

INVESTIGATING HOW STRUCTURED REFLECTION INFLUENCES BOYS' APPRECIATION OF EDUCATION AS A POVERTY-ALLEVIATING FACTOR

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Abstract

This action research project sought to expose boys to the transformative power of education in developing regions of Africa. Students were set a series of tasks aimed at magnifying their appreciation of the importance of education in the global quest to eradicate poverty, using the framework established by the United Nations through the Millennium Development Goals and new Sustainable Development Goals (Körösi & Kamau, 2014).

A combination of qualitative research methods, including formative and summative questionnaires, focus groups and individual written submissions, were used to derive key findings. All five participants formed a strong belief that education plays a pivotal role in the amelioration of living conditions and the enhancement of future prospects. They also indicated that the introspection encouraged through facilitated reflection helped to inform their views.

The boys came to see that the African students were “exactly the same as us,” but for a want of opportunity. Furthermore, each was compelled to harness their emotions as “positive solutions” upon their return. They fundraised and advocated on behalf of their fellow global citizens with whom they had formed “budding relationships.”

Introduction

Scotch College is an elite, affluent institution. We pride ourselves on being academically non-selective; we will educate any boy whose family can afford the tuition fees. Having the capacity to pay these fees alone places one well within the top ten percent of earners worldwide. Our clientele are wealthy by Australian standards, and the average Australian income is over 12 times the global average.

Despite our profound wealth, or perhaps because of it, we do little to agitate for a fairer world. Our boys have a unique opportunity to live in blissful isolation; Melbourne is about as far from the rest of the world as possible. Scotch Collegians can choose to live a privileged, fulfilled and prosperous life without thought for the majority of humankind who, through no fault of their own, live a very different reality. *Boys as Global Citizens* is therefore a theme that excites and daunts me. Engaging, challenging and mobilising our boys to consider how they might play a part in bringing about a more equitable world is both energising and, at times, demoralising.

In his book, *Manhood*, influential Australian boys' education author Steve Biddulph nominates "backbone and heart" as the defining characteristics of a good man, two attributes that arguably also typify a global citizen. He contends that these qualities equip men/boys with "the ability to stand firm... sometimes put himself last, especially under circumstances of great need or stress." UNESCO estimates that 100 million children did not complete primary schooling in 2015; this qualifies as a "circumstance of great need." It is our responsibility as educators of boys to arouse and invoke "backbone and heart" through exposure to the needs of others. One such way should be via more abundant global citizenship education which, according to UNESCO, "aims to empower learners to assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges and to become proactive contributors to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure world."

The UN Secretary-General's *Global Education First Initiative* asserts that "Education is the great driver of social, economic and political progress. As people learn to read, count and reason critically, their prospects for health and prosperity expand exponentially." It states also, that "The world faces... interconnected global challenges [which] call for far-reaching changes in how we think and act... It is not enough for education to produce individuals who can read, write and count. Education must be transformative and bring shared values to life." Likewise, I firmly believe that positive change can be brought about through education. Hence, my action research was aimed at urging students to consider the twofold impact of education on the alleviation of poverty. Obviously providing quality education in developing countries brings opportunity and hope. At the other end of the spectrum, educating students with the potential to share a little of the much they have, has the potential to drastically improve living conditions for others.

While Scotch offers a vast array of overseas travel opportunities, few are to the developing world. Those that do visit poorer nations could optimise the boys' immersive experience by incorporating a greater degree of explicit service learning.

The paramount importance of reflection in the action research process helped mould my research question: *How might facilitated reflection consolidate outreach tour participants' understanding of the power of education to alleviate poverty?* Action research offered the ideal methodology for an investigation of this nature as it allowed me as a teacher-researcher, with a "sense of ownership and connection to the process and outcomes" (Ferrance, 2000, p. 29), the opportunity to shape and refine practice in situ. Familiarity with my context helped "to confer relevance and validity" (Ferrance, p. 13) upon my findings.

Literature Review

A global citizen is one whose identity transcends nationality and is instead founded in a belonging to the entire human community (Dill, 2013). The fundamental principle underpinning global citizenship is the "equal moral worth of each person" (Stokes, 2004, p. 22). To be a global citizen is to pursue a just world (Miller, 2014), and to consider widespread problems, such as mass poverty, the responsibility of all people and nations (Stokes, 2004).

The Cynic philosopher, Diogenes of Sinope, is said to have birthed the concept of cosmopolitanism in ancient Greece. He advocated an open-mindedness that spurned xenophobia and instead embraced "a world citizenship that saw beyond the culture of any one state or people" (Dill, 2013, p. 65). Two and a half millennia later, the need for global cooperation in order to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere" (Körösi & Kamau, 2014, p. 11) and to promote equality and sustainable development is perhaps greater than ever.

Education is "the most important investment a developed society can make, and the most effective way of nurturing a developing one" (Cox & Cohen, 2014, p. 241). It has a significant twofold role to play in the amelioration of poverty. In developing countries, "schools are the frontline" and "improving education outcomes is crucial" (Fry, Jellema & Lawson, 2004, p. 1), while in affluent societies, students can "mobilize their privilege on behalf of and act in alliance with marginalized people" (Swalwell, 2013, p. 3). In both settings, "schools can be transforming

institutions where teachers and students can change themselves and the world” (Johnson & Freedman, 2005, p. 15).

The United Nations acknowledged the vital importance of education as a means to poverty alleviation when setting the Millennium Development Goals in 2000. Goal 2 aspired to achieve universal primary education by 2015. While the target was not realised, the number of primary school age children not attending school did almost halve (Way, 2015). The post-2015 Global Goals adopted by the United Nations aim to finish the job by 2030. Goal 4 hopes to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Kőrösi & Kamau, 2014, p. 13). Improving literacy and numeracy rates, as well as creating tertiary education opportunities to provide technical and vocational skills for employment in decent jobs and to promote entrepreneurship, are identified as crucial objectives in the fight against poverty.

It is imperative that the international community recommit to making education available to all, especially those most vulnerable. The need to secure more funding is now especially great in the wake of a sharp decline in global aid to the education sector (Global Partnership for Education, 2014). “Stagnation in education progress has profound consequences for the children and adolescents who cannot go to school” (Way, 2015, p. 27), and is also “a threat to stability, not to mention economic growth and development” (Global Partnership for Education, 2014, p. 11). Reducing poverty in countries with a largely uneducated population is a monumental task (Fry, Jellema & Lawson, 2004). Even a basic education improves productivity amongst agricultural workers, while further education shifts employment opportunities from the agricultural sector to manufacturing, services and information technology (Marland, Clements, Rae & Valvasori, 2008).

The *Australian Government Review of Funding for Schooling* (2011) discusses some of the broader objectives of schools including the need to form “active and informed citizens,” and to develop “empathy and respect for others” (Gonski, 2011, p. 33). It is clear that “education has a positive effect well beyond the actual skills it teaches” (Marland, Clements, Rae & Valvasori, 2008, p. 169). Dill (2013) goes a step further by asserting that education is a moral enterprise used to instil the character and values that a society holds as ideals. Dill also observes that advocates of global citizenship education argue for a paradigm shift away from the dominant

nation-building narrative, prevalent in modern schools for two centuries, and instead towards the emerging universal story: “As the scale shifts from nation to world, so do the visions of citizenship and accompanying moral demands” (Dill, 2013, p. 64).

Exposing students in the developed world to the plight of their counterparts elsewhere is key, particularly for “children from elite communities who, as adults, are likely to have access to a disproportionate amount of political, social, and economic power” (Swalwell, 2013, p. 2). Miller (2014) argues that more can be done through education to empower students to pursue a just global community. Ideally, when students are made aware of injustices they will feel a sense of agency to address them, and will ultimately choose to do so (Swalwell, 2013).

Dill (2013) suggests that many teachers long to help make a better world and are therefore easily persuaded by the ideal of global citizenship; they “wish to see a social transformation that would create a society that is more tolerant, more just, more diverse” (Johnson & Freedman, 2005, p. 15). Convincing students to adopt the worldview of a global citizen can be harder (Swalwell, 2013), perhaps even more so when educating boys, given Miller’s (2014) study indicated that men showed reluctance to prioritize the reduction of extreme poverty.

Reichert and Hawley (2009) offer strategies that may be of use when coaxing boys to engage with global issues. They assert that “open inquiry” and “encouraging personal perspective” can be especially effective by posing problems for “which the outcome is indeterminate” and there is no “right answer,” thus challenging boys to “formulate a solution according to their own researches and best lights.” Many such dilemmas exist for a global citizen contemplating entrenched disadvantage, and the role that education might play in lifting the marginalised from an impoverished state.

Miller’s (2014) study demonstrated the importance of visitation to countries other than one’s own as a key factor in the formation of one’s identity as a global citizen. Exposure and immersion, while powerful, should be complemented and enhanced via the use of reflective tools and analysis (Stokes, 2004) as “opportunities for quiet and unhurried reflection also play a critical part in learning” (Reichert & Hawley, 2009, p. 230). Reichert & Hawley (2009) cite an American English teacher who received gratifying responses from boys in her class after asking them to keep a journal of their experiences serving others. Two of Reichert & Hawley’s (2009) “elements of effective practice” are indeed “personal realization” and “metacognition”, both of

which are central to reflection upon, and sharing of, experience. Through guided reflection students can be made aware of the “systematic nature of injustice, acknowledge their complicity in these systems, feel a sense of empowered agency to make a change, and mobilize their resources as a way to act in concert with others” (Swalwell, 2013, p. 9).

Action research offers a suitable method for the facilitation of student reflection (Sagor, 2000). The cyclical process of observation, reflection and action (Stringer, 2007) promotes change and improvement (Ferrance, 2000) allowing the teacher to grow along with the students.

Research Context

Scotch College is an independent Presbyterian Boys’ School founded when Melbourne was a fledgling colonial town. Students generally come from high socioeconomic households and a range of abilities exist as the college is academically nonselective. Scotch College aims to “deliver an education which, secure in the traditions of our past and our Christian belief, opens boys’ minds to the rich diversity of the world in which they live and challenges them to question and explore everything they find, with integrity, humour and compassion. And to do this in an exciting, intimate environment which nurtures self-expression and self-worth while promoting the uniqueness of each boy’s journey.”

The participants for this action research were a group of five Year 9/10 students, aged 15-16 years-old, who travelled to Zambia and Tanzania in mid-2015 with the intention of observing and evaluating the impact of education on communities in developing areas. The group was self-selected inasmuch as the overseas tour was offered to all Year 9-11 students. Cost may have been a limiting factor for other potential participants. I had not met any of the participants prior to leading the tour.

Participation in the action research project was voluntary with the option of withdrawing at any stage. All five boys who travelled to Africa, and their parents, provided written consent. Activities associated with the research were conducted out of class wherever possible, so academic study was not impacted. Student questionnaires were completed anonymously online.

The Action

Boys were required to submit three preparatory assignments prior to travel. They were asked to journal and debrief regularly while in-country, and to complete a reflective assignment upon returning home. A series of opportunities to share their experience was then scheduled including: addressing the entire Senior School assembly; visiting the Junior School and whole year level assemblies to share a multimedia presentation; running more intimate question and answer sessions with individual Year 8 forms; sharing with a small group of senior students through the Services Program; producing and posting clips and images on social media; manning an information stall at the annual College Family Day; participating in a media conference with the Lord Mayor of Melbourne and the CEO of World Vision Australia and subsequently appearing on all three commercial news bulletins; and contributing to “The Collegian” and “Great Scot”, two internal publications. Boys subsequently also helped plan and promote “The Chitulika Challenge”, a campaign aimed at raising funds to provide essential infrastructure for the students of Chitulika High School in Zambia.

The impact of the preparatory tasks, reflective tools and sharing opportunities on participants’ cognizance of education’s power to alleviate poverty is the primary focus of my research.

Data Collection

All data used for this project were qualitative in nature, as is generally characteristic of the action research process. The insight gleaned from qualitative data is richer and facilitates the accurate and detailed capture of boys’ voices to a greater extent than quantitative data, which tend to have a more prescriptive, rigid nature. Having such a small sample group for this investigation made the use of quantitative data even more inappropriate.

The data collected from participants and available for analysis included: responses to the three preparatory projects; journal extracts written while abroad; transcripts of in-country group debriefs; reflective project submissions; copies of speeches given, articles written and poetry composed upon return; and responses to questionnaires - completed anonymously through Google forms - aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the aforementioned reflective tools.

Data Analysis

I first read through the data sets in their entirety so as to attain an overall view of the information, making note of initial impressions. Using several different sources of information, gathered at various stages throughout the action research process was important to ensure triangulation of data and validity of results, and to ensure a comprehensive capture of data.

I then re-read everything, paying greater attention to detail and unitizing the data by highlighting relevant, recurring, surprising or expected words, phrases or sentences. This allowed me to isolate various features and elements of experience and perspective from the boys' voices.

These units generally fell into one or more of four emergent themes: education, reflection, empathy and action, to which I assigned a colour coding scheme and recoded printed copies of the data by hand. These codes were not determined *a priori*, but did dovetail pleasingly with my literature review.

Having settled on a set of key observations, I sourced a plethora of representative quotations from the raw data to provide supporting evidence for each concept. This compilation needed culling to ensure fluency and adherence to word count restrictions.

Finally, I complemented the boys' reflections and insights with information from beyond the data sets, such as my observation of how boys: responded to fundraising initiatives; shared their experiences on social media; and participated in related global citizenship activities at school.

My findings were reviewed and scrutinized by a critical friend who is a secondary school teacher currently studying for a PhD in Education with a focus on gender. The students were also emailed drafts of various submissions throughout the process in order to provide opportunity to refute conclusions drawn from their voices.

Discussion of Results

Education

The dominant theme emerging from the data was an affirmation of the fundamental notion that education empowers a populace, giving them the agency to affect positive and lasting change.

One student demonstrated a global citizenship mindset when he discussed “one of earth’s greatest problems: the lack of access to education.” Others described education as a weapon with which to “fight poverty.” Many more assertions such as education is “a massive tool,” “the way of fighting poverty,” “the key to success,” and “a golden ticket out of poverty,” were peppered throughout the boys’ submissions.

Re-occurring frequently was a simple narrative extolling the transformative nature of education: “These kids were confined to a life of hopelessness” and “poverty no matter how hard they tried” but, with adequate schooling, “their future prospects are so much brighter.” One boy asserted, “they now have purpose in their lives.” Yet another mentioned, “it is education which allows you to choose your own destiny.” A third put it thus; “Proof of the power of education can also be seen when contrasting the behaviours of younger and older students... [The latter have] clearly undergone an amazing transformation.”

All boys strongly contended that a quality education is of benefit not only to the student; it “gives people the ability to input into society,” “making the whole community stronger” so as to “climb out of poverty.” One boy postulated, “These students are the future of Zambia and with a decent education, they could change their community, and even country, for the better.”

Other positive knock-on effects were cited to strengthen the premise that education plays a pivotal role in the alleviation of poverty: increased confidence, health, opportunity, employability and hope for individuals; and macro benefits such as reduced rates of crime, teenage pregnancy, malnourishment and manual labour as well as enhanced living conditions, a boosted economy and greater numbers of trained experts such as doctors, engineers and pilots.

The boys also appreciated that they too were on an educational journey. One boy described the trip as “a brilliant learning experience,” while all respondents called for more time with the Zambian students so as to obtain “a better understanding.” Four of the boys have since attended a global citizenship workshop; two travelled to New York for a United Nations conference; and all five joined the college global citizenship email list. All respondents indicated they were “highly likely” to conduct further research regarding the impact of education on poverty, and would follow the progress of Global Goal #4 (Quality Education - Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all).

Reflection

The extent to which facilitated reflection motivated participant engagement and introspection is difficult to gauge. However, anecdotal evidence suggests the preparatory assignments, journaling, reflective tasks and sharing opportunities were each appreciated by the boys.

Responses to survey questions regarding the value of the pre-trip assignments were unanimously positive. The adjectives “worthwhile,” “very valuable,” “beneficial,” “great,” “inspirational,” and “motivating” featured heavily. All boys acknowledged that the preparation prompted them to contemplate the purpose of the trip and “think widely about issues in the region.” They each felt “geared with knowledge,” “insight,” and “background information” before travelling.

Only one participant chose not to keep a journal. Another used his simply to record happenings. The rest claimed to make “a concerted effort to reflect upon experiences and record feelings.” Questionnaire responses indicated that boys had used the journal to jog their memory post-trip.

The reflective tasks helped some participants clarify their thoughts. One boy wrote, “When I arrived back in my house I actually felt the inequality... I saw how much our world resembles the Hunger Games.” Another said of the trip, “In terms of gaining a new perspective on life it certainly did that.”

Having opportunities to share experiences and lessons learnt was “extremely important” – even “crucial,” and “made the whole trip worthwhile.” One boy remarked, “It strengthens your belief and reinforces that what you are doing is not only right but very important.” Another stated, “It was special to talk one on one and in small groups as the levels of engagement were really high; kids clung onto every word.”

The meta-reflection encouraged through the final questionnaire was also well received. One boy acknowledged, “It helped me collect my thoughts” and another admitted, “I probably would not have thought in so much depth on my own.”

Empathy

The prevalence of emotive language in the data illuminated the personal impact of the trip itself, and the facilitated reflection. Boys spoke of the “incredibly sad” “plight” of “kids with so little” who “deserve so much better,” trapped by a “shocking cycle” of poverty. They acknowledged

the “guilt and emotions” they grappled with, and the euphoria. One boy shared, “I had the single most amazing moment of my life... some of them could not contain their joy and they had to hug and embrace me; it was beautiful.”

All boys spoke of a “life changing experience” through which they began the metamorphosis to true global citizens; thinking less in terms of “them” and more in terms of “us.” One boy noted, “Zambians are no different to Australians in terms of what they want to be, however their options are highly limited.” Another boy wrote, “These kids are the same as us and the only difference is that we were brought up in a wealthier country.”

On one occasion, while sharing our thoughts on the trip, another boy revealed the extent to which he was being impacted. What he expressed that evening coalesced in his mind while completing the reflective tasks and sharing with peers upon our return. In one speech he expressed it so: “We are all exactly the same. We laugh at the same things, we act the same way with our mates. There is one huge difference though: I get a world class education and they don’t. But why is that the case? How is there such injustice in our world that we can let this happen and not worry about it?”

Despair, frustration and anger were woven throughout the boys’ responses. One boy reflected, “I felt so emotional and cried at the injustice of our world and why I have so much yet Shedrak has so little... I will always have him in my heart as a reminder of the inequality of our world.”

Some drew inspiration from their newfound friends. One boy admired their resilience: “I only ever saw one kid cry in Africa... They were very tough and hardly complained whereas Australian kids whinge and cry all the time.” Another saw promise: “their very ambitious goals seemed possible.” And another was inspired: “Out of respect to those who do not have the education that I do, I will make the most of my education.”

The boys were clearly moved by the human dimension of the trip, an aspect that was magnified through facilitated reflection, and that consolidated the boys’ collective belief that education is imperative if living conditions are to be ameliorated in developing countries. They celebrated the “awesome,” “amazing,” “wonderful,” “nicest,” people with whom they “made such strong bonds.” The authenticity of their claims is strengthened by the fact that the boys continue to deepen these fledgling relationships via social media.

Action

With seeming ubiquity, boys referenced a compulsion to act as a response to the emotions stirred by their immersive experience,. Translating belief into action is a key evolutionary step toward global citizenship. One boy commented, “It has made me realise that it is our responsibility to close that gap... and improving their education is the way to do that.”

All boys felt compelled to advocate on behalf of the students they had met; they spoke to individuals, small groups and large assemblies, as well as to television and print media. Boys produced promotional videos, entered poetry competitions, published articles in school periodicals, manned information stands and spread the word via *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Instagram*.

Furthermore, the boys spoke of the importance of having an opportunity to fundraise upon their return. Three boys said that it either made them feel “satisfied that [they] actually did something” or that they were “making a real contribution.” Another declared it “very important” to have a tangible “goal” and yet another revealed that, “it made it possible for me to do something with my emotions.” The five boys collectively raised over AU\$6,000 and inspired their peers and wider school community to contribute AU\$56,000. Their efforts are ongoing.

The “collective capacity to affect positive change” was referred to by three students with remarks like “together we can do big things,” and “we have the power to give them even more hope.” One boy surmised, “The whole Scotch community can be proud of this profound difference that we have made in Zambia so far but there is still so much more to be done.” While perhaps a little condescending and paternalistic, the intent was pure, again with the suggestion that “we just need to give them the tools to do it.”

When asked how the trip may have been enhanced, two boys called for “more hands-on work.” Students spoke of a desire to “do as much as I possibly can for them,” being “even more inspired to help,” and having a “need to do [more] in the future” because we “have no excuse.”

Conclusion

Evidence garnered from this action research project suggests that a purposefully planned set of preparatory tasks and reflective tools, when implemented as an integral component of an

immersive tour, can enhance boys' cognizance of the significance of education as a poverty alleviating mechanism. Boys were united in their belief that education is as close an elixir that poverty has. They unpacked many of the ways a quality education can equip individuals and transform communities.

The boys' observations, musings and metacognitive remarks confirmed the efficacy of the facilitated reflection while revealing the extent to which boys were moved by the lives – hardships and hopes – of the people they had met. Furthermore, the importance of sharing one's experience and having a tangible way, such as fundraising, to respond post-travel was illuminated.

“Action research specifically refers to a disciplined inquiry done by a teacher with the intent that the research will inform and change his or her practices in the future” (Ferrance, 2000). As such, it is my strong intention to incorporate, as part of any future study tour, substantive pre-trip research and preparation; in-country journaling and regular debriefs; and guided introspection and facilitated sharing with peers and others post-trip.

Ferrance (2000) contends that action research should also be a “tool for professional development and school reform”. To this end, I hope this report can in some way inform future practice at Scotch College as we look to roll out a Year 11 immersive service learning program.

Reflection

I was not familiar with the action research methodology prior to completing this project. The process has been stimulating, burdensome, rewarding, stressful, and a true source of both joy and pride. My initial suspicion regarding the entirely qualitative nature of the data analysis was largely allayed by the experience. As a Mathematics teacher, I am still to understand the staunch aversion to percentages – not that they would have been of use to me having worked with such a small sample of participants. I remain somewhat dubious of the approach inasmuch as I believe a researcher is open to inadvertent bias as they search for themes to emerge from the data. That said, I like to think that the conclusions of my research are genuine, if not quantifiable.

This project should be viewed as only one iteration of the action research process which is intended to be continuous and circular. The planned immersion program soon to be offered to

Year 11 Scotch Collegians could see colleagues join me in future cycles of action research to further explore the merit of facilitated reflection as a means to amplifying service learning outcomes.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Scotch College Principal Tom Batty for identifying me as a suitable candidate for this research, and for subsequently funding my attendance at the IBSC conferences in both Cape Town and Vancouver, in order to make it possible. Finally, the practically limitless encouragement and exuberance of my team leader, Bruce Collins, has been a constant comfort throughout the process. For that I thank him wholeheartedly.

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