Child-to-Child outreach at a rural Zambian school: an enacted utopia ?

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The paradigm of *Institutionalised Public Basic Schooling* currently prevalent around the world (IPBS[2]) differs from other cultural contexts in which children and youth are socialised by focusing more on preparation of learners for future tasks than on integration of their cognitive growth into their current everyday life. Many critics have pointed out that the instructional format of IPBS tends to rely on weak methods of communication (lecture format, "chalk and talk", IRE routines), at the expense of more effective methods of promoting individualised learning (group study in pods; structured feedback in digital learning environments). Its endurance despite its many shortcomings reflects a kind of Western cultural hegemony, originally transmitted to Africa through processes of religious proselitization and colonial domination, and sustained since the mid-twentieth century by an ideology of *modernisation*. This is often misleadingly labelled *Westernisation,* on the assumption that urban, industrial societies represent a universally desirable outcome of progressive social change. The educational agenda defined in Zambia thus became for an individual to progress along a "narrowing staircase" pathway from early childhood to adolescence. Under this paradigm an *extractive definition of success* is promoted at the expense of local accountability to the learner's community of origin (Serpell 1999). In a thoughtful analysis that only came to my attention quite recently, David (1994)[3] argues that the endurance of institutions like IPBS is a reflection of *path dependency.*

In the late 1980s, when I presented my emerging interpretation of the various encounters with IPBS by a cohort of Zambian children growing up in a subsistence agrarian community[4] to a multinational, multidisciplinary seminar, one of the commentators challenged me with the question:

> "Robert, you have presented a very compelling set of arguments against the way schooling is organised in Zambia. Yet you seem to believe that schooling does not have to be that way. Have you ever witnessed a school that meets your standards ? Can you tell us in outline what such a school would be like ?"

I was floored, unable to recall a real world school that had impressed me enough to be worth citing. This bothered me at a broad philosophical level. I had read with appreciation Illich's famous critical call for *Deschooling Society (1970*[5]*)*, but felt that it was unrealistic – the institution has such a long history across many different cultures and societies that it is surely adaptive in some way. Moreover, as a deeply socialised "intellectual", I could not give up on the idea that elements of the practice are rooted in morally and socially positive values.

In the mid-1990s, part of what impressed me when I was introduced to the *Child-to-Child* approach by the teachers at Kabale Primary School was their enthusiastic articulation of a

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[1] A short essay on the futures of education, invited by Aydin Bal (U. Madison-Wisconsin), following my ppt presentation to Futures of Education Seminar, hosted by *Cultural Praxis*.

[2] Serpell, R. & Hatano, G. (1997). Education, literacy and schooling in cross-cultural perspective. *In* J.W. Berry, P.R.Dasen & T.M. Saraswathi (Eds.) *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology (2nd edition), Volume 2* (pp.345-382).Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

[3] David, P. A. (1994). Why are institutions the "carriers of history"?: Path dependence and the evolution of conventions, organizations and institutions. *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics, 5*(2), 205–220.

[4] Serpell, R. (1993). *The significance of schooling: life-journeys in an African society.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Illich, I. (1970). *Deschooling Society*. Harper & Row.

prosocial agenda motivating their innovative activities. Reflecting later on the nature and philosophical grounding of that agenda, I began to see that it represented a convergence of several complementary perspectives at the interface of African and Western cultures. The catchy phrase Child-to-Child (what Penn (2011) termed a politically loaded "buzz-word") was coined by David Morley a British pediatrician and his British educationalist friend Hugh Hawes (1988[6]). In separate interviews[7], they both attested that their principal inspiration had come from personal observations of the socialization practice, widespread in many societies of the Third (Majority) World, of delegating responsibility for the care of young children to their elder, pre-adolescent siblings. According to the narrative of Pridmore (1996)[8], the concept was promoted in the International Year of the Child (1978) on the strength of a high profile conference that brought together senior paediatricians from several Majority World nations, who endorsed the idea that the practice offered a powerful entry-point in their countries for increasing access to modern primary health care preventive health strategies such as immunisation, growth monitoring and nutritional enhancements.

As I have explained elsewhere[9], the *growth chart*, which is widely used by public health systems across Africa and Asia as a recording instrument for monitoring early childhood development, is an elegant representation that synthesises contributions by parents and clinicians through a form of *socially distributed cognition*. The intersection of two axes on a graph, one indexing age, the other weight or height, is easy to grasp as a metaphor for development: a positive increase over time of an observable feature. Moreover, deviation of the 'curve' from a simple, linear upward slope from left to right is easily detected and a strong indication of a health hazard that is easily countered by oral rehydration and nutritional rehabilitation. The teachers we observed at Kabale school in Zambia's predominantly rural northern province introduced their pupils in Grades 5 to 7 to this succinct health educational message, combining classroom exercises with an *outreach activity into the local community*. Each learner was required to bring to school from his or her home a growth chart already completed for a sibling or neighbourhood child under the age of 5, and to accompany the child's parent, guardian or other primary caregiver when the young child was presented for routine check-up at the under-5 outpatient clinic at the local health centre. In addition to this community outreach method of integrating the learners' acquisition of understanding mathematical graphs into their current everyday life, the CtC practices at Kabale included an emphasis on cooperative learning in study groups.

With the consent of the teachers pioneering this approach, our research team based at the University of Zambia, conducted interviews with parents, who were generally supportive, and assessed student outcomes, many of which were positive. Learners demonstrated a good practical understanding of infant growth-monitoring, home-based oral rehydration and

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[6] Hawes, H., & Morley, D. (1988). *Child-to-child: A World-wide Network in Health Education*.

[7] Cited in Udell, C. L. (2001). *Educational innovation: A case study of Child-to-Child in Zambia* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, Baltimore County).

[8] Pridmore, P. (1996). *Children as health educators: the Child-to-Child approach* (Doctoral dissertation, Institute of Education, University of London).

[9] Serpell, R. (2020). Literacy and Child Development in a Contemporary African Society. *Child Development Perspectives, 14* (2), 90-96.

Serpell, R. (2023). Access to the affordances of literacy: reflections on the evolving influence of ICT in Zambia. *Cultura and Psyche (special issue on* "Multiplicities of il-/literacy", edited by C. Koelbl & E. Alber)

hygienic treatment of wounds[10]. Moreover they achieved a higher academic pass rate than a control group at the same school in the national selection exam for admission to secondary schooling. A follow-up study of members of the same cohort during their secondary schooling documented an enduring mutually supportive orientation among them despite the absence of CtC from the high schools' approach to instruction[11]. A small sample of the cohort were further interviewed a decade later when many of them were now parents. They evinced detailed recall of their experience of CtC at primary school, and long-term appropriation of prosocial values: peer-group cooperation, gender equality, and helping others[12].

One detail about CtC in Zambia I did not go into in my webinar presentation is that the concept was successfully pitched to the Head of State quite early on, Kenneth Kaunda, who declared (ex cathedra) that henceforth CtC was to be a national policy. In the wake of that, the Ministry of Education set up a unit at HQ dedicated to bringing it up to scale. The elderly teachers-turned bureaucrats in Lusaka decided to deploy the experienced teachers pioneering the implementation in Kabale school (Mumba, Mumbo and Kangwa) as experts to disseminate it in other Districts with in-service training workshops. This took them away from the challenging tasks at their home base, and generated unrealistic expectations among policymakers that in a few years it would be adopted at schools all around the nation. A sympathetic international consultant (Gibbs) was called in to evaluate after a few years, and his report, while praising the practices he observed at Kabale and a few other schools, stated that in **most** schools the adoption of CtC was confined to painting the Logo on an outside wall and formation of an extra-curricular club. Instead of learning from this that the Ministry needed to intensify and deepen their dissemination strategy, the central government policymakers/ managers in Lusaka concluded that its adoption by the Head of State (who had since retired) had been a policy mistake insufficiently grounded in "evidence" and should be cancelled from the criteria for budget support as a completed or failed project.

That, to me disappointing, turn of events illustrated a peculiar obstacle to the sustainability of a potentially powerful innovation: *projectization.* The core strength of *the CtC approach*, in my estimation, was that it tapped into the energy and open-mindedness of children as drivers of progressive social change. Understanding that strength, teachers could have harnessed it as a resource for implementing two major policy initiatives that came to prominence in Zambia in subsequent decades: affirmative action on behalf of *The Girl Child,* and *inclusive education* for children with disabilities. Instead, by construing *CtC* as a project with a fixed duration, misled teachers and administrators to regard it as having been rendered obsolete. Another obstacle to the sustained adoption of the CtC approach was that some stakeholders perceived its innovativeness as evidence of disrespectful of the practices it sought to replace and resisted its adoption on the spurious grounds that it was a foreign invention. Advocates

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[10] Mwape, G. & Serpell, R. (1996) Participatory appropriation of health science and technology. Poster presented at the International Conference of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD). Quebec, Canada: August, 1996.(**ERIC document** ED417191.htm)

[11] Adamson-Holley, D. (1999). Personal dimensions and their relation to education: a follow-up study of students graduating from the Child-to-Child program in Mpika, Zambia. Ph.D., University of Maryland Baltimore County.

[12] Serpell, R., Mumba, P., & Chansa-Kabali, T. (2011). Early educational foundations for the development of civic responsibility: An African experience. In C. A. Flanagan & B. D. Christens (Eds.), Youth civic development: Work at the cutting edge. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *134*, 77–93.

enamoured of scientific reasoning may have unwittingly fed such resistance by placing too much emphasis on its theoretical and/or ideological rationale.