

Joanne Dwyer

Challenges associated with school linking programmes: the case of Elimu Foundation linking schools in the Nandi Hills region of western Kenya and the UK

What we do

I am the founding director of a small, newly established charity called the Elimu Foundation which grew out of a two-year school link project and whose core objective is to create wider educational opportunities for students and teachers in Kenya and the UK. 'Elimu' means education in Kiswahili. One of our headteachers in Kenya told me that that should be its name. We are currently working with schools in the Nandi Hills region of western Kenya and the London Borough of Bromley (these are the communities where we have connections and first-hand knowledge and experience) to set-up, and to facilitate, school link partnerships with the aim of raising aspirations and inter-cultural awareness and understanding. The focus is on incorporating internationalism into the curriculum by learning about each other's lives and cultures. To ignite and to further develop and sustain these links, we run the following exchange visits:

- School trips to Kenya for UK sixth form students and teachers to visit the country and to volunteer their time and skills in their partner schools
- Trips to the UK for Kenyan to visit their partner schools and to support their professional development*

We are also supporting one designated project at a time to improve educational quality and provision in the Nandi Hills community; the first of these is a project to re-build a nursery and infants school which is housed in a small corrugated iron hut. It was set-up by a local teacher in response to a need in the area. She said: *'The school is situated in town where there are many slums around and most parents are poor, so many children are at home, and that is why I started this nursery. My main objective was to offer basic education to these children who are likely to miss education in their lives.'*

The schools we work with

In Nandi Hills, we work with the schools we find who need as much support as we can give them and who would like to be involved with us, whether they are fee-paying and targeted at low-income families, or government-sponsored.

In the UK, we work with state secondary schools. Although we are planning to semi-link small clusters of primary schools here with each the secondary schools so that they can participate as well.

Why we do it

I attended ordinary state schools in the UK, but I think sometimes the extraordinary lays in the ordinary, and I was very fortunate in the teachers I had who really gave me a passion for education and for thinking about education. This then mixed with Africa and initiated an interest in development issues when I was living in Kenya as a volunteer teacher, in 2004, which led eventually to my Masters here at the IoE. The personal is threaded through everything that Elimu does. It starts with the personal and leads out from there. Schools in Nandi Hills had asked me if I would connect them with schools in the UK. I worked in schools here over a period of eight years, mostly in state schools but also in a leading independent school, and during that time I saw the dichotomy that exists between the two sectors, the opportunities inherent in one, not the other. It was never enough simply to talk to state school students about Africa and to encourage them to travel because often it was too far

outside of the realm of their own experiences. People generally do not go to Africa unless it's for a particular type of visit, like a safari holiday, and safaris are wonderful, but on their own they give only a limited perspective on life in those countries. In the end I thought that perhaps it was necessary to create those kinds of opportunities for students while they are still in school, and that I could take some of them with me to Kenya. It was not quite so plain sailing as that, we had to work hard to get permission from the governing body of our first UK school for a trip to Africa, but from these things, Elimu was born.

We use school linking as a framework firstly because it came initially as a request from Kenyan schools and second, because of the potential it carries for bringing parts of the world into the classroom, or taking a class out into the world, and for allowing students and teachers to connect with one another and to consider issues of global justice, peace and development in a different way. This might be just in thinking about fair trade, for example, and what it actually means. One of the UK teachers Elimu is working with at the moment said recently that students here who take part in these trips will one day be in middle management positions where they are likely to be making decisions which impact on people in the developing world, and it will be better that they have been there and seen it than to never have known it at all.

We want to help open up a dialogue and to actively facilitate new exchanges and ideas among the schools we work with. A highlight of the first trip, in July last year, was a hastily convened leadership conference involving senior prefects from both schools, who were all present, in which they spoke about their individual roles, the different challenges they faced (and some that were the same), offered each other advice, and considered what makes a good leader. The Kenyan students drew on their country's own history of poor leadership, they were particularly concerned with the impact of corruption and how it filters right the way down into the playground. The head girl was intrigued by how student election campaigns worked in the UK school. She said prefects were chosen by teachers in her school and she felt an election campaign might not work there because candidates would 'buy' votes by selling sweets and favours to other students, and that they would not then be the leaders they needed to be.

Kenyan and UK teachers also have a chance to share good practice and ideas and to aid in their own and each other's professional development. This is particularly important for Kenyan teachers. Nandi Hills is a fairly rural area where there are few opportunities like this or models of teaching and leadership with which to engage, locally or internationally. So we are localising these exchanges by setting up Elimu support networks in each of the communities we work in to guide and support the teachers in our link schools. The development projects we support, meanwhile, enable us to combine the personal with the practical to improve educational infrastructure.

How we work

We look to the basic principles of Education for All (EFA) which in 1990 placed education at the heart of the global movement towards poverty reduction and development as a starting point for our work and weave this into it.

Elimu is very much a grassroots organisation. We rely on and work to build sustainable, long-term relationships with schools, community leaders, students, parents, local education officers, and local businesses. Kindness, loyalty and goodwill are carrying us forward in these early stages. We will be holding three fundraisers a year. Our trustees are based in the UK along with two advisors, one of whom has lived in Kenya while the other works in development, but our development project manager and our Kenya representative who assists me in organising the school trips are both part of the Nandi Hills community and I work closely with them. We are all quite different and we all inspire each other I think in wanting to respond to the things we can. The local community in Kenya is important for leading us in

the right direction. We have a laidback way of working in that we will go with whatever we come across there, whether it's a school or a potential development project.

I am coming to the conclusion, however, that a collaborative approach must also be the exhausting approach, given the number of different dialogues that are running, and being fed back, at any one time, in two different countries! It's not just me speaking over the phone to a builder in Nandi Hills about our nursery school. It's our project manager, George, asking people if they can recommend one, passing on messages, finding someone who is willing to donate their time to draw the floor plans, and someone else who does not mind offering up the use of their computer and internet so that the plans can be emailed to me. Other than that, it's up to the teacher who runs it to decide what she wants her school to look like. I just make sure everything that needs to happen, happens. On the school trips, we stay locally, we eat dinner in people's homes, and we borrow a minibus from one of our schools, we don't hire a big truck. It's about immersing people in this community as much as possible.

Overall, Elimu's work is akin to putting together a small tapestry. We are building a few bridges here and there and sowing a few seeds and if we are talking about peace education, directly or indirectly, then these are the things which provide the very foundations for it.

Challenges we face

These are many and varied and there are challenges which spring up on a fairly regular basis. One is in tackling misconceptions about the link country, which can be either too negative or too positive, and which undermines the essence of school linking. We also have a few uninterested, temporary teachers in one or two of our Kenyan schools who are in a more transient state and do not really want to be there. This may be because they are from different parts of the country and have left their families behind and they want to go home, or they are not trained teachers. Some have a tendency to leave their classes to whoever is in the room and to sit elsewhere with a cup of tea. This presents a challenge when we are encouraging an exchange between teachers and is not helpful for maintaining a school link. I can't say 'go back to your class' but I do think: how do I explain this to teachers from the UK? These are things though that we have adopted a certain acceptance of and deal with one step at a time.

Currently, our two main challenges are:

1. Finding the most effective – and efficient – methods for evaluating school linking programmes, bearing in mind that we are sowing seeds and much of what we do is hard to measure. Also, that I prefer minimal data.
2. Nandi Hills is a town that is slowly recovering from the trauma of the 2007 election violence. It was in the eye of the storm for a while. It is a challenge to know how to address this within the context of school linking programmes as the 2012 elections are in sight and local election campaigns are starting this year. I am concerned with ensuring that no-one feels unsettled about visiting a place that has had a difficult time in recent years but is now safe. At the same time, it is about pre-empting all possibilities and if anything were to ever happen there again, I would want the people we bring to Kenya to be educated and informed enough to be able to pick up a newspaper at home and to see beyond the headlines. Education has a key role to play in understanding these things both now and in the future and in propagating peace. I feel that as an educational organisation, it would be natural for us to engage with this issue in some way and that probably we have a responsibility to do so.

Thoughts and advice would be much appreciated.

Thank you for having me.

Some Q&A responses (abridged, and not necessarily in order):

1. What do the UK students do in Kenya?

They visit their link school and volunteer as teachers in lessons, based on whichever subjects they are studying and what their skills and interests are. The Kenyan school puts together a timetable for them which is a bit chaotic, but at least they have one! They also help with extra-curricular activities and they play a lot with the children. They are based in one school but they do get taken off to other schools and 'shown' to them as well. They get to know the local community.

2. How long are the trips for?

The trips are for 10 days. We are bound by the UK school curriculum and timetable and we do have to consider costs. The students pay for their trips, although they do some fundraising.

3. What is the potential for scaling up the number of students involved?

We take around 15 students to Kenya. There are two deciding factors in this. One is that there are a limited number of beds in the guest house where we stay in Nandi Hills, and the other is that we do not want to overburden the Kenyan schools with too many visitors. They would happily have 100 people coming to stay but practically, that would be difficult. I have to balance discussions on how many people the schools think should be involved with what the overall picture is, and therefore, weigh up what is for the best.

There is a basic criterion for students, so that automatically reduces the numbers who are eligible. It is not done on a first-come first-served basis as with other school trips. Students have to show commitment and to have contributed to the life of their school here first. But the more trips we run the more students there will be who will have a chance to take part.

4. Could you use technology such as Skype to reach more students?

Yes, we would like to. Not all the Kenyan schools have internet access at the moment. They are working on that though and once they do, that is something we will be able to look into. It would also be good for teacher conferences.

Facebook is also useful. A lot of mobile phones in Kenya have Facebook applications so some students and teachers have kept in touch that way.

5. What age range are the students in Kenya?

We work with primary schools so they are aged six to 14. There is a direct link with students in the UK schools who are aged 11 to 14 [for example, letter writing exchanges which have been very interesting in revealing standards of literacy in both places]. The GCSE years here tend to get 'left', as they are focused on exams, although they will have gone through Key Stage 3 and been taught about Kenya then, and in the sixth form students can travel to Kenya.

The reason we work with primary schools in Kenya is that our focus there is on basic education and because there are only a few secondary schools in Nandi Hills. Also, the moment you have children of secondary school age in contact with one another, you run into all kinds of potential trouble. Especially when in Kenyan schools children may not be the age you think they are; boys of 19 or 20 may be in classes of 15-year-olds. So in linking primary schools with secondaries, we have created a separation there and eliminated that problem.

But we will be involving secondary schools in Nandi Hills with the link primary schools there, just as we are starting to do in the UK, but the other way round.

6. Will you be bringing Kenyan students to the UK?

No. It is something we think about, but the problem with bringing Kenyan children over to UK secondary schools – when to come here at all would probably be enough of a culture shock for their teachers – is that they may not be able to go onto secondary education, so you show them something they may never have, and then you send them back. What does that do to someone and does it not then become tokenistic? I don't think it's the right thing to do at this time. Kenyan teachers though can visit schools here and then feed-back their experiences.

7. Would you consider bringing Kenyan secondary school students to visit primary schools here instead?

Yes, that is a possibility. It's something to consider.

8. How do UK teachers cope with going from a teaching environment where they have a lot of resources to somewhere where they have none?

Well, we have worked out a criterion for teachers as well. At least one must be an experienced teacher with so many years' teaching experience and they all have to be flexible and adaptable. They also need to be able to teach subjects which fit the needs and requirements of the Kenyan curriculum and the link school. There is a lot of rigorous planning in schools here and the advice I give is that while they can plan some lessons to take with them, they shouldn't get too attached to those plans; they must be able to separate from them and to make do with very little. We have a pre-departure session for them where I go through the school system in Kenya and talk about their link schools and what to expect. We also bring in a UK teacher who has taught in a Kenyan school and can advise them – anyone who's not me!

9. Do you have any thoughts on how you might evaluate the work you're doing?

We know we can keep track of the number of schools we are working with and the numbers of students and teachers who are involved in exchange visits. If we're looking at the nursery school we're building, then we will be able to see how many more children have benefited from that. The school will have the equivalent of a Year 1 class so that children can stay on for longer, and more children can join. So that's a very basic assessment of numbers.

We have a partnership agreement with each of the schools which details what Elimu's role is, ours is very specific, and what we expect of the schools. Theirs is looser because we want them to have input. So that's a useful base as well for when we come to evaluate. We have questionnaires to give to students and teachers about their responses to the trips and what they have learnt. But that has to be done in a culturally sensitive way. It's no good for the Kenyan teachers if I am there while they fill them out; it has to be after I've left and they have to feel secure in being honest in what they write, and to know that we are not going to abandon their school.

We get to know everyone involved in the trips and we keep in touch afterwards with students in the UK who go off to University, we want to build in an alumni network. A few from last year's trip have gone on to give presentations about Kenya as part of their University courses. So in keeping it 'close' to us, it will help us to decide how to assess and to evaluate over the longer term. We are figuring out how to do that which is partly why we are moving so slowly.

[It was suggested that we stick to an academic evaluation/exploration; possibly starting with my dissertation].

10. What about sustainability? If you leave, does it all fall apart?

Well, we will need to involve more people in specific roles as we go along. We have actually just put together a disaster management policy for the trips and have had to co-opt in someone who can step in and take over if I die. Hopefully, I won't die but we need an emergency contact just in case.

11. What is your vision for the next five, 10, or 15 years?

We have a strategic plan which maps out the next five years. We know how many schools we will be linking, and involving in other ways, each year, and we have mostly identified which ones they are. Our next development project has also been discussed; we will be doing one at least every two years. We want to build a youth education centre in Nandi Hills town which has an HIV/Aids awareness centre. That's George's thing. He and I previously worked on HIV awareness campaigns and he is very involved in youth empowerment through education.

In three to four years time we will need to be working with another community in Kenya. We have a partner organisation which works in the south-east of the country building schools and libraries and we have talked about the possibility of switching places – keeping up with our own bases, but swapping contacts and networks in order to establish new ones as well.

I would like us to link up every school in Nandi Hills not only with UK schools but with each other and to bring many more people out to Africa, and see where we go from there.