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# **Language of instruction and the quality of basic education in Zambia**

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# Language of Instruction and the Quality of Basic Education in Zambia

A paper for UNESCO by Shay Linehan

## 1.0 Language Policy in Zambia

1.1 The issue of language and education in Zambia was fairly straightforward throughout the colonial and much of the Federal period. From 1927, only three years after the Colonial Office took over the responsibility for what was then Northern Rhodesia up to 1963, just before the break-up of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the policy was consistent: mother tongue was used for the first two years of primary education, followed by a dominant vernacular up to Standard 5, and English thereafter.

1.2 In 1963, a group of Australian educationists, sponsored by UNESCO, reviewed the education system in what was to become Zambia, and recommended that, 'The medium of instruction should be English, from the beginning of schooling; and as soon as possible, a pilot scheme should be set up to commence the introduction of English as the medium of instruction' (UNESCO, 1964, page 105).

1.3 This recommendation was endorsed in 1965 by the Hardman report, written by a language officer seconded by the United Kingdom to Zambia to investigate the challenges of teaching English to primary school children.

1.4 In June, 1965, in the newly established Republic of Zambia, cabinet deliberated on the issue and, on the advice of the then Minister of Education, Mr. J.M. Mwanakatwe, decided to legislate on the Hardman recommendation, which became enshrined in the 1966 Education Act. For reasons of national unity plus a belief that the earlier a language was started the better, English was formally adopted, for the first time, as the medium of instruction from the beginning of Grade 1 to the end of tertiary education. Considerable resources were committed over the following years to establishing and running what was initially called, the English Medium Scheme, later to be called, the New Zambia Primary Course.

1.5 The thirty-year period between 1965 and 1995 saw a number of moves to reverse this 'straight-for-English' approach. In two major reviews of educational policy, in 1977 and again in 1991, the case for vernacular languages and their role in ensuring quality in education was made.

1.6 In 1977, although there was broad agreement that learning through the medium of English was detrimental to educational achievement, educational principles were subordinated to the pragmatic considerations of political harmony, and the final report, '*Educational Reform: Proposals and Recommendations*', while acknowledging that 'it is generally accepted by educationists that learning is best done in the mother tongue', decided that 'this situation is found to be impracticable in multi-lingual societies, such as the Zambian society' (MOE 1977, page 32). The new policy did, however, allow teachers

to explain concepts that might otherwise not be understood through the medium of English, in one of the seven official local languages, provided a majority of pupils in a class could understand this vernacular language.

1.7 The 1991 Zambia policy response to the 1990 World Conference on Education For All, called, *Focus on Learning*, was resolved to tackle the issue, stating clearly that the arguments for local languages in education were proven beyond doubt and that, despite the administrative difficulties, the major Zambian languages would be the basic languages of education from Grades 1 to 4. *Focus on Learning* was formally adopted by cabinet in October, 1992, replacing the 1977 policy. However, no attempt was made to implement this new policy up to 1995, despite a number of studies that were showing increasing signs of reading disability in primary schools in both English and local languages.

1.8 One major study commissioned in 1993 by Britain's Overseas Development Administration (ODA), and conducted by the University of Reading, looked at reading levels in a sample of Zambian schools in both English and the selected Zambian language, Cinyanja, at Grades 3, 4 and 6. The study indicated that, on average, pupils could not read texts two levels below their own grade level (Williams, E., 1993). Williams study included tests of reading levels in Malawi, where the medium of instruction was Chichewa from Grades 1 to 4. Here reading in Chichewa, even under a more challenging physical school environment than Zambia's, was progressing at an acceptable level, with no impact on progress in English, whose level was broadly similar to that of Zambia.

1.9 A separate study by the Zambian Ministry of Education under the auspices of the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) in 1995 (report published in October 1997) showed that only 25% of Grade 6 pupils could read at defined minimum levels and only 3% could read at defined desirable levels.

1.10 It was evident that the first thirty years of English medium had been less than satisfactory. Teaching and learning in an alien language had meant that, for the vast majority, school was unrelated to real life. Rote learning was the only way to approach a situation where understanding was absent from school, with mindless repetition replacing problem solving and inventiveness.

1.11 Not that the language policy could be blamed for everything. Other factors were at work: 'the colossal neglect of education during years of economic collapse, droughts, and sickness are among other adverse factors. But ... were it not for the language policy, we would have had better educated people who would have known better how to cope with the economic problems, and even with those arising from drought, AIDS, and other extrinsic factors' (Kelly, 1995, page 6).

1.12 By 1995, there was a growing awareness within the Ministry of Education that reading and writing were better developed first in a language with which children were familiar. The pedagogical advantages were becoming more accepted, and since they were articulated at various for a, they were becoming familiar:

- i) it follows the basic principle of working from the known to the unknown, i.e. learning first in a known language (L1) and later moving into the unknown (L2);

- ii) it enables pupils to express themselves in a meaningful way and therefore participate in their own learning processes;
- iii) it prevents cognitive overload in pupils, since they are concerned with only one thing at a time, that of learning to read and write in a familiar language instead of having to negotiate both the reading skill and the new language;
- iv) it reinforces pupils' self-esteem by validating their cultural identity.

1.13 In 1995, the Ministry of Education formed the National Reading Committee (NRC) with a mandate to improve reading levels in primary schools. It was specifically tasked to:

- i) raise awareness of the reading problem;
- ii) seek solutions as a matter of urgency; and
- iii) identify partners who would assist in implementing these solutions.

1.14 This group began to see, as it interacted with stakeholders, that there was likely to be an intractable obstacle to any solution to the literacy question that involved the thorny issue of language of instruction. Fear of change that could lead to political unrest, or even unease, might outweigh the hopes of educational gains that were promised in the distant future.

1.15 A possible solution was to separate the issue of medium of instruction from the issue of language of initial literacy. This was a way of looking at the problem that had not been given any consideration in any of the policy dialogues up to that date. A child could conceivably learn to read and write in a familiar language, but within a school system where the medium of instruction was officially English, especially given the leeway that teachers were given in 1977 to use a major vernacular language in lower grades if this facilitated learning. This satisfied both the educational and political points of view: pedagogical innovation was possible but within an ostensibly stable linguistic context. Such a solution might allow for the evolution of more overt change in the future when stakeholders had an opportunity to consider the issues in a less emotive atmosphere.

1.16 But first there was a need for a broad national consensus. In November/December 1995, the National Reading Committee brought together stakeholders from all walks of Zambian life in the Zambia National Reading Forum. The forum also included reading experts and senior educators from a number of countries from the Southern Africa region and the United Kingdom. The forum was tasked with examining the reading problem and proposing action that would solve it.

1.17 Three practical objectives for schools arose from the forum and it was agreed that all future actions would be guided by these. It was resolved that irrespective of the prevailing language of instruction, the following should be achieved:

- i) basic literacy in a familiar language by the end of the first year of primary education;
- ii) basic literacy in English by the end of the second year of primary education;
- iii) improvement in the teaching of reading at all grade levels through appropriate training and materials.

1.18 A number of measures taken by the Ministry of Education since 1995 have been in support of the above objectives:

- i) The status of local languages was raised by including them among subjects that counted towards selection to Grade 8, formerly Lower Secondary, but now Upper Basic. Previously, although Zambian languages were taught up to Grade 7, they were not part of the package of selection subjects for the limited places at secondary level. This policy change greatly boosted the status of local languages and the morale of local language teachers and curriculum experts.
- ii) An ongoing curriculum reform initiative begun in 1997 adopted these objectives as central to a wider change process;
- iii) The government in 1996 produced a comprehensive policy statement for education, called *Educating Our Future*, which incorporated the recommendations of the Reading Forum, stating that initial literacy and numeracy would be developed through a language which was familiar to children. This policy position further enhanced the status of Zambian languages and provided the rationale for future initiatives. It should be noted, however, that 1996 was an election year in Zambia and political considerations were to the fore when the policy document was being drafted. The initial debates that preceded this change took place within educational circles, with always the threat of a political veto overhanging the process. Up to the penultimate draft of the policy document, certain senior politicians insisted on the retention of the status quo and only agreed to limited change in the final draft after sustained interventions by senior Ministry officials. The separation of medium of instruction from medium of initial literacy allowed *Educating Our Future* to set down initial literacy in a familiar language as a child's right while maintaining English as the medium of instruction;
- iv) With support from Britain's Department For International Development (DFID), the Ministry of Education designed the Primary Reading Programme, a £10.2 million, seven-year programme to implement the new initial literacy policy.

## **2.0 Description of the Primary Reading Programme (PRP)**

2.1 The Primary Reading Programme, which began to be fully implemented in 1999, involves interventions at each of seven primary grade levels.

2.2 In Grade 1, the *New Breakthrough to Literacy* (NBTL) course, which is taught for one hour per day, is a version of the original *Breakthrough to Literacy*, that has been modified to better suit the Zambian environment. This fast-track one-year initial literacy course in each of the seven official Zambian languages has had significant success. The evaluation report on the pilot programme carried out in Kasama during 1998 states: 'The programme was an unqualified success; children in *Breakthrough to Literacy* (BTL) classes were reading and writing at a level equivalent to Grade 4 or higher in non-BTL classes' (Kotze and Higgins, 1999, page 4). The review team further claimed at oral presentations of their findings to the Ministry of Education, that children in pilot schools in Kasama were

performing in literacy tests at a level above what they would expect of children of similar age in South Africa, the UK, and Ireland – areas with which they were familiar.

2.3 NBTL was developed by PRP from the original *Breakthrough* to make it more Zambian, more teacher-friendly, and more durable. The modified course was piloted in two Zambian languages in four districts during 2000 and found to be as effective as the original (Higgins, 2000, page 4). This modified version has drawn a good deal of interest from countries surrounding Zambia, and those further afield.

2.4 In addition to initial literacy in a local language at Grade 1, PRP developed an oral English course called, *Pathway to English* which is taught for one hour, twenty minutes per week, two forty-minute lessons.

2.5 The strategy at Grade 1 is to fast-track reading and writing skills while building up to a level of spoken English that will allow the skills developed in the local language to transfer to English at Grade 2.

2.6 Six hours, twenty minutes per week might appear to be a modest amount of time for such a critical component of early learning. However, over the years, it has become an accepted view among Zambian educators that part of the reading problem has arisen from the fact that Literacy has been embedded within the Languages Syllabus and has therefore been treated as a relatively minor (though difficult) component of a larger set of objectives rather than as a vital prerequisite to all learning in schools.

2.7 A decision was taken in the year 2000 through the Basic School Curriculum Framework produced by the Curriculum Development Centre (December 2000) to de-link Literacy from Languages, to better tackle Literacy by dealing with it as a subject in its own right. English Language and Zambian Language still appear on the school time-table, with a focus on the oral, lexical, and structural elements of the language. Because this is an unnatural separation to begin with, the language lessons cannot help but support and supplement the literacy work. For example, the weekly time-table allocation for Grades 1 and 2 that is being implemented in 2004 as part of a staged curriculum reform process is as follows:

- Literacy - 10 periods (*one hour per day, with a Zambian language focus in Grade 1 and an English focus in Grade 2*)
- Zambian languages - 03 periods
- Oral English - 02 periods
- Numeracy - 05 periods
- Social Development Studies - 04 periods (SDS)
- Creative and Technology Studies - 04 periods (CTS)
- Integrated Science - 04 periods
- Community Studies - 03 periods

Total contact time per week: 35 periods x 40 minutes = 23 hours, 20 minutes.

2.8 In Grade 2, *Pathway to English* continues the development of oral English, but is now supporting a new English literacy course developed by PRP called, *Step In To English*(SITE). SITE covers much of the ground that was covered in *Breakthrough* at Grade 1 – for example, the same supplementary readers are used, this time in English, so the children are familiar with the stories and the cross-cutting themes. Also familiar to children is the child-centred methodology and classroom management which remains the same.

2.9 The strategy at Grade 2 is to ensure the transfer of literacy skills from the Zambian language to English. Alongside this is the transfer of the child-centred methodology from Grade 1 to Grade 2 and from the Literacy lessons to all lessons.

2.10 This transfer of methodology and classroom management has been a key strategy of the PRP initiative and its impact has been evident from the beginning: ‘There were clear indications that a significant new philosophy of education was evolving in *Breakthrough to Literacy* (BTL) classrooms; specifically, a growing child-centred, problem solving approach to teaching was apparent ....There was evidence of a transfer of the BTL method and teaching strategies to other curriculum areas’ (Kotze and Higgins, 1999, page 4).

2.11 In preparation for the implementation of the broader curriculum reforms the Ministry of Education appointed a team in 2003 comprising the PRP core group and a group of Mathematics experts to map the Mathematics syllabus onto methods and management techniques that had proven successful in Literacy. The team developed a Mathematics Resource Kit (MARK) to be delivered to all teachers via training in 2004. This teaching resource builds on the training that has taken place through PRP and ensures that teachers are using familiar tools in all curriculum areas. Publishers have been advised that textbooks to support the new curriculum must have the materials graded in a colour-coded style and have built-in assessment similar to that in the Literacy courses.

2.12 For Grades 3 to 7, PRP has developed a course called, *Read On* which provides for bilingual literacy development and consolidation in Grades 3 to 7. As a separate subject, Literacy now has allocated to it, one hour per day in Grades 3 and 4; and half an hour per day in Grades 5 to 7.

2.13 The Primary Reading Programme is therefore a systematic attempt to improve reading and writing in all primary schools, initially within a seven-year time-scale, from 1999 to 2005, through interventions at each grade level.

2.14 Piloted and field-tested materials are supplied to teachers along with practical training in the use of the materials conducted by trainers who themselves have been identified for their excellence through the piloting process. Monitoring and mentoring is carried out at school level by teams comprising Standards Officers, Inservice Providers and Teacher Trainers. The supportive language of literacy policy, ongoing curriculum reform, and general integration of Literacy into other education reforms ensures that the context is supportive of schools and is part of the larger change process.

### **3.0 Challenges in implementing the new Language of Literacy policy through the vehicle of the Primary Reading Programme**

3.1 The first challenge for Zambian educators was to work within an ambivalent language policy. As previously stated, 1996 was an election year in Zambia, and it proved not possible, for political reasons, to go as far as changing the medium of instruction to a local language without the threat of derailing the impetus towards familiar language literacy. As the policy document, *Educating Our Future* went through its final drafts, it was made clear to senior education officials that unless a non-contentious formula could be found, the political preference would be for maintenance of the status quo, with English remaining in the same position as it had done since 1965. The compromise position that had been anticipated by the National Reading Committee therefore came into focus.

3.2 The language of instruction post-1996 is still officially English, but with a directive from the Permanent Secretary to schools that this be an aspiration to be achieved by the end of Grade 4 at a pace that is appropriate to learning needs. Textbooks are still in English, but teachers are encouraged to use the local language whenever it benefits learning and understanding.

3.3 In reality, local languages predominate in the early grades, particularly in the rural areas. In a new departure, *Educating Our Future* states clearly that children must have the right to be introduced to literacy and numeracy through a familiar language: ‘The fact that initial reading skills are taught in and through a language that is unfamiliar to the majority of children is believed to be a major contributory factor to the backwardness in reading shown by many Zambian children. It is also a major factor in fostering rote learning, since from the outset the child has difficulties in associating the printed forms of words with their real underlying meaning. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that children learn literacy skills more easily and successfully through their mother tongue, and subsequently they are able to transfer these skills quickly and with ease to English or another language’ (*Educating Our Future*, 1996, page 39).

3.4 Even the present policy position causes a degree of political unease. When some Members of Parliament protested recently about the ‘new language policy’ that ‘forces children to learn in a foreign language’ (not English, but a major vernacular) they were persuaded that the language policy was unchanged, but that the literacy policy was to use whatever oral language resources were available to children. This was acceptable since it seems to maintain an equilibrium of sorts – that of all suffering equally through the medium of English. In such a sensitive area as language, where people’s feelings of worth and identity are so much enshrined in their native discourse, it might be that compromise is the least compromising route for all concerned. This has been, in the past, the argument for maintaining the status of English, and continues to maintain its prominence as the official medium of instruction.

3.5 However, with 72 or so dialects, choosing initial literacy in only the 7 official Zambian languages of education, still involves a sizable minority of people for whom the language of literacy is a familiar language but not necessarily their mother tongue. This has led to a call to increase the number of languages designated as official languages for education,

with at least four new languages now claiming that they have sufficient literature to warrant their inclusion. The Ministry of Education has encouraged this movement in the belief that while familiar-language literacy is desirable, mother-tongue literacy should be the ultimate goal. The belief is that if fewer and fewer people feel excluded, there will be less political opposition in the future to adopting local languages as media of instruction.

3.6 There is no doubt that the present language of instruction model in Zambia is untidy and will need to be revisited at some point. The policy may result in textbooks for Grade 1 subjects having to be 'language-free' to avoid using English text before pupils have learnt to read in English.

3.7 Another challenge to the implementation of PRP was the lack of capacity in the area of literacy and particularly of initial literacy. Part of this lack of capacity was a lack of knowledge and acceptance of this fact. Some 'experts' felt that all materials could be produced through a few quick workshops and implementation could be achieved countrywide within a year, or two years at the most. It was therefore decided by the Ministry of Education to look for an existing model of initial literacy that might be modified to suit the needs of Zambia, and in the process help build up the needed capacity.

3.8 The *Breakthrough to Literacy* course, developed and used in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and later translated for use in various African languages by The Molteno Project, a South African NGO, and used successfully in various southern African contexts, was eventually selected.

3.9 The programme was piloted in Kasama in northern Zambia in 25 schools in 1998. It was evaluated by independent consultants and declared to be 'an unqualified success' (Kotze, Herman and Higgins, Cathal, 1999, page 4). This pilot therefore achieved two objectives: through the training of trainers conducted by Molteno, as well as the translation and critiquing of the various materials, it built much-needed capacity; while at the same time its success acted as a convincing argument for familiar language literacy.

3.10 In Kasama, it was widely reported, children in Grade 1, were reading and writing at levels equivalent to Grade 4 and 5 compared with children following the traditional course. Those who were involved in the pilot went on to produce cost-effective pedagogical and training materials for other grade levels.

3.11 As far as possible, PRP tried to learn from the Kasama experience and replicate the conditions elsewhere for the nationwide rollout. Training was of a similar duration and quality, with the most effective of the Kasama teachers forming the core of a fully Zambian training and monitoring team. Kasama teachers were also at the fore in identifying improvements to pedagogical and training materials.

#### **4.0 Barriers and Opposition**

4.1 There were a number of barriers to PRP implementation:

- i) It was argued that initial literacy through a local language would mean that all teachers would have to be deployed to areas where their own language was spoken and this would create chaos and might even lead to a ‘tribal education system’. In practice, teachers do not need to be native speakers of the language in order to teach it at Grade 1 since the concepts and vocabulary are very basic and would be known by any adult person living in the area regardless of whether it was their mother tongue or not. In fact, in PRP pilot schools, it has been found that non-native speakers are getting better results, probably for the very reason that they are being extra careful and may be using the children as informants, which fits well with the child-centred methodology.
- ii) It was also argued that since English was spoken in urban areas, local languages would disadvantage the urban child. It often took a visit to a school by a Ministry of Education official to convince teachers that the language that was spoken by children in the playground – the language of play - was not English, but the dominant local language.
- iii) Allied to this argument was the concern that since schools often had many language groups represented in their student body, it was impossible to choose a language of instruction that would suit all. Again, it soon became apparent to teachers that all of the children quickly picked up the language of play and were far more comfortable in this than any of them would be in English.
- iv) The strongest threat was the prospect of parental opposition to the use of local languages. There was a fear that parents would see this as a backward move since English has long been the high status language of education, public life, commerce, and therefore opportunity.

4.2 To counter this last threat, PRP adopted a detailed communications strategy involving a raft of measures using a variety of media. It was argued in newspapers, radio, television, and at public meetings that initial literacy in a familiar language would strengthen both the local languages and English. Once this premise was tested and proven in a number of public pilot trials, the anticipated antagonism virtually evaporated. In general, parents are supportive of the innovations to a surprising degree, taking a new interest in their children’s education, and seeming to regard the school and its teachers in a friendlier light. There is even a growing demand from illiterate parents for adult literacy classes in the schools where their children are making such obvious progress. Many primary schools now run adult education classes in the evenings in response to this demand.

4.3 There has been some debate recently about how parental insistence on a ‘straight for English’ policy may be a myth (Samuel and Harrison, 2001, page 21). In Zambia, teachers and parents who were not initially targeted by the PRP communication strategy, tended to articulate the perceived benefits of a ‘straight for English’ approach. Delaying English in order to strengthen it is counter-intuitive and not something that might seem immediately logical. An effective communication strategy can marshal the evidence and present it in an absorbable way. This is something that the Primary Reading Programme has managed to do in Zambia to a degree that is now proving to be of interest to other countries in the region.

## **5.0 Evidence of PRP Success**

### **5.1 Baseline Study**

5.1.1 Sampa (2003, page 36) points out that one of the first activities of the Primary Reading Programme was to establish reliable baseline data against which any future gains in literacy could be measured. For this purpose a literacy test was developed for both English and Zambian languages. District Inservice Providers were trained in how to administer the test to two schools in each of 72 districts, one urban school and one rural. The tests were administered, for the first time, in November 1999, at the end of the school year.

5.1.2 In August 2002, this same test was repeated in schools that had received interventions under the Primary Reading Programme. This time, however, the test was administered at the end of the second term, one term earlier than the original baseline test. Despite this, the results were impressive (Sampa, 2003, pages 51 to 57):

#### 5.1.3 Grade 1 (tests in Zambian Language)

- In 1999 average learners scored 2.1 out of an expected score band of 0-24 marks
- In 2002, they scored 16.4, an increase of 780%

#### 5.1.4 Grade 2 (tests in English)

- In 1999 average learners scored 5.5 out on an expected band of 0-24 marks
- In 2002 they scored 31.6, an increase of 575%, indicating that, on average, learners were reading above the expected level in Grade 2.

## **5.2 National Assessment Results**

5.2.1 In 1999, 2001, and 2003, a sample of pupils from 400 randomly selected schools have been tested at Grade 5 level in literacy and numeracy in order to see how well the overall education system is performing in Zambia as part of a national assessment exercise. 'The initial assessment of the impact of the Primary Reading Programme indicated huge gains in learning achievement levels. It was therefore deemed appropriate to subject the Primary Reading Programme to further investigations in order to ascertain the impact of the programme on Learning Achievement Levels at Middle Basic' (Kanyika, 2004, page 7).

5.2.2 For the September 2003 National Assessment, it was decided to include 45 schools that had been included in the PRP pilot and whose Grade 4 children would have passed through the *New Breakthrough to Literacy* programme.

5.2.3 Overall, the results showed that pupils at Grade 4 who had started with PRP courses were outperforming pupils at Grade 5 level in literacy, and also in numeracy : 'Pupils in PRP pilot schools performed appreciably better across the country than pupils in ordinary and community schools in general' (Kanyika, 2004, page 7). Another interesting finding was that gender differences in performance had all but vanished in these schools compared

to the non-PRP sample : ‘There are still gender disparities in performance overall, with community schools leading, while there appears to be gender parity, with female pupils having a slight edge over their male counterparts in PRP schools’ (Kanyika, 2004, page 7).

### 5.3 Evaluations

5.3.1 There have been a number of evaluations of the Primary Reading Programme and courses – all of them extremely positive:

- ‘Overall the Primary Reading Programme is judged to be making exceptional progress’ (DFID/Ministry of Education Review 2000)
- ‘There is ample evidence on the ground that the Primary Reading Programme has revolutionised the learning mechanisms in the country, and that the results can only be described as astonishing’ (DFID/Ministry of Education Review 2001)
- ‘The focus on literacy at primary level has helped to secure a very observable success that parents and communities have responded to warmly. This success has raised the expectations that teachers have for themselves and their pupils. PRP has managed to embed methodology, assessment, and classroom management into its courses and training programmes in a way that allows for practical demonstration of good practice and facilitates a process where teachers can theorise from practice rather than vice versa, which is altogether more difficult’ (DFID/Ministry Review 2002)
- ‘The Primary Reading Programme has made a significant contribution to the task of transforming teaching cultures in Zambia. This approach can provide a model for the whole curriculum’ (Reforming the Curriculum - Danida Report 2002, page 6)
- ‘There is a lot of support from parents and members of the community because they have seen the change in the quality of learning of their children. The motivation for all, teachers and parents, are the results: reading, writing, and better understanding of all subjects of the curriculum’ (Sampa, 2003, page 9)

5.3.2 Some of the general outcomes of the literacy programme that have been cited in these reports and others include: better all round teaching; successful learning; motivated teachers; supportive parents and communities; a pupil-centred approach in reality rather than in theory; collaborative learning; confident children; leadership roles for children in groupwork situations. There is also growing evidence that supports the contention by Headteachers that enrolment levels are growing and absenteeism is on the wane in schools that are spearheading PRP strategies: ‘A number of teachers commented on a significant improvement in pupil attendance since the introduction of the *Breakthrough* innovation. (Kotze and Higgins, 1999, page 4).

5.3.3 The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education stated in December 2003 that PRP was the single most effective change agent for achieving quality education in Zambia, and that the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education by 2015 was dependent on convincing children and their parents that what is available in schools is worth the opportunity cost to families and communities. In so saying, she was mirroring the comments from the 2002 DFID/Ministry of Education

Review of PRP (page 11): ‘Literacy as the most visible benefit of education as far as parents are concerned, can help persuade communities of the value of sending children to school – possibly especially girls –and be a significant factor in helping to establish EFA’.

## **6.0 Lessons Learnt from the PRP Implementation**

### **6.1 The need for a communication strategy**

6.1.1 In the Zambian situation, it was important to be able to recognise the real problem and not just one or more of its symptoms. The problem may not be poor reading levels or overall poor performance in schools per se. The real problem may be wanting to preserve a stable situation, however bad, rather than gamble to improve that situation in the future at an unknown social and political cost.

6.1.2 If fear of loss outweighs hope of gain, success will depend on how well the underlying fears are allayed. For this reason, a comprehensive communication strategy should be part of any programme for change and be in place from the outset.

### **6.2 The role of PRP as a project working within a sector plan**

6.2.1 PRP is definitely seen as a winner within Zambia, but it may not have achieved as much without having been fully embedded in the sub-sector plan.

6.2.2 It could be argued that the symbiosis between the programme of the Basic Education Sub-Sector Investment Programme (BESSIP), the precursor to the full Zambian SWAp and PRP as essentially a project has allowed the sector work to mature at its own pace while fast-tracking improvements in quality.

6.2.3 It might well be that SWAps alone will help achieve the MDGs, but in the area of quality, they seem constrained, and it is now widely accepted that it is quality that drives demand and not just buildings and desks.

6.2.4 Ministry’s can be good, or made good, at policy formulation, strategy building, financial management, monitoring and evaluation, but they are less good at seeing things from the customer’s perspective at school level.

6.2.5 The Primary Reading Programme has managed to improve learning achievement quite significantly in the area of Reading and Writing (see Baseline Study Update 2002 and National Assessment 2003). PRP has developed syllabuses for literacy, produced materials to support them and then practical training in the use of these materials, which together have resulted in improved learning achievement. ‘The traditional ‘quality mix’ of materials, training and contact time, have succeeded in this case, but it is more in the way that PRP

has managed to work across departments and directorates that has given it such success' (DFID/Ministry of Education Review 2002, page 10).

6.2.6 The secret may be to ensure that not only are the ingredients appropriate, but that they are combined in such a way as to achieve the essential synergies for quality.

6.2.7 This is where the role of a project team that is embedded within Ministry structures might come in to help to maintain a change process in schools that is driven by customer needs and able to combine responses across Ministry departments and directorates. It might be that responsive projects dealing with quality issues, but working within the discipline and control of a sector plan, have a role to play, especially in those countries that are unlikely to meet MDG targets.

### **6.3 Where to begin?**

6.3.1 One of the big questions that confronts planners is where to start when reforming systems that don't work for large numbers of people. One would imagine that curriculum would be chosen to drive the process of change in education. In Zambia, BESSIP tried to do it first through the Ministry's Planning Department and ended up creating parallel structures which are only now being integrated. Curriculum reform seemed to be given a much lower priority by the Ministry and cooperating partners until quite recently.

6.3.2 And even when Curriculum Reform is prioritised, it is difficult to do it all at once. It could be argued that if you can get just one central thing right, the others will follow, as the influence ripples out from a central model.

6.3.3 And if you are going to take on one thing, literacy is probably an excellent choice. There are improvements in many curriculum areas in Zambia that can only be attributed to the literacy inputs. PRP has also provided models for training, assessment, materials production and classroom management that are feeding directly into other curriculum reforms at virtually zero cost.

### **6.4 The cost of quality**

6.4.1 There is no doubt that quality costs, as was the case with some of the elements of PRP. Training is obviously expensive, but there is an alternative to face-to-face training and this is to build capacity at the level of the school-cluster or zone through a Zone Education Support Team. In Zambia, this team is trained through an annual cycle in those priority areas that are identified by a group representative of all Ministry of Education Directorates. This should ensure sustainability at reasonable cost.

6.4.2 Some of the PRP materials might have been initially expensive, but replacement will be less so, since some of the elements of NBTL, for example, are almost indestructible.

6.4.3 Sampa (2003, page 42), puts the cost of the PRP intervention at £1.06 per pupil allowing a five-year life for materials. This cost does not seem excessive given the influence that PRP has had on literacy and across the curriculum.

6.4.4 There are also benefits that are difficult to quantify, such as teacher motivation and closing the gaps in performance between girls and boys and between urban and rural children.

## **6.5 Focus on quality**

6.5.1 Lastly, PRP has achieved some success in Zambia, and no doubt it has much to do with the fact that it grew from a real need that was well articulated from within the country. But it has been going through its 'spending years' where it has resources to solve problems – any glitch can be attacked with fresh supplies of funds for additional training, for example. It is from here out that the real impact of PRP can be measured as it becomes fully absorbed within the day-to-day school routine and must have the durability to survive the rough and tumble of a more normal environment.

6.5.2 One of the main challenges ahead will be to keep quality at the top of the Ministry's agenda through, for example, maintaining and updating data on literacy performance: 'Tracking literacy improvements through a baseline survey has helped to keep quality on the Ministry's agenda. This aspect tends to slip away when success seems elusive and comes to the fore when there is evidence that it can be achieved' (DFID/Ministry of Education Review 2003).

6.5.3 As an initiative that began with a curriculum and training focus, its sustainability will hinge on its ability to evolve into a Standards-driven quest for quality learning in schools. It will also be the ability to build capacity at a level close to schools that can monitor quality and mentor teachers in a way that ensures their motivation and commitment.

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