

# Intergenerational Perspectives on Education and Employment in the Zambian Copperbelt

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This article explores intergenerational perspectives on the link between secondary schooling and employment held by students, parents, and teachers in Ndola, Zambia. I argue that the differentiated meanings of schooling must be understood in light of the economic effects of the shift away from a state-controlled economy during the postindependence years to Zambia's acceptance of structural adjustment policies (SAPs) beginning in the late 1980s and the current promotion of foreign capital investment as a means to economic development. In this once middle-income country, 64 percent of the population lives below the national poverty line (World Bank 2004), and HIV infects 15 percent of the adult population, further compounding the economic hardships faced by Zambians (UNAIDS 2008).

In the years following independence in 1964, education in general and secondary schooling in particular were believed to be a golden passport to social mobility. Today as well, most Zambian youth continue to pursue education: 85.2 percent complete grade 7, and 51.8 percent continue on to junior (grades 8–9) and/or senior (grades 10–12) secondary school (ZMOE 2006). However, even if students are fortunate enough to pass competitive examinations and secure the financial resources necessary to pay for secondary schooling, their hopes for a better future collide with the realities of many government schools: overcrowded classrooms, absentee and often corrupt teachers, poor educational quality, and limited job prospects after graduation.

This article discusses the perceived link between secondary education and economic success in the decades following independence in 1964, perceptions that persist today despite substantial evidence that the correlation between the two has weakened. I further explore the continuities and discontinuities of educational meanings across generations in the context of 2 decades—the 1980s and the 1990s—over which time gross domestic product (GDP) per capita declined in real terms by over 35 percent (World Bank 2007); in recent years, the economy has begun to show signs of positive growth (CIA 2008). I examine Zambia's labor and economic policies as a backdrop

This article greatly benefited from the thoughtful comments offered by Bikku Kuruvila, Frances Vavrus, and *CER*'s anonymous reviewers and enormously helpful editors. Radhika Iyengar also provided important assistance. Funding for this research was provided by the African Youth and Globalization fellowship program of the Social Science Research Council (2003–4).

Electronically published February 16, 2010

*Comparative Education Review*, vol. 54, no. 2.

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0010-4086/2010/5402-0005\$10.00

against which to understand the unforeseen consequences that macro-level policy has had on the beliefs held by youth, parents, and teachers regarding the value of secondary schooling.

Various scholars studying education across national contexts have identified the exploration of beliefs, meanings, and expectations related to formal schooling as a productive area of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> For example, in his examination of the expectations Peruvian youth hold for postsecondary education, David Post noted that “it is more important to consider students’ perceptions of the returns to education than the actual returns” (Post 1985, 190). He finds that, in the context of a national-level discourse about the high value of secondary and postsecondary education, “students unable to continue will understand that responsibility rests squarely on their shoulders, and will consequently blame themselves rather than the system” (Post 1994, 278). In his research in Zambia (1993), Robert Serpell focuses on the primary to secondary school transition, but similarly he finds that rural students perceive themselves as “failures” if they are unable to continue on in formal schooling despite the fact that the secondary school system itself, at the time of his research, could not accommodate more than 15 percent of those completing primary school (12). The study of educational aspirations and the construction of educational success and failure can yield important information about how youth experience education in the context of broader changes in labor market structure and employment opportunities.

In the case of secondary school students in Ndola, educational aspirations and expectations have not changed significantly over the past 4 1/2 decades despite larger economic decline and political realignment. Some students, however, are beginning to question the utility of secondary schooling and think in increasingly individualistic terms, including resorting to corruption for educational and professional advancement.

First, this article will review the use of nested research approaches in the field of international and comparative education and discuss how the information presented was collected. In line with a vertical case study approach, literature on political economy approaches to African education is presented alongside information about recent Zambian political economy. This review is followed by local-level data that highlight three different themes associated with perspectives on secondary schooling since independence: (1) education for social mobility, (2) educational aspirations amid shrinking labor market prospects, and (3) corruption in school and society.

### **Research Design**

Scholars in the field of comparative and international education have increasingly advocated for multilevel analyses (Bray and Thomas 1995; Bart-

<sup>1</sup> Post (1985, 1994), Fuller (1991), Serpell (1993), Demerath (1999).

lett and Vavrus 2009). In developing their framework of “vertical case studies,” Frances Vavrus and Lesley Bartlett suggest research design and methods that “strive to situate local action and interpretation within a broader cultural, historical, and political investigation” (2006, par. 4). Research that examines multiple levels recognizes the declining prominence of the nation-state as the sole unit of analysis in comparative educational research and balances cross-national and national-level studies with investigation at the local level; taken together, multilevel approaches can provide important insights into the multiple dimensions of schooling in highly stratified societies for various stakeholders.

Even beyond the field of comparative and international education, political economy approaches, often conducted at the macro level, are often used together with studies of micro-level phenomena. Political economic analyses and local-level studies have been used together to inform the study of “outside” and “inside” forces that shape cultural processes, such as the impact of international political, economic, and social forces on local meanings of modernity (Ferguson 1999). Anthropologists such as George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) argue that local forms of social organization cannot be understood completely without analyzing their position in the larger world system; as such, certain micro- and macro-level approaches can together inform a “new political economy” that is “pushed toward the particularistic, toward the interpretive and cultural” (80). Meanings and symbols that are culturally constructed and locally significant, they argue, often reflect broader economic and political interests.

While political economy assessments of Zambia make up one dimension of this vertical case study, the capital of the Copperbelt province, Ndola, offered an opportune locale in which to examine how political and economic reforms are experienced locally and reflected in intergenerational attitudes toward secondary education among its teachers, parents, and youth. Since colonial times, the Copperbelt has been a site for reexamining conventional wisdom about modernization and development, due to the nature of its insertion into the global economy during the early and mid-twentieth century when copper became an increasingly valuable commodity.<sup>2</sup> The region’s decline since the 1970s owes to the price of copper having fallen and employment opportunities having dwindled (Ferguson 1999). Given Ndola’s particular history as a site for significant internal migration and foreign investment, the region served as a useful setting to investigate the complex relationships between economic decline, political development, and educational meanings.

#### *Local-Level Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures*

The data presented in this article come from a larger study of government and private secondary schooling experiences in Ndola, Zambia. The primary

<sup>2</sup> Richards (1961), Bates (1976), Cooper (1983).

methods utilized for the year-long study (2003–4) were interviews, focus groups, participant observation, school visits, and student diaries, with a total of more than 90 respondents, including 43 students, 12 parents, 12 alumni, and 28 teachers, administrators, and social workers at five schools. This article draws primarily on the qualitative data about the schooling-employment link; however, questionnaire surveys were collected from an additional 600 students at the four government schools and one private school in Ndola.

The findings presented in this article come from analyzing individual interviews, focus group interviews, and student diaries to explore the questions of what drives participation in secondary schooling and what meanings youth and adults attach to the link between education and future employment. All interviews and focus groups were carried out by me as the primary researcher. As part of the student diary method, participants were given notebooks with a series of questions on the role of schooling in their lives, their future goals, and their schooling experiences; a space for “free-write entries” was also provided, where respondents wrote on various topics and sometimes interviewed neighbors, family members, or friends over the course of the 3 months in which they completed the diaries. All of the 22 students (from five different high schools) who participated in this part of my study were also interviewed at least twice and often provided more information about the topics they had written on in their diaries. I present some of their diary entries in this article as they relate to the education-employment link, but, unless otherwise noted, all data presented come from interviews and focus groups.

Demographic information on the student respondents indicates their largely lower- to middle-class background, though the very fact of participation in secondary school in Zambia implies a certain level of economic or social privilege. Nevertheless, information gathered through individual surveys and interviews indicates that even these students lacked access to the level of financial resources that would have permitted them to attend considerably high-cost, elite private schools in Ndola. The one private school included in this study was low-cost and heavily subsidized by the nongovernmental organization that operated it, and as such it served a similarly lower- to middle-class student population.

*Political Economy of Zambian Education*

*The utility of studying political economy and African education.*—The broader political and economic context in which Zambian public schools operate provides a productive framework for understanding the contested terrain within which state policy is crafted and education is experienced in sub-Saharan Africa. Social institutions, such as schools, though understood in their own particularity, emerge within matrices ordered by the economic organization of society. Given the multiple layers of structural conflict in

Zambia in particular and in sub-Saharan Africa in general, I find, as other scholars in international and comparative education have,<sup>3</sup> that exploring the historical relationship between political economy, education, and the state offers a rich intellectual substrate for understanding the local meanings ascribed to education.

Political economy approaches to schooling in Africa highlight the multiple functions of education—as a force of social reproduction (Carnoy 1974), as a contested political site (Samoff 1992), as a purely symbolic project of modernity (Fuller 1991), and as a site for potential transformation based on the interactions between global and local forces (Tikly 2001). Each of these approaches is useful in identifying the range of functions schools serve and providing a basis for understanding intergenerational perspectives on the education-employment link.

In contemporary times, literature on the increasing disconnect between schooling and labor market opportunities posits the various functions and limits of education for youth in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere in the global South.<sup>4</sup> Given the mismatch between what is needed in the domestic labor market and what is offered in secondary school, students are often unprepared or over-qualified for the realities of the world of work, if they are able to even access formal employment after completion. Increasingly, as parents and communities come to terms with the disjuncture between schooling and employment, they may make an informed decision, based on economic rather than cultural considerations, not to send their children to school. Particularly in the case of secondary schooling, where fees are often burdensome for families, the decision not to attend school may correspond with the material realities of the family as well as the limited labor market opportunities available for graduates. Yet schooling still holds a symbolic value for many (Fuller 1991). This article explores the motivations and meanings for low-income secondary students in Ndola, Zambia, who continue in school despite little evidence of social mobility through education today, unlike during previous decades when secondary education could result in well-remunerated employment and elite status.<sup>5</sup>

*Recent Zambian political economy: Structural adjustment, limited government spending, and economic decline.*—In Zambia, a political economy approach reveals the policy shifts over the past 45 years and provides a backdrop against which to understand educational reform and the localized experiences of secondary school students in the Copperbelt town of Ndola. Beginning in the 1970s, general declines in commodities prices, including copper, which once provided 90 percent of Zambia's foreign exchange earnings (Szeftel 2000), led to reduced import capacity, lower productivity, and a broad decline in

<sup>3</sup> Carnoy (1974), Fuller (1991), Samoff (1992), Tikly (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Biane and Mwamwenda (1994), Jensen and Nielsen (1996), Admassie (2002), Weiling (2003), Jeffrey et al. (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Burawoy (1976), Colson and Scudder (1980), Bond (1982), Lungu (1985), Gough (2008).

economic performance over the 1980s and 1990s (Musonda 2007). Zambia's implementation of neoliberal economic policies, beginning with the acceptance of SAPs in the mid-1980s, characterized a significant break from past command and control economic policies, which originally included significant subsidies for social services, such as free education at the primary and secondary levels (Carmody 2004).

Debates over structural adjustment policies in Zambia and their effects on education are linked to competing political interests at the national level, primarily those between the more socialist or planned approach (United National Independence Party [UNIP] and trade unions) and those in favor of a more free market model (Multiparty Movement for Democracy—MMD—and the private sector). Initially, Zambia's first president, Kenneth Kaunda (1964–91) was reluctant to accept international lending and its accompanying conditionalities after the decline in copper prices in the mid-1970s. However, by the 1980s, Kaunda had to comply with the conditions of international lending institutions to receive much-needed loans. These conditions included ending currency controls and price subsidies on staple foods, reducing the size of the civil service, selling off state-owned enterprises, and introducing cost-sharing measures for public services (Myers 2005).

Structural adjustment programs were first implemented by Kaunda in 1985 and then stopped in 1987 due to public backlash to price increases when government subsidies for food and fertilizer were removed. They were then reapplied in 1991 by Chiluba, who sought to avoid the reprimands and cuts in aid by international lenders that the Kaunda government had experienced in both 1983 and 1987 (World Bank 1999). Kaunda's overwhelming defeat in the 1990 presidential election to the MMD—Chiluba's party—signaled a desire for change and general dissatisfaction with the Kaunda regime, arguably because of economic decline in the country. Ironically, Kaunda had faced strong public backlash when he tried to reduce subsidies on staple foods like mealie-mealie (cornmeal) in 1987, yet the pro-market MMD stance was able to garner the support of the majority of the electorate despite the certain increase of prices that would (and did) ensue after price controls were removed as per the conditions of international lenders.

Immediately after Chiluba took office, much external aid was freed up for the new government, given the president's willingness to implement SAPs.<sup>6</sup> Some of the MMD's first policy changes were to liberalize interest rates, eliminate food and fertilizer subsidies, and introduce user fees for health and education (Kayizzi-Mugerwa 2001). The impact of SAPs at the macro level has been particularly evident in decreasing employment opportunities in the government sector, the dismantling of the domestic textile industry (Jeter 2002), and limited public benefit from copper exports in Zambia.

<sup>6</sup> Former President Frederick Chiluba is considered one of the most corrupt public officials in Zambian history, reportedly having stolen over \$40 million from public funds (BBC 2004).

In exploring the education-employment link as experienced by respondents from different generations in the Copperbelt, it is interesting to speculate about future changes in the economic structure of the region. The copper industry is currently experiencing attempts at reinvigoration, with large capital investments from foreign donors, primarily Chinese companies.<sup>7</sup> The current economic climate of Chinese investment, and the political decisions that facilitate its presence, may signal a move toward greater employment for secondary school graduates, though any postulation of links between macroeconomic policy, labor market structure, and education appears fraught with uncertainty.

Critiques of reduced public funding for education due to limited government revenue from copper and SAPs have focused on issues of access (especially for girls), quality, and increasing inequality among those able to pursue education at the primary, and particularly secondary, levels. Following the introduction of fees for both primary and secondary schooling beginning in the 1990s, net educational enrollment rates dropped at the primary level by 14 percent, from 80 percent to 66 percent between 1990 and 2000 (UNDP 2003). Education scholar Michael Kelly also noted that, between 1985 and 1994 in Zambia, there was “a 20 percent drop in those students completing grade 7” (1999, 350). President Levy Mwanawasa (MMD party) decided to abolish school fees up to grade 7 in 2002, and after Zambia’s receipt of debt relief in 2006 for the majority of its outstanding balance of \$6.5 billion through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Ellyne 2002), he extended free schooling up to grade 9 (or through the “basic” education cycle) for government schools. As a result of the abolition of fees, the rise of community schools, and increased donor funding for Education for All mandates related to primary schooling (UNICEF 2008), primary school enrollment in Zambia has reached near-universal levels.

The cost of secondary schooling, however, continues to be borne primarily by families and averages US\$80 per year for fees and up to an additional US\$300 in indirect costs for uniforms, books, and supplies (JCTR 2006). A comparative study commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) showed that over 60 percent of Zambian respondents—a higher rate than in any other country surveyed—cited inability to pay school fees as a reason for absence or school dropout (Boyle et al. 2002).

In the case of Zambia, large-scale structural changes in demand for and production of copper in the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with a general move from more planned to *laissez-faire*-oriented economic policies from the 1980s to the present, have greatly reduced educational spending as a percentage of the gross national product (GNP) and in real terms. Table 1 provides

<sup>7</sup> Trade between Africa and China reached \$55 billion in 2006, and indications suggest that this figure will climb, according to Meredith Jung-En Woo (2007).

TABLE 1  
ZAMBIAN ECONOMY AND EDUCATION, 1970–2009

	1970–79	1980–89	1990–99	2000–2009
Average GDP/capita (in 1994 values, \$)	634	500	395	410
Education expenditures as % of GNP	6.0	4.2	2.3	2.2
Formal sector employment as % all employment	29.1	25.0	12.9	9.0
Literacy rates (ages 15+, %):				
Male	61.0	75.1	81.9	86.8
Female	43.2	52.6	64.8	74.8
Progression rate (seventh grade to eighth grade, %)	21.2	22.2	33.1	51.9
Average secondary school enrollment (GER, %):				
Male	18.2	24.4	33.6	33.4
Female	9.8	13.2	21.1	27.3

SOURCES.—GDP/capita averages were taken from World Bank data for the decade and held constant at 1994 kwacha values (World Bank 2007). The figures were then converted to dollars using the 1994 conversion rate. Averages for educational expenditures as percentage of GNI (gross national income) and GNP were taken from the latest UNESCO statistics that go through 2008. Data for formal sector employment rates come from Kalinda and Floro (1992), World Bank (2007), and the UN Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD] (2005). Data for literacy rates come from UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2008 figures and from the World Bank's *Zambia: Summary Gender Profile* (2004). Data on progression rates come from the following sources: Mundia (1995), Kaluba (1986), and the Zambian Ministry of Education (ZMOE 2006 and 2009). Data for secondary school gross enrollment rates come from UNESCO Institute of Statistics' latest figures and UNICEF (2008).

NOTE.—GDP = gross domestic product; GNP = gross national product; GER = gross enrollment ratio.

comparative data on the average GDP per capita; economic expenditures on education; formal sector employment; and literacy, enrollment, and progression rates in education over the past 4 decades.

Table 1 shows changes in the Zambian economy and educational progress over the past 4 decades. It is interesting to note that, while GDP per capita plummeted 35 percent in real terms from the 1970s to the present and opportunities for formal sector employment have been reduced three-fold, secondary school progression rates have more than doubled. The declines in GNP are greatest during the years of SAPs (1980s and 1990s), and school spending as a proportion of GNP has dropped by roughly two-thirds. Recent figures indicate that government spending on education represents 2.2 percent of the Zambian GNP (UNESCO 2008), with heavy reliance on donor partners to fulfill this budgetary item (USAID 2007). Given donor attention and financing toward the achievement of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to education, the majority of the educational sector budget in Zambia currently goes toward primary schooling—62 percent for primary versus 11 percent for secondary—as prioritized in these international agreements (UNESCO 2004; World Bank 2006).

Despite decreased educational funding and declining quality in education, gross enrollment as a percentage of total population has increased two to three times: 18.2 percent of all males and 9.8 percent of females enrolled in secondary school in the 1970s compared to 32.4 percent and 27.3 percent,

respectively, in recent estimates.<sup>8</sup> Primary to secondary school progression has shot up from 21.2 percent to 51.9 percent, while formal sector employment has plummeted. I argue that beliefs about the education-employment link are important explanations for this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have attempted to explain this apparent disconnect between educational aspirations and evidence of the utility of secondary or postsecondary schooling (Post 1985; Sharp 2002). Lesley Sharp (2002) suggested that parents and children in Madagascar understand the shifting meanings and opportunities provided by formal education but that they persist in sending their children to school because it is the only avenue that still holds out a modicum of hope amid the backdrop of economic decline and health crises. In his work on Peru, Post cited George Primov's use of the "lottery" thesis, which asserted that, "although students and families are well aware of the tiny probability of success, they nevertheless buy a ticket in the educational lottery because their costs are so low and the potential returns thus remain high" (Primov cited in Post 1985, 193).

While this may be true in Zambia at the primary level, at the secondary level, where substantial household income is devoted to secondary education—school fees often make up more than 30 percent of discretionary household income (Boyle et al. 2002)—it seems more likely that educational experiences and meanings that persist from the immediate postindependence period have a stronger impact on the belief in secondary schooling. It is important to explore where such beliefs emerged from and how they shape current perspectives on the education-employment link.

*"When I am educated, I can be anything I want": Education for Social Mobility*

Since Zambia's independence from Britain in 1964, political leaders have prioritized formal education previously inaccessible to most Zambians as a means of promoting national unity and with the belief that education would spur economic development (Chan 2000). Soon after independence, enrollment rates dramatically increased, with approximately 84 percent of Zambian children enrolled in primary school by 1980 (Carmody 2004). Among his first acts in office, President Kaunda desegregated schools, abolished

<sup>8</sup> While there has not been significant new construction of secondary schools since the advent of SAPs, there has been extensive "upgrading" of primary schools to extend beyond grade 7 and include grades 8 and 9 as part of the "basic education" cycle. This may explain why, in table 1, progression rates from grade 7 to grade 8 have dramatically increased from the 1990s to the present but why secondary school GER (calculated for grades 10–12) has remained somewhat constant between these 2 decades.

<sup>9</sup> At the primary level, recent reports cite increasing poverty and the desire for parents to have their children fed through school midday meals may be the driving rationale behind rising enrollment rates at the primary level (in government schools where such programs are in place) and not the perceived economic rationale related to rate of return analyses (Adelman et al. 2008). In their study of school feeding programs in Haiti, Peter Easton and Simon Fass (1989) find that poor families actually receive more benefit vis-à-vis savings in terms of food expenditures than the financial or opportunity costs of sending children to school, suggesting that demand for schooling can be related to various factors aside from a belief that it will enhance future earnings.

school fees, and consolidated the oversight of all schools, including private schools run by religious organizations that were primarily responsible for education during the colonial period. Kaunda vested control of educational affairs singularly in the Ministry of Education in Lusaka, which set policy and curriculum and provided resources and qualified teachers to all schools, with the goal of increasing access and standardizing educational quality.

The changes in policy in the early years of the Kaunda administration were most reflected in the meanings associated with education and employment expressed in the views of older respondents in this study. These older respondents generally held the belief that education was taken seriously by students in the immediate postindependence years (1960s and 1970s) when, following completion, civil service jobs were readily available. One teacher respondent, Mr. Chewe,<sup>10</sup> noted his own previous experience with education during this postindependence period: “When we were at school at that time [after independence], school was seen as a life thing. You must have it; if you don’t have it, your future will be bleak. At that time when I was at school, there was equipment in the government schools. There were books [and] learning materials. I think the economic situation was better for the government so it was able to buy books and materials; we found a lot of things at school.”

Mr. Chewe identified infrastructure and equipment as part of educational quality, and his comments exemplify those of older respondents in this study who repeatedly noted the high standards of education they received in the 1960s and 1970s and the availability of jobs after completion. Many respondents, like Mr. Chewe, also highlighted the higher quality of educational infrastructure and greater subsidies for supplies in the past, implying a structural critique about the earlier prioritization of schooling in national-level spending. In his student diary, an eleventh-grade respondent chose to interview a 55-year-old neighbor in his “free-write” section. The following (verbatim) excerpt written by Martin highlighted the view of Mr. Kasava about the role of teachers in educational quality:

MARTIN (STUDENT): But why it is that people of your days are more educated than of today even when a lot of improvements have been made in the education system?

MR. KASAVA (NEIGHBOR): First of all, people then [had] passion for learning. A good education assured one of a very bright future as compared to today where education is expensive and unfruitful in some cases. The other point is that even before completing grade twelve, companies used to go around schools recruiting workers. So all this encouraged pupils to work hard. The other thing contributing to poor results nowadays is the poor working conditions of teachers. In those days, teachers were very respectable figures in society and were very well paid. Now, how can a teacher do his work on an empty stomach?

<sup>10</sup> All schools and individuals have been assigned pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality.

Many respondents, such as Mr. Chewe and Mr. Kasava, identified decreasing investment in educational materials and teacher salaries on the part of the state,<sup>11</sup> in addition to limited employment prospects for school leavers, as the cause of poor standards at the secondary level.

The older generation (i.e., parents and teachers) as well as many youth held on to the belief in education as the sole vehicle for social mobility in Zambian society, and the experiences of elders with education during the immediate postindependence period provided the rationale for this faith in secondary schooling. Kaunda and other African leaders in the 1960s and 1970s advanced a view of education formed, in part, by “the dominant modernization approach to development,” whereby it was believed that schooling would create a citizenry able to promote economic development on a national scale (Kelly 1999, 26). In the mid-1960s and 1970s, as Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder (1981) noted in their longitudinal research in Southern Zambia, colonial officers were repatriating, thus creating opportunities for Zambians and other expatriates to fill these jobs. As such, many high school graduates were able to find jobs during this time, cementing a belief that education was a direct path to employment.

The secondary school, as an extension of the state, was seen as the site where individuals could be selected for employment in government and other sectors. Thus, participation in schooling for many in the older generation meant an immediate opportunity for social mobility. Mr. Mayombo, a high school English teacher in his mid-fifties, noted: “Before I could even get into the general stream of job seekers, there were companies coming to school [to hire us] while we were writing examinations.” Many younger respondents, while recognizing that these very immediate paths to employment may no longer exist, still retain significant belief in the power of schooling to affect their upward mobility.

For the low-income students in this study, secondary schooling represented a significant economic cost, with limited economic gains in terms of formal employment after graduation. Yet most of my interviews suggest that students who continue to seek out education do so based on a belief about employment prospects and what it means to be an “educated” person that is similar to those of the older interviewees who obtained education during the 1960s and 1970s. Through interviews and student diaries, students expressed what they believed to be the purpose of education often-times by relating what would happen without education. One student offered: “If I don’t have education, I won’t be respected.” Another secondary school student similarly noted: “Being without school is like being a child

<sup>11</sup> The Fast Track Initiative, which assists low-income countries in achieving the MDGs and is housed at the World Bank, advocates that teacher salaries be 3.5 times a country’s GDP per capita and that educational spending comprise 20 percent of GDP in order to achieve the MDGs on education (FTI 2004). According to recent data, Zambia pays teachers salaries that are equivalent to the average GDP per capita (Colclough 2003).

who is born today,” suggesting a level of ignorance and naïveté associated with being uneducated and rendering him or her unable to function in society. The stigma associated with being uneducated and the status of having a secondary school certificate were together one motivation for attending school.

By and large, however, the belief that successful completion of secondary schooling would enhance their job prospects in the labor market drove most respondents’ continued participation. Lucy, a 16-year-old, noted: “One cannot have a bright future without education—that’s how this world has been created. So education is a means of getting towards your goal, of getting a job, and securing a future. It’s all about education. Without education, you are nobody in society.” Other students also expressed confidence in their ability to translate skills and credentials received in school to future success: “When I am educated, I can be anything I want. I can do anything [and] be somebody in [the] future.” These continuities across generations reflected historical experiences with a linear path from secondary schooling to employment and were rooted in real opportunities that existed at one time in Zambia for those select few who were able to attend secondary school.

The trajectory of the Zambian labor market provides an important reference for youth and adult perspectives on the possibilities for social mobility in the immediate postindependence period and currently. On the supply side, there were fewer Zambians with secondary and tertiary education in the 1960s and 1970s as compared to today, which meant less competition for relatively well-paying and secure jobs, as noted in table 1. Additionally, formal sector employment made up a much larger percentage of the labor market in the 1970s (29.1 percent), with the civil service accounting for 72 percent of those jobs (Kalinda and Floro 1992). Figures from recent years indicate that the formal sector makes up just 9 percent of all labor market activity and the civil service constitutes 30 percent of those jobs (CSO 2004).

In his seminal work, *The Diploma Disease*, Ronald Dore (1976) examined the process of newly independent states emphasizing education but soon realizing that “the growth in school outputs has outstripped the growth in desirable modern-sector jobs” (67). He cited Kenneth King’s concept of the subsequent adjustment of expectations as a process of “cooling out” (King in Dore 1976). Zambia’s process of “cooling out” may have been delayed because, in addition to vacant posts left by the departing administrators, it also had jobs in its then booming and state-run copper industry. As a result, low- and middle-income youth and adults have recently begun to recognize the adverse impact of larger structural shifts on their opportunities for social mobility. Amid these limited opportunities for advancement, some respondents individualized their failure while others noted the structural causes of such, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections on limited employment and the increasing role of corruption in securing it.

*“School is nothing now because there are no jobs”: Educational Aspirations amid Shrinking Labor Market Prospects*

As of now, when pupils complete their grade 12, having written their examination and receiving their results, they just roam the streets because, in the first place, colleges are very expensive. A child can qualify very well with a Division One certificate, but if the parents are poor, [they] cannot send him for further education. The employment in the country is not readily available. As a result, you discover that children just join the stream of loafers around. Those loafers who are educated, including the university students, some of them could complete a course and be out for three, four, five years without even finding employment. I have an example of one friend of mine who completed his course in public administration and law. He just found employment though he completed his course five years ago. Five years, without a job, as a university graduate!  
(Mr. Mayombo, secondary school teacher)

With employment in the formal sector decreasing due to economic uncertainty and a shrinking civil service—once the biggest employer of educated Zambians—many professionals are unable to find employment opportunities, as Mr. Mayombo noted, in contrast to the past when secondary education tended to secure a job despite one’s economic background. This phenomenon of secondary and tertiary education not leading directly to formal employment has created new terminologies for those individuals who are qualified but yet lack employment. The term “loafers,” used by Mr. Mayombo and several other respondents during the course of this study, highlights the changing meanings of education suggesting that schooling and employment are a personal rather than a government responsibility. The “neoliberalized school,” or schools that operate amid larger structural constraints vis-à-vis macro-level economic and labor market policies, benefit from historical meanings about a perceived linear progression from schooling to opportunity that mask the limited chances for employment, let alone social mobility, and instead place the burden for academic and professional failure on the individual.

Consequently, educational failure or the inability to secure a job is often constructed as a personal rather than a structural problem, with the myth of meritocracy looming large. While this may be part of the “cooling out” process that King (as cited in Dore 1976) referred to, the term “loafers” offered a local variant of how individuals are internalizing the consequences of their disadvantaged position in the global economy with little support from a government that is restricted by international pressures from extending a social safety net (Saasa 2002). Many respondents, young and old, utilized the notion of loafers to describe someone who was educated but was unable to secure employment. Roger, an eleventh grader, noted: “Even if students finish school, they don’t get decent jobs. Some just end up loafing around the streets doing nothing.”

The presence of a visible population of educated but unemployed youth

on “the streets” offered concrete evidence for some respondents of the weakening link between education and employment in the formal sector and its attribution, often, to personal shortcomings. Respondents of various ages attributed loafers’ predicament to their own failure in securing work. For example, Mr. Muzi, a school administrator, related the following perspective on those educated youth unable to secure employment: “They are not hard-working; they just don’t want to work. I don’t see why the economy should be bad if people work very hard. . . . [But] they are just loafing around on the streets. They just walk around [and] are being kept by their parents.”

While Mr. Muzi personalized students’ inability to secure employment after secondary school, other respondents externalized the shift to greater individual responsibility in securing employment as paralleling the shift from a command to a market-driven economy, citing it as the cause of increasing unemployment. For instance, Mr. Mahbena, head teacher of one of Ndola’s largest high schools, asserted that the government has abandoned its responsibility to provide for all young people in the neoliberal era. This, he felt, has resulted in a decreasing commitment to work for the betterment of one’s country. He stated:

Education is not cheap anymore, and the government is not playing the role it once played. During my time, the government was committed to developing the manpower in the country. But at this time, they are saying “it’s a shared responsibility.” Back then, the government had put in place a lot of money to see that all the nationals were brought into a required standard. They were given the knowledge they needed for employment. Everything was given almost free of charge. What a parent needed [to do] was to provide transport money and uniforms. The rest was the government’s [responsibility]. Nowadays, students who have completed [secondary school] are on the street . . . [and] trying to get employment, which is not there.

Mr. Mahbena noted the move from heavy government involvement in and funding for secondary school toward a more individual responsibility for education and employment. This shift means that educational quality has suffered given the privatization of state-run industries that once provided revenue for greater educational budgeting.

In a social setting where many educated people have become “loafers,” as discussed above, by attributing failure to individual characteristics, students continued to believe in a legitimate system that would reward completion with labor market benefits. Those respondents, who correlated the phenomenon of loafers with structural shifts that implicate the government in not providing opportunities for youth, noted the limited value of secondary schooling in securing employment, which is especially complicated by the prevalence of corrupt hiring and employment practices.

*“If you’ve got no relative, I don’t know what you will do”: Corruption in School and Society*

Among the student respondents, there emerged a tension between the view that education should lead to employment for qualified youth and the experience that employment was largely obtained through bribery or personal connections. Students appeared eager to believe that secondary school would lead to social mobility and stable employment, though the corruption they and their families experienced put a damper on their enthusiasm. Respondents across generations cited corrupt practices in school and in the labor market as impediments for low- and middle-income students who lacked the extensive social networks and financial resources that wealthier students had access to. The corruption encountered in schools also paralleled that found in the labor market, suggesting the ways in which the “neoliberalized school” socialized students into a new set of understandings about the way society functions and their individual responsibility to find a way—licit or illicit—to get ahead or risk being a “loafer.”

The shifting responsibility for achievement and social mobility from the government to the individual level, as discussed earlier, forced secondary school students to leverage any resources available to them to improve their chances for success. This often entailed engaging in practices of corruption, prevalent in the broader labor market and society and repeatedly identified by students as operating in secondary schools as well. Common examples of corruption cited by secondary school students were securing access to school through bribery, fee-based extra lessons encouraged by opportunistic teachers, and “leakages,” or the purchase of [sometimes fake] answer sheets prior to the examinations. Extra lessons, while not illegal, were often reported by respondents to be at a high cost and as a substitute for teachers teaching the required material in class during the school day. Little disciplinary action was taken by headmasters in students’ accounts, and corruption on their part in assigning scarce spots in secondary schools for students offering bribes was also noted.

The enduring belief in the power of the secondary school certificate for further employment drove students to various measures to secure a passing grade, but even getting access to secondary school often required students to engage avenues outside of the formal system. In Zambia, less than half of those students who pass the grade 9 exam can be accommodated in government senior secondary schools (grades 10–12) due to the infrastructure and the limited school construction from the 1990s forward after then-President Chiluba cut educational spending in line with SAPs. For low- and middle-income students unable to afford private schools, securing a place in a government school proved difficult and tenuous. Abraham, a secondary school student, related the following:

I got 476 on my grade 9 exam. Kwamba got 300. The cut off point was 370. He didn’t make the selection, but if the parents have got enough money, they can find

a place for him. The head teachers of schools like money, so it's easy for a person to bribe them and then get a place. It's a lot of money. The person who got the higher score will be told that there are no places remaining and the one with the lower score—just because of the money that the head teacher was given—he'll be given the place of the other person.

Such bribes for admission to secondary school, as well as for other government services, have been noted to disproportionately affect lower-income families. A World Bank study on Zambia (2007) found that bribes required to meet basic needs on average amounted to 4 percent of household income and that, for the very poor, 17 percent of the household income was spent to secure government services.

Similarly, in the labor market, the scarcity of jobs vis-à-vis the number of qualified applicants has led to many responses, including the prevalence of corruption in hiring in various forms.<sup>12</sup> Respondents repeatedly said that, even if qualified, candidates for a position either “needed a relative” in a company or government office or had to have sufficient resources to provide a bribe in order to secure a job. While such practices might be seen as individuals utilizing social capital and associated networks, low- and middle-income respondents, without extensive connections, repeatedly noted the adverse impact of such practices on their ability to secure employment. A twelfth-grade student at Kolala government secondary school described the difficulties in securing employment without resorting to corruption or nepotism: “In Zambia, if you don't have any relative in a certain company, then you won't get any job. Most of the people who've even reached university are still roaming around looking for employment.” Responses related to unequal access to employment based on familial or economic resources suggested that some students questioned the education-employment link in light of the corruption they witnessed around them.

The presence of corruption in Zambia was certainly not a new phenomenon (Szeftel 2000); nevertheless, the presence of a stronger social safety net during the Kaunda years seemed, to older respondents, to mitigate the severity of the impacts of such corruption on low-income individuals and communities. For example, one respondent noted the condition of Ndola's central hospital in the 1970s (where he worked) and its free health care under Kaunda's regime: “Anything could be arranged in less than five minutes with all the latest drugs; the laboratory was working 24 hours. It was all free for the patients, and there was no discrimination between the rich and the poor. Now the patients have to get a prescription to get anything. They have started charging 5,000 kwacha (US\$1.50) for [admission] cards to the hospital, and

<sup>12</sup> Respondents repeatedly noted that money and sex as commodities could be exchanged for educational and economic advantage in school and society. Outside of school, the money earned through cross-generational relationships or commercial sex work could be leveraged to improve one's chances at educational success, but it also exposed girls to the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (Kelly 1999; Carmody 2004).

some patients cannot even afford [it]. Then they have to bring their own gloves, injections, so many things. It would be more than K50,000 (US\$15) to bring all the supplies.”

Given the decline in revenues from, and privatization of, the copper industry, the Zambian government has been unable to provide the same social security its citizens once experienced. The combination of corruption with the “austerity” and “cost-sharing” measures advocated by proponents of neoliberal economic policies have resulted in labor market challenges and a concomitant sense that, despite one’s education, the future is uncertain.

Responses by many secondary school students reflected insecurity about their future and a feeling that schooling offered, as one student noted, “no hope” for them. While some students identified their disillusionment with secondary schooling as related to structural factors linked to economic decline and corruption, others still engaged beliefs about their individual inability to work hard enough; in both cases, students often blamed themselves for not getting ahead. Harriet, an eleventh grader, wrote in her research diary: “I can say that I am not happy with the way we learn in my school. I was hoping to get a better education that would change my life in [the] future, but *unless I pull up my socks*, the future holds nothing for me” (Baja 2009a, emphasis added). To Harriet, “pulling up one’s socks” referred to working extremely hard and finding ways to secure money for extra lessons since her teachers would not show up to class to teach the required material. This was based on the belief that, if she did well in secondary school, university admission and employment would certainly follow. Harriet wanted to report the negligence of her teachers to higher authorities, but she said she was afraid to do so because she might lose her prized place at her secondary school. While some students still held on to a belief in the education-employment link and labor market rewards for achievement in school, as did Harriet, others realized the limited possibilities for advancement within a system that favored economic resources and family contacts most.

### *Discussion*

An analysis of Zambian education revealed the intergenerational meanings related to the education-employment link among youth and adults in Ndola. These differentiated beliefs in secondary schooling were products of constricted government spending by Zambia in response to international financial pressures, a dramatically weakened economy, and postindependence imperatives to achieve “modernity” through the construction and expansion of Western schooling (Fuller 1991). Without extensive government industries to absorb graduates and with increasing numbers of students completing secondary school, lower- and middle-income students in government schools became keenly aware of their limited prospects for education as a

means of economic advancement. It is understandable that, because of the greater availability of (and less competition for) civil service jobs in the past, as well as the government's provision of books, uniforms, and school lunches during the Kaunda regime, middle-aged respondents in this study saw education as a channel for upward mobility. Surprisingly, and, contrary to what we might expect, this was also true for most youth.

However, the new realities of the labor market seem to be forcing a reconsideration of the purpose of schooling. The discrepancies between past experiences with education in the immediate postindependence period and the current opportunities for education created conflicting expectations and attitudes toward schooling among school-age Zambians. Martin Carnoy (1982) has noted that exacerbating contradictions can be a force for change in the Third World when "the hope generated cannot be realized. . . . Even if schooling tries to convince youth that failure is their fault, a more articulate, literate, disappointed working class will ultimately not accept this explanation" (173). In the case of Zambia, however, students seem to be "accepting this explanation" of individual failure, and schooling has not yet become a force for radical change; faith in the system still abounds.

The disillusionment of educated youth (usually young men) who are unable to secure jobs has been discussed in Africa (Samoff 1999) and other regions (Jeffrey et al. 2007) in relation to social cohesion and political stability.<sup>13</sup> The evidence presented here offers a glimpse into educational beliefs that were beginning to change, and which may facilitate increased frustration and resistance to an unequal system. Students who resist the education system may drop out of school altogether, often seeking income-generating activities to support their families in the informal sector rather than risking not being able to enter the highly competitive formal sector after completing secondary school (Jensen and Nielsen 1997).

Educational expansion, devoid of connections to the expectations, meanings, and needs of individuals and communities, will indeed prove frustrating for students who see educational participation as linked to future employment prospects (Fuller 1991), which simply do not exist. Historical opportunities, created by the departure of colonial officers, were given to those Zambians with formal education and fostered among many the belief that there was a direct relationship between education and employment (Colson and Scudder 1980). This study, however, noted greater competition, fewer available formal sector jobs, and rampant corruption; at the same time, the Zambian government has scaled back its role in providing employment and mediating the global economy.

<sup>13</sup> Less research has been devoted to young women who grow disillusioned with limited employment prospects after secondary school. In my own larger project in Zambia, the issue of young women enlisting or acquiescing to the advances of older "sugar daddies," who are sometimes their teachers, was prominent in securing money for basic necessities, educational fees, and luxury items (Bajaj 2009b).

Recent evidence points to fee-based secondary education reproducing social inequalities, with 51 percent of the wealthiest students reaching secondary school as compared to just 5 percent of the poorest (UNICEF 2008). Economic inequality may have been just as pronounced under Kaunda's rule, but scholars have noted that the provision of free education, health care, and subsidized foodstuffs mitigated the decline into abject poverty that characterizes so many Zambian families' existence at present (Saasa 2002; Gough 2008). A critical consciousness of such class-based inequalities was masked in many respondents' accounts that demonstrated continued faith in the education-employment link, but it was evident among some low-income students who, as cited in this article, began to recognize the limits of their academic and professional aspirations.

Given the uncertain employment prospects for secondary school (and arguably university) graduates in Zambia, further investigation is needed into what drives students to aggressively pursue education amid competing economic and opportunity costs. While young people in Zambia clearly believe in the value in schooling and continue to pursue it, policy makers' drive toward "education *for all*" must also consider the questions of "education *for what?*" and "education, *then what?*"

Decisions made at the macro level have contributed to reductions in formal sector employment and educational spending, but these have not resulted in decreased demand for secondary education. A vertical case study approach exposes the missing links between educational strategies and labor market policies and practices. While the pendulum has swung in global discourse from education as a means of cultivating "human capital" inherently linked to perceived economic growth (Schultz 1980) to education as a fundamental "human right" (UNESCO 2004) nearly devoid of labor market considerations, the relationship between education and larger social, economic, and political processes should be more clearly articulated by international- and national-level policy makers such that students are positioned to enjoy the whole range of their fundamental rights beyond the completion of primary schooling.

Vertical case studies and other nested research approaches provide local-level analyses in tandem with an understanding of the policies, practices, and discourses around education at the "inter/national" level (Vavrus 2005), offering insights into the complexity of schooling in the global South. Multi-level analyses may ultimately inform the policy strategies undertaken by government and donor agencies, which attempt to encourage enrollment in secondary school based on economic arguments about the virtues of it as an assumed universally privileged social good. Examination of how larger political and economic shifts are experienced also draws attention to the need, in the Zambian Copperbelt and elsewhere, for policy makers to make greater efforts to link educational policy and practice to labor markets and job cre-

ation as part of more meaningful participation of youth and fuller realization of human rights.

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