

African Voices - In Their Own Words

Richard Borowski (University of Leeds)

Between 2004 and 2020 the LUCAS Schools Project recruited and training 134 African postgraduates to deliver activity days and sessions about contemporary Africa in local schools. They came from 20 different African countries, mainly from former British colonies, to study a wide range of taught postgraduate courses (103) and undertake postgraduate research (31) at the University of Leeds.

Behind these numbers, each of the African postgraduates had their own reasons for joining the LUCAS Schools Project and their own stories to tell. Granted, they represent a section of the African population that had the opportunity to excel within the education systems in their own countries and were fortunate enough to secure the sponsorship required to continue their studies in the UK. Nevertheless, they were ambassadors for the continent of Africa, their countries and their own ethnic communities.

Why did they join us on the LUCAS Schools Project journey? What did they experience along the way? What new skills, abilities and perceptions did they acquire? This is their story, in their own words.

Recruitment

As the African postgraduates were studying at the University of Leeds for a relatively short period, one year in the case of Taught postgraduates and three years in the case of research postgraduates, the LUCAS Schools Project has to regularly recruit and train Project Teachers to deliver the activity programmes. When the African postgraduates applied to join the LUCAS Schools Project, we asked them about their reasons for wanting to be a Project Teacher.

One common reason for wanting to become a LUCAS Schools Project Teacher was the pride the African postgraduates had in their African heritage and a passion for sharing their knowledge and experience with young people.

“... I am an African born and raised in Africa. I love Africa and, I believe, other people should get information about Africa so they can love it too... I hope this is the opportunity I have to paint the right African picture about my beautiful continent Africa.”

Owens Berunga (Uganda) 2010/11 (TPG/MA International Education Management)

“... I love Africa and Zimbabwe and am passionate about presenting a balanced view of where I come from, my heritage. I also passionately love young people and relish every opportunity I can get to impact them positively. Being a LUCAS Schools Project Teacher offers me the opportunity to be an ambassador for my nation and for my continent.”

Nyaradzo Debra Muhonde (Zimbabwe) 2010/11 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“I love Africa and my country Ethiopia. I would love to learn about British Culture in a school context and I would like to share my experience in Africa. I believe that we can learn from each other.”

Abayneh Haile (Ethiopia) 2013/14 (TPG/MA TESOL)

The African postgraduates applying to become LUCAS Project Teachers were also aware of the distorted representation of Africa presented by the media in the UK and expressed a desire to change that overly negative narrative.

“I was really interested in the program because of the objective that it aimed to achieve. I felt it would be a good opportunity to project Africa and show Africa as it really is rather than the misrepresented Africa on BBC and the foreign media.’

Ejekwumadu Ikechukwu J (Nigeria) 2007/08 (TPG/MA Sociology)

“It will allow me to present to the children in the schools in Leeds an alternate point of view to the often-skewed views of Africa that the media and some organisations incessantly bombard them with. It would be an opportunity to present “the other side of the story” as it were.”

Nyaradzo Debra Muhonde (Zimbabwe) 2010/11 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“A lot has been said about Africa on Radio stations and Televisions. However, some of the information told about Africa is not accurate enough to make non-Africans to love it.”

Owens Berunga (Uganda) 2010/11 (TPG/MA International Education Management)

“I want to contribute my fair share in ensuring that people in western countries have a correct view and knowledge of the beautiful continent that is Africa. The sad portrayal of Africa as a diseased, war-torn and poor continent by the media has for a long time overshadowed the beautiful sunsets, friendly people, and good food that is abundant in Africa. I want to share the wonderful stories from Africa that can only be told by an African.”

Sepo Sitali (Zambia) 2015/16 (TPG/MSc Energy and Environment)

Some of the African postgraduates had already experienced the impact of misunderstandings and misconceptions of Africa for themselves or aware of the need to tackle prejudice and discrimination.

“During a visit to Scarborough, I encountered a white couple with their two young children (possibly five and a three year old). On seeing me and my colleague, the three year old run to his mother and clutched on her tightly. It was apparent to us the innocent child may not have met a black person before, and possibly not made aware of their existence. The seemingly embarrassed parents, tried to make up for it with some pleasant faces. I have also encountered a few postgraduate students who are ‘heavily weighed down’ by their misconceptions about Africa.”

George Njoroge (Kenya) 2011/12 (TPG/MSc Sustainability)

“Having travelled to two other continents/countries (Australia and UK) I have come across people both young and old who have not even a faint idea about Africa or whose idea of Africa is the one portrayed in the media by charity organizations. Talking to these people in informal settings have been quite satisfying. Becoming a LUCAS Schools Project teacher promises to be an exciting experience both on me and those schools I will be involved with.”

Edister Jamu (Malawi) 2015/18 (RPG/PhD Work and Employment Relations)

“I think this is very good project to change the mind-set of all children and adults about Africa, the practices and the lifestyle of African people... This will help the new European generations to look at Africa in a different perspective and in a different way. It is important also to illustrate and make them to understand why they should not discriminate African people in all various aspect of life.”

Johannes Tohlang Ngakana (Lesotho) 2011/12 (TPG/MA Health Management, Planning and Policy)

Other African postgraduates expressed a vision of a more equitable future for Africa and Africans in their relationships with the rest of the world.

“I feel this is an opportunity for me to leave an African mark on the young minds not only through teaching but attempting to bring the African culture closer to these minds. This will broaden their understanding of the way of life and, most importantly, development hiccups facing these outlying areas. It is my hope that together, with a deeper understanding shall surge a collective voice and ultimately change the image of Africa. This is my driving force and vision.”

Simon Manda (Zambia) 2010/11 (TPG/MA Global Development)

“As a leader for social justice, I find this opportunity a very important one in creating awareness about my continent as some of the negative stereotypes often portrayed in News and films encompass social injustice for African people. This is a timely opportunity to change the stereotypes especially in the era of globalisation where the world is a global village. It is only fair that the world has an objective representation of what Africa is.”

Lillian Mbabazi (Uganda) 2011/12 (MA Theatre and Global Development)

“As my experience here in the UK has shown that there is actually a misconception of Africa and the continent by many and I have had the privilege to share with some friends and colleagues. It would be another good opportunity to do this with children in Leeds, as I also think it is a noble initiative by the city to create this awareness that would help diversity and good relations in the lives of these children as they grow and interact with people from other continents.”

Lydia Suleh (Nigeria) 2018/21 (RPG/PhD Work and Employment Relations)

Training

It became clear from the LUCAS Link Pilot Project, undertaken between 2004 and 2006, that the African postgraduates would require training and support to deliver effective activity programmes with young people in the classroom. Most of the African postgraduates had no teacher training and those who had were unfamiliar with teaching young people in the UK. A programme of training and support was devised during the developmental phase of the LUCAS Schools Project between 2007 and 2010. This consisted of four Saturday training days followed up by one-to-one support prior to and following the delivery of activity programmes in schools.

The effectiveness of the activity programmes in schools was dependent on the skills and abilities of the African postgraduates to deliver them in a manner consistent with a professional educator.

The preparation the African postgraduates received to accomplish this was very much appreciated.

“I was trained as a LUCAS Teacher in 2011 where I was equipped with skills to engage children and effectively deliver the Lessons. After the training, I was enthusiastic and ready to impart the knowledge about Africa and showcase some of the beautiful things in Africa - it was an exciting journey for me.”

Mary Stephens (Nigeria) 2011/12 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“The training we received before going to the schools helped us to be well-prepared to teach in a British context. The training sessions were moments of learning about the programme itself and ways of delivering the lessons in effective ways. We were also provided with a lot of materials and advice to succeed in our teaching.”

Dame Diop (Senegal) 2013/14 (TPG/MA TESOL)

“The truth is, delivering on the LUCAS Schools Project would have been near impossible without the training. How were we to know what to expect? How were we to know the deep and strongly held misconceptions about Africa? Indeed, how were we to prepare for the level of activity required to keep the children engaged throughout the day? And, how about the level of support to expect from our hosts—the schools? All of these wouldn't have been possible without the exhaustive training we all received. In my eyes, the facilitators became Africans. They knew more than I had anticipated they would know about the continent.”

Effiong Henshaw (Nigeria) 2015/16 (TPG/MA Political Communication)

One other, unexpected, outcome of the training programmes was the sharing of experiences amongst the African postgraduates themselves and the peer support they received from each other in preparing and delivering the activity programmes.

“...getting to know that some of my African counterparts do not know anything about other African countries. They have similar thinking like the British, especially lack of knowledge about Sudan.”

Kutiyote Steward Francis (Sudan) 2008/09 (TPG/MA Development Studies and Education)

“It was a great experience. It gave me an opportunity to be in a group of dynamic young Africans that I would have otherwise not met. Secondly, the support was so great that I ended up thinking teaching was the easiest job on earth and I know it is not true – the tools we were equipped with made our lives so easy. I also enjoyed the bond between the school's teachers, pupils and us. The Saturday trainings were great. It always felt like a family get together in a place very far from home.”

Ret'sepile Makamane (Lesotho) 2008/09 (TPG/MA Development Studies and Gender)

“Although I am from Senegal, I learnt a lot about Africa through the designing of the lessons with the support of the trainers and our interactions with other African students.”

Dame Diop (Senegal) 2013/14 (TPG/MA TESOL)

“In fact, it exposed me to certain important facts about our continent which, as an African did not know about.”

Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye (Ghana) 2010-14 (PGR/PhD African Religions and Environment)

“The shared experience with my other African colleagues made us bond closer as we talked more about our different countries, cultures, foods, and of course, perceptions and stereotypes before discussing with each other. Of course, such stereotypes were quickly eroded as we engaged with each other over the course of the year.”

Effiong Henshaw (Nigeria) 2015/16 (TPG/MA Political Communication)

Engagement

Collectively, the African Postgraduates delivered African Voices activity programmes in over 100 primary and secondary schools in the Leeds area. It was these engagements with young people in the classroom that they valued the most.

The African postgraduates were most surprised by the young people’s overall lack of awareness of the African continent, its peoples and culture.

“What excited me, which was actually a surprise, was to hear a child asking me whether I have a mobile phone, and seeing children getting surprised when they hear from me that I can drive a vehicle on the most difficult road. This showed to me the kind of perceptions they, including some adult British, have about Africa’s status as totally backward in technology.”

Kutiyote Steward Francis (Sudan) 2008/09 (TPG/MA Development Studies and Education)

“...I was surprised that majority the pupils thought that Africa is a country rather than a continent with over 54/55 countries. When I brought out the map of Africa, some of the pupils were able to identify Egypt and Libya while some were able to guess South Africa on the map using the name of the country as a hint – the South of Africa.”

Mary Stephens (Nigeria) 2011/12 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“The pupils showed much interest in the lessons. However, I also realised that many of them did not know much about Africa and some had a lot of misconceptions about it. For instance, some thought that it was a single country, not a continent! Many of them linked their understanding of Africa with poverty and the need to be helped by charity organisations. It seemed to me that African pupils learn more about Europe than their European counterparts do about Africa.”

Dame Diop (Senegal) 2013/14 (TPG/MA TESOL)

“Without an iota of doubt, my participation in the LUCAS Schools Project was an “eureka” moment for me. I could not believe that, in too many cases, children in the schools here thought of Africa as one undifferentiated country, rather than a continent with over 50 thriving countries. In some classes, I found that the teachers were equally getting some enlightenment about the continent, its peoples and cultures. I recall showing a video of some of the streets in Lagos, Nigeria and being asked to rewind a bit so they could get a better look at that “posh house.”

Effiong Henshaw (Nigeria) 2015/16 (TPG/MA Political Communication)

However, they enjoyed the eagerness of the young people to find out more and realising that their engagements were beginning to change perceptions.

“I realised from the response from the children I taught that they were not happy about the unfair trade order against Africa.”

Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye (Ghana) 2010-14 (PGR/PhD African Religions and Environment)

“...the pupils were very surprised to see that the richest man in Africa, Aliko Dangote, is richer than the richest man in the United Kingdom. Their initial understanding of Africa was a desert full of poor people with no clean water. Then came a surprising question to me from one of the lovely pupils “Mary, are you rich” when she started internalizing the fact that not all the people in Africa are poor.”

Mary Stephens (Nigeria) 2011/12 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“At the end of our lessons, the pupils didn’t want to let us go. They were so excited and wanted to learn more about Africa, of course they want to go to Kenya to see the wild animals and enjoy the warm weather.”

Mary Stephens (Nigeria) 2011/12 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“I remembered that some students were amazed when I showed them pictures from capital cities of some African countries. They asked a lot of questions about wildlife and people and the differences between Africa and Europe. As a teacher, I could see in them a genuine eagerness to know more about this continent.”

Dame Diop (Senegal) 2013/14 (TPG/MA TESOL)

“Unexpected questions always came at me about various subjects, from Fair Trade on Cocoa, the reason for the disparity in standards of living between the UK and countries in Africa... With children, one could hardly be politically correct, because they would keep peppering me with questions that really required a frank conversation.”

Effiong Henshaw (Nigeria) 2015/16 (TPG/MA Political Communication)

“I have loved very much seeing how engaged the children were, learning about Africa and very inquisitive asking very key and interesting questions about Africa and relating to both day-to-day life and school activities and the general economy of the UK.”

Anjelo Okot (Uganda) 2015/16 (TPG/MSc Economics and Finance) and 2017/21 (PGR/PhD Leeds University Business School)

Personal Development

At the end of each academic year it was sad to see the African postgraduates that the LUCAS Schools Project had recruited, trained and supported finish their studies at the University of Leeds and return to their African homes. However, they took with them the skills and experiences they had gained during their time in Leeds and their participation in the project.

“I have gained knowledge of working with children who are open-minded and curious. I have also gained the skills of changing perceptions of human beings.”

Kutiote Steward Francis (Sudan) 2008/09 (TPG/MA Development Studies and Education)

“Today, 10 years later, I still vividly remember this exciting experience. It was indeed a great privilege to participate in the LUCAS project.”

Mary Stephens (Nigeria) 2011/12 (TPG/MPH Public Health)

“As a whole, my participation was good for both my professional and personal development. I enjoyed the time I spent with the pupils. These moments were opportunities for me to learn from them and to raise their awareness about the different realities of Africa.”

Dame Diop (Senegal) 2013/14 (TPG/MA TESOL)

“I often remember my participation in the LUCAS Schools Project with a lot of fondness, and consider every moment I dedicated to planning the lectures as time very well spent.”

Effiong Henshaw (Nigeria) 2015/16 (TPG/MA Political Communication)

“Getting involved with LUCAS was eye-opening in some respects. I came to know more about the United Kingdom and its people due to the frank and honest exchanges with the pupils and teachers... In some ways, my participation prepared me for what I discovered in researching on how the British press portrayed African immigrants in the UK. The reality is some things can't be taught. It's only by getting involved that one learns in a tangible way.”

Effiong Henshaw (Nigeria) 2015/16 (TPG/MA Political Communication)

“Engaging with teachers in schools in Leeds has inspired me to think of copying the same commitment and innovating learning approaches to take to my country, Uganda, especially the Northern part which has been heavily affected by prolonged wars.”

Anjelo Okot (Uganda) 2015/16 (TPG/MSc Economics and Finance) and 2017/21 (PGR/PhD Leeds University Business School)