designed in order to highlight lived experiences that may be invisible in positivist approaches (Yin 1989).

In this study, as in other qualitative projects, student diaries were utilized as a means of data collection and triangulation (Crossley and Vulliamy 1997; Lofland and Lofland 1984). Secondary students in Umutende School with a sibling of similar age at a local government school were identified and invited to participate.² While student diaries have been used in studies of educational experiences primarily in higher education (Andrews and Ridenour 2006; Gan, Hunphreys, and Hamp-Lyons 2004; Hudson, Hudson, and Steel 2006), such diaries have rarely been used as a means of collecting data about secondary school students’ realities vis-à-vis their siblings.

The goal of the diary–interview method was to explore the experiences and perspectives on a range of issues of students of similar ages from the same household who attended different schools, thereby minimizing socio-economic status as a factor in comparing students’ experiences in different schools. There existed a range of reasons for why siblings attended different schools, including individual choice, aversion to the single sex education at Umutende where young women and men were separated into two campuses, and the policy of Umutende of admitting only one child per family in order to expand access.³ Parents, and not the school, were

responsible for deciding which child would be the first one enrolled. Hence, it is possible some selection factors within the family were in operation.

Student diaries were completed by a cohort of 11 sibling pairs, 22 students in total, from Umutende School and local government schools; these diaries were complemented by periodic semi-structured interviews carried out with each member of the sibling pairs.⁴ Each student was given a diary with nine structured assignments on topics ranging from ‘my family’ to ‘my community’ to ‘Zambia in 25 years’ and there was space for an additional five assignments on any topic of the respondent’s choosing. Interview questions included the topics schooling experiences, family life, future aspirations, HIV/AIDS, teacher–student relationships and the curriculum and structure of their school. The data presented on student conceptions of agency primarily come from the written assignments in diaries or from the interviews carried out in conjunction with the sibling pair cohort written diaries.

Two key limitations are worth mentioning at the outset and their potential impact on the data that follow. First, while the sibling cohort design attempted to control for socio-economic and household factors that may impact on students’ conceptions of agency, there certainly may have been factors at the household level that resulted in which student attended which school. Of necessity, the sibling cohort design is a best approximation of how to examine differentiated schooling experiences and is not a dispositive clinical study. While I draw inferences from what happens at school and the responses given, the influence of pre-existing factors cannot be discounted. Second, ‘positive illusions theory’ suggests that those aspiring to attain or already in leadership positions tend to be overly optimistic and this may lead to over-optimism, thereby influencing their perception of their own circumstances (Johnson 2004).⁵ Certainly the processes represented by self-selection of the school could account for some of the differential responses between siblings. Nonetheless, the schooling experiences of youth in government secondary schools and in Umutende School offer rich comparative information, however provisional due to the limitations of data collection, that allow for extended commentary and a greater understanding of student conceptions of their own present and future agency.

Student agency in Ndola secondary schools

In order to better understand the schools included in this study, the differences and similarities between Umutende School and the government secondary schools in Ndola are worth exploring.⁶ All Ndola secondary schools in this study, be they public or private, shared common features such as adherence to the nationally mandated curriculum, the employment of government trained teachers and use of national examinations at the end of grades 7, 10 and 12 for promotion and graduation. All secondary schools also had fees associated with them and while most private schools in Ndola had high fees beyond the reach of lower to middle class Zambians, Umutende School’s fee structure was similar to that of government secondary schools in 2004, given its non-governmental and social service orientation. Teacher salaries at Umutende and at government secondary schools were comparable.⁷

Aside from the aforementioned human values infused within Umutende School’s instructional model, various other features of the school – related to both content and structure – depart from government schools in Zambia, which are characterized by high degrees of corruption and social inequality based on class and gender (Bajaj

2005). With regard to content, students at the focal school, aside from the government mandated curriculum, participated in daily assemblies where lectures were given by school officials with advice on matters related to money management, careers, HIV awareness and practicing the espoused values of the school. Additionally, three days a week students had an interactive lesson on one of the dozens of values enshrined by the school. At the four government schools included in this study assemblies occurred twice monthly and consisted primarily of announcements and a reading from the bible, given former President Chiluba's declaration of Zambia as a 'Christian nation' (Phiri 2003, 401). The longer hours of Umutende school also included a period for agricultural production and community service; both these aspects were absent from government schools.⁸

Umutende School also focused on cultural pride as an element of its school discourse and practice. Unlike government schools, where students were prohibited from using local languages while at school and wore western style uniforms with blazers and ties, at Umutende School students greeted their teachers in the regional language Bemba and wore uniforms made of local *chitenge* cloth as part of an emphasis on their cultural heritage. Although formal instruction was carried out in English at Umutende, students began each school day by singing and drumming several songs in Bemba. The school also sought to foster a close-knit environment in their relatively small classes of 20–40 students, compared with the much larger and overcrowded classes and bigger school size of government schools. The differences in curriculum content and structure between Umutende School and the Ndola government secondary schools are highlighted in Table 1; both components are important for understanding the differentiated responses of students in this study. It is impossible to isolate the impact of structure or curriculum content alone and, as such, they are both believed to contribute to the distinctive conceptions of agency put forth by Umutende students, as will be discussed further.

Self-conception and transformative agency

In a declining economy and confronted with the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and its social impact, Umutende students' belief in their agency despite their limited circumstances was evident in the data gathered on student self-conception and future goals. In school assemblies at Umutende, students were frequently addressed as 'future leaders' and encouraged to contribute to improving their society in the future. In my field notes I recorded numerous speeches by administrators that emphasized leadership development. They achieved this through the repetition of key phrases, such as 'One day when you are running the country...' and 'When one of you becomes president...', even when unrelated to the topic at hand. For instance, one day a film-maker was coming to shoot some footage of the school, and a school official was telling students on the girls' campus to be serious while on tape by saying that one day when one of them was president she wouldn't want to have been on videotape making funny faces. In classes as well teachers reiterated the message of students being leaders in the future. One teacher of fifth graders, for example, when discussing student behavior said 'you are a leader who will bring about change in Africa' and, hence, according to this teacher, students needed to behave well in class.

Umutende students noted the school's mission and philosophy, as highlighted in lectures by teachers and administrators, as important influences on their future goals as leaders. A 12-year-old in Grade 7, Grace, discussed the daily assemblies and how

Table 1. Curricular content and structural differences between Ndola secondary schools.

	Ndola public secondary schools	Umutende School (private)
Structure of school	<p>Government funding Grades 8–12 School size: 1000–2000 Class size: 50–100 School day: 8 a.m.–1 p.m. or 12:30–5 p.m. Monday–Friday Jacket and tie as uniform Extra lessons: pay teachers High teacher absenteeism due to authorities being based in capital Many instances noted of corruption in enrolment and favouritism Fees: approximately US\$60 per year National curriculum Twice monthly assemblies with announcements English only at all times; punishment for Bemba use After school clubs with voluntary participation Agricultural production activities assigned as punishments</p>	<p>External funding Grades 1–12 School size: 500 Class size: 20–40 School day: 6:30 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday–Saturday African clothing as uniform Extra lessons: free Low teacher absenteeism due to strict local oversight Few instances noted of corruption in enrolment and favouritism Fees: approximately US\$60 per year National + values curriculum Daily assemblies on leadership and values English medium but Bemba greetings and songs Weekly club meetings with mandatory participation Community service and agricultural production periods</p>
Curricular content		

they impacted on her future goals: ‘We are advised not to do bad things so that people can look on us because we can be the future leaders. Sometimes [the principal] says that, “I want all of you to be in the government so that Zambia can be a better nation”’ (interview, 24 June 2004). While the idealism expressed in Grace’s comment may not translate into actuality, it is important to note how Umutende students believed in their own sense of agency. For example, for one Grade 7 student, Gladys, the first step towards achieving her future leadership goals was to study hard, an immediate task within her power:

The advice they give us is to study hard so that we can make Zambia a better country in future. ... I’d like to be a leader because I would like to improve Zambia and other countries so that they can be developed. (Interview, 29 April 2004)

Students and alumni echoed in diaries and interviews a desire to be leaders of their communities and the nation.

Unlike government school students, who expressed little desire to pursue public service (Bajaj 2005), most students and alumni of Umutende School talked about serving Zambia and making the nation better, either through their government service or through other means. In response to the question ‘Where do you see yourself in 20 years?’ one Umutende sibling noted the following:

In about 15 years, I will enter government and be a minister or a member of parliament. In 20 years, I aspire to be the president of Zambia. I believe ... I’ll set foot in the State House of Zambia and bring about oneness and unity in Zambia.

Other Umutende students sought to be in parliament or other elected offices in order to ‘make changes and make Zambia a better place’ and ‘bring about the end of starvation in this country of ours’. While many students discussed a desire to be an elected leader for reasons of improving their country, other students conceived their future differently, although sharing a similar notion of serving Zambia through activities other than those carried out by public officials.

Students expressed a desire to help their community in the future in distinct ways, all of which related to experiences they had had at Umutende: three students reported wanting to become doctors in order to find a cure for AIDS and many others wrote and spoke about building orphanages, establishing schools and helping street children. For instance, one 13-year-old student commented ‘I want to complete my studies and then maybe be a doctor. I think I’ll take half or a quarter of my salary and give it to the poor’ (Interview with Alice, 21 June 2004). Another 14-year-old student wrote the following as part of his assignment on ‘my future’:

Since I was in grade four I have planned big things for my future. ... I have planned to work as a doctor. Where I will be working? My country is Zambia and if God will send me to go work somewhere else I will obey but I prefer Zambia. I want to be a doctor not that I want to be paid a lot of money, but to save people’s lives. In 20 years time I want to find the cure of AIDS. This disease has killed a lot of people and I don’t want to be affected or infected with it. (Written assignment, 26 June 2004)

Students’ career goals reflected a desire to improve one’s community, an important aspect of the notion of transformative student agency.

Even though some Umutende students expressed a desire to study or live abroad, they all discussed coming back to Zambia to work afterwards to improve the country. This sharply contrasted with government school students, among whom the majority expressed less belief in their ability to influence society and a desire to pursue educational and career opportunities abroad, to get out of a country they saw

as flawed (Bajaj 2005). Umutende twelfth grader Paul, in contrast, wrote the following in his assignment about ‘my future’:

I want to build Zambia while still in Zambia. I want to live in Zambia until I die. I would love to go to other countries and observe their way of life, but again come back. In 20 years time, ... I will be running or working for an institution to do with humanitarian works. I want to fight for the human rights of the disadvantaged in the society. (Written assignment, 26 June 2004)

In nearly all of the Umutende student responses to questions about their future, a strong sense of hope and the ability to improve their society emerged. The data collected show that most government school students did not share this sense of agency in improving their communities or working for human rights in the future. Instead, their interviews and essays were filled with expressions of despair about their future or their hope to leave the country in order to improve their situation.

Student diaries provided the richest source of data for examining differences in conceptions of agency among siblings who attended government schools and those who attended Umutende School. The reiteration of leadership messages seemed to impact on students’ self-conception and future goals, as seen in the comparison of the interviews and diaries of sibling pairs with one sibling at Umutende and one at a government secondary school. Among the 11 siblings in government schools only one sought to go into public service as an elected official in the future. In contrast, among the 11 Umutende students involved in the sibling pairs study nine sought to be elected officials in Zambia or to be involved in the running of international organizations such as the United Nations. While being an elected official in Zambia is presently characterized by high levels of corruption, the Umutende students articulated community service and a desire to reduce corruption as reasons for wanting to enter public office.

In the same family the siblings often had different future goals and varying degrees of certainty about what their futures held. The nine essays and five free choice assignments that each student produced offered a glimpse into how they conceptualized the future and their role within it. The following written responses – by Martin, a student at Kolala High School, and his brother Abraham, a student at Umutende – to the topic ‘my future’ illustrate these differing future visions related to their plans for leadership in their community:

Martin (Kolala High School): I have many plans for my future but the [exam] results will determine what I’ll do. But it is not only good results however that guarantees a good future. Without money, [one] cannot further his education. I’ve always wanted to become a farmer. In 20 years, I think I will be enjoying the fruit of my sweat. I hope to have a family of my own then. But to be honest, I don’t know what I would have done. Things change rapidly in our third world. But if I will be alive, then I will have had maybe done enough for my country. Probably I would have created some jobs in the agriculture sector. (26 June 2004)

Abraham (Umutende School): My plans for the future are that I want to be an engineer, be successful, and keep my family well. In 50 years time, I will make sure that I will make at least two or three schools in my community and I will make sure I try to tell people that HIV is bad. I will try to make some clubs that will help the poor because I see people who suffer and I don’t feel good. I try to help the poor by giving them old clothes. I think I will make an orphanage for the street kids. I will try by all means to make my community and country better by reducing corruption, drugs, ... and [the] many things that make people stop going to school. In these ways, I think I can improve my country and community. ... Being educated, [I’ll be] doing things for the country,

maybe I'll be a mayor or a MP [member of parliament]. I'll just do my duties [and] I won't take things that I'm not supposed to. (26 June 2004)

The differing future visions among these siblings in the same household suggest that participation in Umutende School accounts for the distinct notions of agency, particularly as the definition utilized in this study links conceptions of agency to community development. Table 2 provides additional excerpts from the diaries of students from the same families and in response to the same questions or topics.

Table 2 highlights the different schooling experiences and distinctive sense of agency among youths in the same family. The excerpts highlight the ways in which social equality and advice contributed to student development of agency in Umutende School and, conversely, how the social inequality as manifested through favoritism and corruption adversely affected student conceptions of agency in the government schools. Despite the mention of a few positive experiences, government school students generally expressed less commitment to serving their communities and to taking leadership roles to improve their society in the present and in the future. Overall, in diaries of Umutende School students it was noted that they felt that the quality education and leadership messages they were receiving would result in better opportunities in the future. This was in contrast to their siblings, who generally felt that much more individual effort was necessary for their success. As Kolala government school eleventh grader Harriet noted in her diary 'Unless I pull up my socks, the future holds nothing for me'.

The differences in the responses from government school and Umutende students about their futures suggest that students are conceptualizing agency in distinct ways based on their schooling experiences. The opportunities to help others offered evidence to Umutende students that society can be transformed by human action, even in the midst of economic decline and the HIV/AIDS crisis. Moreover, students' and teachers' participation in human values education at Umutende School provided resources and continual messages about service and leadership that do not currently exist at government schools in Ndola.

The evidence presented suggests that Umutende students develop a distinctive sense of agency and vision for their futures when contrasted with government school students. Given that the socio-economic and household backgrounds of the government school and Umutende students are similar, I attributed these differences primarily to participation in the human values curriculum at Umutende School, which attempts to disrupt certain features and processes of social inequity. There are many features of Umutende School that could be contributing to these distinct conceptualizations of agency besides the human values curriculum: the external funding, the longer hours students spend in school, the better facilities, the closer supervision of teachers by administrators and the small size of the school and of classes compared with government schools. Whatever this agency may be attributed to, it appeared to be a product of the intentional efforts of the school administrators and teachers. The discourses and practices in Umutende departed from the norms in government schools, which tended to reproduce social inequality based on economic background.

In creating an alternative educational space that grants greater privileges such as small classes and innovative curriculum it could be argued that Umutende School, similarly to government schools, also reproduces social inequality, through selection for the school rather than on economic status. It is arguable conversely, however, that the funding of schools and projects such as these are often intended to explore

Table 2. Selected diary responses of siblings to assignment topics.

Topic	Excerpt from sibling at government school	Excerpt from sibling at Umuteende school
Zambia in 25 years	Roger: Zambia in 25 years can be developed or get poorer, but the truth is nobody knows what the future holds. Looking at the current situation, things are no good. If Zambia is to develop, it should start with the leaders.	Maureen: The people will be different from now because they will be [able] to go to school. ... Zambia will be led by me. I will love my country and care for the people. I will treat them like my relatives. I will treat them equal.
My teachers	Janet: [Teachers] don't teach according to what they have to teach. They just waste time telling stories which are not even part of the lessons. They don't care whether they have given work or not. All they know is how to get their salaries at month's end.	Paul: Teachers have been an inspiration to me. Writing as someone who spends most of my time with teachers, teachers have always led by example. Teachers have been like parents. They are very unselfish. They share their knowledge.
My school	Mwansa: In class we are 60. Not everybody completes school because some drop out and some stop because of [becoming] pregnant. ^a ... If you write an exam and you fail to make it to grade eight or ten, some parents bribe the teachers and the child can start school.	Annie: In class we are about 37. ... We are given library books, skills books and all the other books. Every day we are given homework and we [go home] at 5 p.m. At government schools, they just go in the morning. Here, they provide us with a very good education.
My community	Martin: In my community, people only come together when there is a funeral or a very, very rare case when there is distribution of free rice. There are so many orphans in the streets. ... I play no active role in my community.	Abraham: My role in the community is to teach my other friends about what I learn and about the disease of HIV. I want my friends to know about HIV. I also teach them about human values.

^aStudent pregnancies were often related to the high incidence of teacher-student relationships that, while largely consensual, had coercive elements, such as the provision by male teachers of higher grades, extra lessons and other educational advantages to female students (Bajaj 2005).

alternative models of pedagogy and 'best practice'. While not inconsistent with the reproduction of social inequality at the moment of selection, these models could also be said to contribute to educational change through participation in laboratories of pedagogical practice. As with the literature on democratic experimentalism in education (Dorf and Sabel 1998), continuous experimentation, revision and incremental change may lead to longer term transformation in pedagogical practices system-wide. In any event, for the purposes of this article an examination of whether the sense of agency cultivated is a tool that Umutende graduates can use in meaningful ways at tertiary institutions and in the world of work can provide a productive set of hypotheses for those concerned with African schooling and student agency.

Beyond Umutende School

While this study has focused on current students of government secondary schools and Umutende School, I also located and interviewed 10 alumni of Umutende to better understand how the sense of agency fostered at the school manifested itself when confronted with the challenges of re-entering an unequal society upon graduation. Compelling evidence emerged regarding students' conceptualizations of agency and belief in one's ability to act to improve and transform society while at Umutende School. An area of interest then became the experience of graduates upon entry into an unequal social order after leaving the confines of Umutende School.

Leaving an environment where notions of equality and social justice are espoused and re-entering a society where these values are not necessarily present proved difficult for some Umutende graduates, suggesting that students are forced to reassess their sense of agency. According to graduates this process can be challenging and can lead to social isolation. John, a 2003 graduate of Umutende, received extremely high marks on his national examinations which, in a purely meritocratic system, would have secured him admission and a full scholarship to any university in Zambia. He discussed, however, the challenges he was facing in getting admitted to a medical program at the University of Zambia (UNZA), the only one in the entire country. The following excerpt from my field notes describes his frustration:

John was sitting with a teacher when I went by and he was explaining that he was nervous about getting a bursary (scholarship) from the university. He was saying that although his scores are extremely high, many people he knows have had to bribe officials to secure a spot at UNZA. He said that although there is space for 2,000 students, the university over-enrols to make money and then fails students so that as they go on, many have to dropout. He also said that after getting a place, it's hard to get a room in the hostel, which requires further bribes. He said that because he has graduated from a private school, officials assume that he is rich and can afford to give them some money for him to secure a spot in the first-year class. (Field notes, 11 May 2004)

University officials assumed that John was wealthy and could produce a bribe for them. John, however, received a full scholarship to study at Umutende and was working while awaiting his examination results in order to pay costs such as transportation to Lusaka to submit his application to the university. Private schooling in Zambia is widely believed to be a luxury only accessible to the rich, hence, the corrupt officials of the university expected money from John. Disruption of this norm by Umutende School and the inability of graduates to impose the

human values and notions of equality they had cultivated created a dilemma for John. Ultimately, after repeated visits and discussions, John was able to convince the university officials of his economic status, receive a partial scholarship and entered UNZA. Yet this example shows that the reality of life beyond the gates of Umutende often clashes with the students' notions of human values and with their own sense of agency, forcing them to confront social norms vastly different from those of the school. For some, returning to Umutende as a teacher was the best option, given its familiarity and alignment with what they had come to regard as normal. For such graduates, when confronted with the structural realities present in Zambian society, their future goals as change agents and leaders were tempered by the need to survive in a highly unequal social context.

Some graduates, however, felt that they were better able to negotiate the realities of society with the human values they received while in secondary school, which suggests that one's sense of agency can indeed affect one's future. One 1998 graduate, Christopher, discussed his experience of encountering obstacles when looking for a job after graduating from Copperbelt University (CBU) and how his foundation in human values helped him to cope:

When I just left the University, I wanted to start working. I tried to apply for government jobs. Even after finishing university, I couldn't find a job. Being the first born because my elder brother is dead, I tried almost everything. I didn't find a job.

As I was [looking], one man who had been doing the same course I was doing was facing a problem with the lecturers. He asked me, 'Can you help me with financial accounting and business mathematics?' I said, 'I'm not doing anything, I think I'll help [you]'. Little did I know that that was the beginning of the job that I was waiting for. I just offered some lessons and I saw to it that I did my best. He wrote the exams and he passed. Having passed, he was among the best. Many others failed. The man sent four more people to me.

I started teaching them from home. Then they said, 'You are quite good. You [should] find a central place to do this'. I went into town and tried to look for places. I was told you should have a company license to find any office. From all the business studies I did, I knew the company registration procedure. I wrote that up, went to Lusaka, paid two hundred and something thousand kwacha, got that license, and tried to look for an office. Even with that license, I couldn't get one. I then tried the International Credit Company. They offered me some accommodations, which were not conducive for any lectures to go on.

I started with that. It was a very old office, and in the summertime, it was very, very hot. The ventilation was quite poor. Some time later, I saw one of my neighbours was in an office next to me which had ventilation. So I applied for it and he gave it to me. Then I saw people coming slowly. I managed to buy a very old computer, an IBM. So I have seen even if there are these disturbances around, these discouragements, these threats, if I may put it that way, I am used to it. You see the quality that makes me very, very confident that I will make it through is perseverance. (Interview, 30 June 2004)

In Christopher's account of looking for a job and then creating one from scratch he identifies the realities awaiting students from Umutende after leaving an environment that attempts to equalize opportunities and resources. While he does discuss his ability to reconcile his learnings from Umutende and utilize them to overcome the obstacles in his path, his account illustrates the challenges presented to qualified individuals in a stratified society characterized by a declining economy and limited employment opportunities.

Discussion

The agency expressed by students of Umutende School was related in large part to the structure and curricular content of their unique school, in contrast to the government schools attended by peers and siblings. Distinct conceptualizations emerged, suggesting that schooling experiences can foster a transformative sense of youth agency – a concept that has largely been explored in educational studies as opposition to schooling (Luykx 1999; MacLeod 1995; Willis 1977). While alternative schools may attract greater resources and have greater autonomy than government schools, certain elements of Umutende School's design could contribute to a not necessarily all empowering but greater sense of agency than amongst students in government schools while requiring a certain level of economic support from the government. As such, this study suggests that incorporation of certain curricular elements, such as an emphasis on community service and an interactive pedagogy, as well as structural features, such as a longer school day and smaller class sizes, may enhance students' belief in their ability to transform their surroundings – defined here as agency – although it may not transform economic relations, corruption or broader decline in and of itself.

The paradox of creating a school with norms vastly different from those in the larger society results in an uneven transition process for graduates that forces some to renegotiate their sense of agency cultivated while at Umutende. This process required students to consider their realities vis-à-vis the information they received while at school, shifting their position along a continuum between structure and agency that at any moment might change, given its situated nature. The limitations of Umutende School's attempt to foster agency among its students lay largely in the disparate society they entered upon graduation from the school. What are students to do with their high hopes for a future of service and leadership in Zambia when they face slim prospects for higher education and employment given their largely lower and middle class socio-economic backgrounds? In terms of preparedness for social realities, government schooling perhaps provides a better socialization in the processes by which employment and other services are secured, namely corruption through the provision of monetary or sexual services (Bajaj 2005). In this way, government school students may be receiving a more 'realistic' preparation for understanding the unequal realities they will face after secondary school, although one could certainly question the utility of educational processes that socialize students in an unquestioning acceptance of inequality in social relations and illicit acquisition of material resources.

Umutende students' agency, when tempered with the social realities beyond their idealistic school environment, may, as in the case of Christopher, turn into resilience to confront future challenges. The school's approach, however, might be more relevant if it shifted from imparting absolutist values to offering pragmatic tools and advice for the diverse and uncertain situations that await students. Recommendations for the school include: (1) developing a more formalized alumni network so that current students are aware of future social realities, such as corruption, that may put constraints on their ability to activate the agency they have cultivated in secondary school; (2) incorporating real life situations into the human values curriculum in order to offer students realistic examples of life beyond the school's gates; (3) creating a career advice office given the reality that many secondary school and college graduates are currently unable to find employment despite their high hopes or qualifications.

Conclusion

An exploration of student agency in the global South necessitates a mention of the dialectical tension between agency and structure as highlighted by scholars of comparative education (Broadfoot 2002; Weis 1996). This study has explored students' belief in their own present or future agency and, through interviews with alumni of alternative schooling, found that while a belief in future agency was cultivated by the unique curricular content and structure of Umutende School, after graduation agency was situational and operated distinctly in different contexts and at different moments beyond the school gates. Graduates of Ndola government secondary schools often left school with little hope for the future, particularly if their families lacked access to economic resources. Umutende students, on the other hand, seemed to possess a belief in their ability to succeed despite the odds presented by an unequal and often corrupt society. While various explanations could be offered about the differing responses of siblings, schooling experiences in alternative or government institutions seemed to be the primary factor leading to conceptions of agency as defined in this study.

As responsibility for services previously provided by the nation state are transferred to civil society actors, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Ferguson 2006), greater attention must be paid to the impact of such shifts and their comparative dimensions. Utilizing the notion of student agency to examine local level realities of students in various parts of the global South offers insights into the meanings, conceptualizations and understandings held by participants in increasingly common alternative educational initiatives sponsored by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies, as well as conventional schools. Scholars of comparative and international education have been exhorted to focus research endeavors on issues concerning 'class relations, hegemony, and human agency' (Clayton 1998, 496). This research contributes to the field by analyzing the cultivation of student agency at an innovative school as a counter-hegemonic practice by teachers and students in Ndola, Zambia.

The direct and indirect impact of HIV/AIDS on the lives of African youths also necessitates new approaches to address long-standing questions of the role, purpose and value of formal schooling. Agency as a tool for inquiry into the educational experiences of youths in sub-Saharan Africa offers a dynamic framework in which to situate the possibilities for transformational resistance amidst the larger structural constraints of social, economic and political realities. Attention to student agency and the ways that innovative educational initiatives enable such resistance can greatly inform scholars and practitioners of international and comparative education who seek to understand the increasingly complex interplay between school and society.

Acknowledgements

In addition to all the respondents, I would like to thank the following individuals who assisted in the development of this article: Valerie Kinloch, Bikku Kuruvila, Linda Lin, Annie Smiley, Frances Vavrus and the anonymous reviewers of *Compare*. This research was carried out with support from the African Youth and Globalization Fellowship program of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies Africa Regional Advisory Panel in partnership with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa and South Africa's National Research Foundation.

Notes

1. Given that this study focuses on lower and middle class students, agency is linked to a belief in improved material and social conditions for students and their communities. This

definition of agency emerged from the literature on critical research in education and from the findings of a pilot study in which I sought to develop an operational and contextual definition for the concept of agency as related to student attitudes and behaviors in Umutende School that differed from those among students in government schools. While no respondent characterized their actions as 'agentic' or used the word 'agency', my classification of statements and actions as evidence of agency was based on the definition developed through interactions with youths and adults at the school when discussing their own actions and their beliefs about how they intend to influence society in the future. This definition of agency is also consistent with the usage of the term in critical research in education.

2. Participants received reimbursement for transportation costs, snacks and, at the end of the research period, school supplies and a certificate of participation in the study.
3. Admission to Umutende was on a first come, first served basis. Deliberate attempts were made by the administration to avoid any corruption in the admissions process through having multiple senior staff involved in admissions' decisions and the requirement that a staff member excuse themselves if they knew the prospective student or his/her family personally.
4. The insights derived from these 22 students and the year long participant observation carried out in Umutende School allow for a certain degree of transferability.
5. Bouris (2006) offered a good summary of Johnson's argument about how 'positive illusions' may influence policy-making decisions:

Johnson puts forth the argument that states, and particularly their leaders, are susceptible to a phenomenon he dubs 'positive illusions'. Positive illusions are the tendency for individuals (and groups) to be overconfident in their own abilities, to underestimate the abilities of others, and further, to be particularly convinced of their ability to control a situation, even when there is abundant evidence to the contrary. (Bouris 2006, 230)

6. All schools and individuals have been assigned pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality.
7. Given various forms of supplemental income for teachers in government schools, such as extra lessons for which teachers receive additional payment and which were outlawed for Umutende teachers, it was difficult to ascertain whether Umutende School teachers received a higher salary for the additional hours they taught and the required free extra lessons they provided. In interviews with teachers, the better facilities at Umutende, the regular pay, the small class sizes and certain additional benefits, such as the provision of a parcel of farm land and free housing for teachers and their families, were cited as reasons why they preferred to teach in the private school rather than a government school. Some teachers also noted their preference for the human values curriculum as the main reason for teaching at the school.
8. Most students enjoyed the more pedagogically interactive aspects of human values education, which complemented the national syllabus by providing opportunities for activities such as dramatization, singing songs every morning and holding cultural programmes related to human values. The primary form of student resistance to the curricular program was found in students leaving the school for government schools, although this departure also reportedly occurred for reasons related to the school structure such as a desire for a co-educational environment, a better sports program and/or a dislike of the long school hours (focus group with former Umutende School students at government schools, April 2004).

References

- Abbink, J. 2005. Being young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal. In *Vanguard or vandals: Youth, politics, and conflict in Africa*, ed. J. Abbink and I. Van Kessel, 1–34. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Althusser, L. 1979. *Reading capital*. London: Verso.
- Andrews, M.L., and C.S. Ridenour. 2006. Gender in schools: A qualitative study of students in educational administration. *The Journal of Educational Research* 100, no. 1: 35–43.

- Apple, M. 1982. Reproduction and contradiction in education. In *Cultural and economic reproduction in education*, ed. M. Apple, 1–31. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Argenti, N. 2002. Youth in Africa: A major resource for change. In *Young Africa: Realising the rights of children and youth*, ed. A. De Waal and N. Argenti. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Aronowitz, S., and H. Giroux. 1993. *Education still under siege*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Bajaj, M.I. 2005. *Conceptualizing agency amidst crisis: A case study of youth responses to human values education in Zambia*. PhD dissertation, Columbia University, New York.
- Bouris, E. 2006. Book Review: Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions. *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 1: 230–231.
- Bowles, S., and H. Gintis. 1976. *Schooling in capitalist America*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Broadfoot, P. 2002. Editorial: Structure and agency in education: The role of comparative education. *Comparative Education* 38, no. 1: 5–6.
- Clayton, T. 1998. Beyond mystification: Reconnecting world-system theory for comparative education. *Comparative Education Review* 42, no. 4: 479–496.
- Comaroff, J., and J. Comaroff. 2005. Reflections on youth. In *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*, ed. A. Honwana and D. de Boeck, 19–30. Oxford, UK: James Currey.
- Crossley, M., and G. Vulliamy. 1997. *Qualitative research in developing countries: Educational perspective*. New York: Garland.
- Diouf, M. 2003. Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space. *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2: 1–12.
- Dorf, M.C., and C.F. Sabel. 1998. A constitution of democratic experimentalism. *Columbia Law Review* 98, no. 2: 267–473.
- Ferguson, J. 1999. *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- . 2006. *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Foley, D. 1991. Rethinking school ethnographies of colonial settings: A performance perspective of reproduction and resistance. *Comparative Education Review* 35, no. 3: 532–51.
- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gan, Z., G. Humphreys, and L. Hamp-Lyons. 2004. Understanding successful and unsuccessful EFL students in Chinese universities. *The Modern Language Journal* 88, no. ii: 229–44.
- Giroux, H. 1983. *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. London: Heinemann.
- . 1988. *Schooling and the struggle for public life: Critical pedagogy in the modern age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1997. *Pedagogy and the politics of hope*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Honwana, A. 2005. Innocent and guilty. In *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*, ed. A. Honwana and D. de Boeck, 31–52. Oxford, UK: James Currey.
- Hudson, B., A. Hudson, and J. Steel. 2006. Orchestrating interdependence in an international online learning community. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 37, no. 5: 733–48.
- Johnson, D. 2004. *Overconfidence and war: The havoc and glory of positive illusions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kwon, S. 2006. Youth of colour organizing for juvenile justice. In *Beyond resistance: Youth activism and community change*, ed. P. Noguera, J. Cammarota, and S. Ginwright, 215–28. New York: Routledge.
- Lofland, J., and L. Lofland. 1984. *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*, 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Lungwangwa, G. 1992. *The impact of structural adjustment on the quality of basic education in Zambia*. Lusaka: Institute for African Studies.
- Luykx, A. 1999. *The citizen factory: Schooling and cultural production in Bolivia*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- MacLeod, J. 1995. *Ain't no making it*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

- Miron, L., and M. Lauria. 1998. Student voice as agency: Resistance and accommodation in inner-city schools. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 29, no. 2: 189–213.
- Mundy, K., and L. Murphy. 2001. Transnational advocacy, global civil society? Emerging evidence from the field of education. *Comparative Education Review* 45, no. 1: 85–126.
- Noguera, P. 2003. *City schools and the American dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noguera, P., and C. Cannella. 2006. Youth agency, resistance, and civic activism: The public commitment to social justice. In *Beyond resistance: Youth activism and community change*, ed. P. Noguera, J. Cammarota, and S. Ginwright, 333–47. New York: Routledge.
- O'Connor, C. 1997. Disposition towards (collective) struggle and educational resilience in the inner city: A case of six African-American high school students. *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 4: 593–629.
- Phiri, I. 2003. President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia: The Christian nation and democracy. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 4: 401–28.
- Reay, D. 2004. 'It's all becoming habitus': Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25, no. 4: 431–44.
- Saasa, O. 2002. Poverty profile in sub-Saharan Africa: The challenge of addressing an elusive problem. In *Contested terrains and constructed categories: Contemporary Africa in focus*, ed. G. Bond and N. Gibson, 105–16. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Sefa Dei, G. 2005. Social difference and the politics of schooling in Africa: A Ghanaian case study. *Compare* 35, no. 3: 227–45.
- Sharp, L. 2002. *The sacrificed generation: Youth, history and the colonized mind in Madagascar*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stake, R. 1995. *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Twum-Danso, A. 2005. The political child. In *Invisible stakeholders: Children and war in Africa*, ed. A. McIntyre, 7–30. Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies.
- UNAIDS. 2004. Zambia. UNAIDS. http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Countries/zambia.asp (accessed November 23, 2006).
- UNICEF. 2005. *Africa's orphaned and vulnerable children*. New York: UNICEF.
- Weis, L. 1996. Foreword. In *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of the educated person*, ed. B.A. Levinson, D.E. Foley, and D.C. Holland. New York: SUNY Press.
- Willis, P. 1977. *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yin, R. 1989. *Case study research: Design and methods*, Vol. 5. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.