

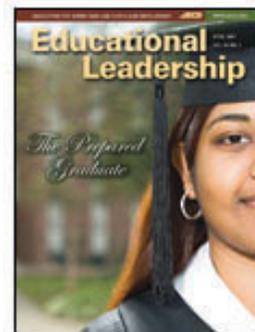
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Leading to Change / Lessons from Shamombo

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Several weeks ago, I traveled to rural Zambia to dedicate a school that my colleagues and I had built there.¹ Amidst the celebration of a facility that will serve more than 550 students in grades 1–9, I learned some leadership lessons.

The situation in Zambia is complex. Many schools are dilapidated; the new school replaced one that was more than 40 years old, was falling apart, and had been condemned by the Zambian government. Parent support is inconsistent. Too many children stay away from school either because they are caring for an ailing parent or because they must work in the fields for relatives who see little value in education, particularly for girls. An estimated 20 percent of the students have HIV/AIDS, and up to one-third have either been orphaned by the disease or have parents suffering from it.

Although the curriculum is prescribed, its application is inconsistent. Teachers are scarce and misallocated. Last year, Shamombo School had five teachers serving 476 students; this year, 12 teachers will serve more than 550 students. The doubling of the teaching staff allows the school to work in double shifts rather than triple shifts, but with the increasing student population, triple shifts will probably return next year. Teacher training ranges from the exemplary to the wholly inadequate; the teacher's college I visited was trying desperately to keep up with the demand despite a lack of books, supplies, and teacher mentors. The pay for teachers and principals is dismal, and many educators leave the profession early in their careers.

Despite the challenges—poor facilities, large class sizes, inadequate parent support, inconsistent curriculum, and widely varying teacher training (sound familiar?)—the school and community leaders of the Makangua region, in which Shamombo is located, taught me several valuable lessons.

"*Anything to add or subtract?*" Meetings were conducted with uncommon civility. In this region, where chiefs and headmen remain dominant political forces alongside (and sometimes superior to) government officials, local community governance is an emerging art. In observing meetings regarding school curriculum, community health, plans for improved water supplies,

and teacher preparation, I noticed remarkable consistencies in the conduct of affairs. People speak thoughtfully, courteously, and seriously, with clear focus on the issue at hand. Women, whose voices have only recently been heard in community and government councils in the region, are encouraged to contribute and speak, even when they have not asked for recognition. At the end of every meeting, the leader asks, "Is there anything to add or subtract from our meeting?" How often I have wished that I could have not only added to the content of a meeting, but also subtracted a comment I made in haste, a cutting remark, an unkind word, or a premature judgment.

"What do you need to learn?" When my friend Victor Simuchimba started school at age 12, he was not asked, "What grade are you in?" or "How old are you?" Rather, he was asked, "What do you need to learn?" Because his father had died and the uncle with whom he lived required him to work for his family's housing and food, Victor did not attend school until he could leave his uncle's home. When he explained that he had never held a book or a pencil and did not speak anything but his native language, he was placed in the 1st grade. Victor stayed in school for 12 years, finishing high school at the age of 24. How logical is it that state funding formulas and hidebound tradition conspire to associate the age of a student with a grade level, rather than recognizing that the relevant question for every student is, "What do you need to learn?" Before you tell me that such a question would lead to overwhelming complexity and your school system could not possibly deal with it, please be prepared to explain why your system is more complex and challenging than that of Zambia.

"We are so grateful." One of the most wonderful things about Africa is the music. In every corner of the most remote and impoverished areas I visited, the sounds of four-part harmony would greet my arrival and punctuate every meeting. The lyrical singing was accompanied by joyful dancing. I was particularly moved at a meeting of an HIV/AIDS support group whose members gathered to help one another manage their medications and learn about preventing the spread of this disease, which is the scourge of Africa.

Even in such a bleak setting, I easily became lost in the harmonies and rhythms of the singers—at least until my hostess, Madame Nkomo, asked if I knew what they were singing. I shook my head, so she translated the lyrics of the refrain: "We are so grateful. We are so grateful. We are so grateful." It made no sense to my Western ears. I was angry at social injustice, furious with the slow pace of medical treatment, frustrated and bewildered that the developing world could find millions of dollars to extract Zambian copper and just pennies to pay Zambian teachers. Thus, I could not understand this song, literally or emotionally.

But if I am to learn the lessons of Shamombo, then I must do more than be angry when confronted with challenges in Africa—or in the schools that I work in today. The obstacles that teachers and education leaders confront are immense, but we can choose our refrain. Will it be one of anger, complaint, cynicism, and despair? The lessons of Shamombo suggest that we can choose instead to learn from African students, teachers, and leaders who face hardship every day, and let our refrain be, "We are so grateful."

Endnote

¹ Combining the proceeds of the Brock International Prize with private donations, we funded the school through the Makangua Area Development Program. Although the funding and initial support came from private donors and nongovernmental organizations (in this case, World Vision), the Zambian Ministry of Education and the local governing board of parents, teachers, and community leaders own and control the school.

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