MIGRATION: A GAMBIAN PERSPECTIVE

MUHAMMED JOBARTEH WITH SIMON COLLIS

This article from Gambian teacher, Muhammed, challenges us to view issues about migration from African perspectives. Simon then responds with some thoughts about how he might rise to this challenge with his own primary class in the UK.

While the world continues to view irregular migration from the angle of its human tragedy in the Mediterranean, the inhuman conditions of migrant camps and the enormous pressure on host countries, there exists a far greater impact on the countries that migrants originate from. The Gambia is among the countries in sub-Saharan Africa where many migrants originate.

Located on the edge of the Sahara Desert, in recent years The Gambia has had low rainfall and a poor agricultural output, this has been deepened by the global financial crisis. As a result, many of its youth have opted to look elsewhere to achieve their dreams of a better life. One option that many take up is 'irregular migration'.

This migration of young people to Europe is the worst of all scenarios. Locally, the journey is called the 'backway'. The mere thought of going on it begins a frenzy about travelling in boys as young as 14. They cease to show any positive attitude to learning or enterprise in their own country, because their vision is already set on Europe, and nothing makes sense to them except getting there.

The impact on schools

A brief survey in my school indicates that nine in every ten boys would like to travel to Europe, and seven of every ten would go the 'backway', if they had the means. Teachers like me face the challenge of teaching pupils who have lost their conviction in the education system and would prefer to migrate. Those young boys who have set their heart on reaching Europe are not only difficult to manage, but also their attitudes often influence others.

Irregular migration helps explain the negative rate of return of education in The Gambia and other sub-Saharan African countries. Young students have little hope of a bright future in their own countries, so they rarely accept the fact that greater opportunities exist in Africa. Perhaps they mirror themselves on those students who have passed through the same education system and still struggle to gain a meaningful livelihood. As such, there is not enough incentive to endeavour in our education system. The 'backway' syndrome has impacted adversely on the interest and performance of a large number of students, especially in high schools. We are seeing disruption of school rolls, an increase in the rate of dropout, a poor completion rate, and an overall threat to the efficiency of the education system.

'Young students have little hope of a bright future in their own countries, so they rarely accept the fact that greater opportunities exist in Africa'. Photo © Ben Ballin.

The impact on wider society

Most of the participants in irregular migration are the poorest members of an already poor society. They are from families who struggle very hard to feed themselves at all, let alone well, yet they commit a thousand US dollars to travel to Libya (unsure if they will reach that country) and another thousand dollars to cross the Mediterranean, with no certainty that they will reach the shores of Europe safely.

While some families dip into their life savings to send one member on the perilous journey in order for them to send remittances back once they start earning, others sell off their only assets. In some situations, boys steal the entire fortune of a family business in order to escape to Libya. Altogether, the cost of migration – however it is generated – is robbing third-world families of thousands of dollars that could have gone a long way to improving the whole family's conditions.

Such migration sends the whole community into shock: everyone is either

mourning the loss of a loved one or extending condolences to bereaved neighbours. It feels like a war zone, considering the number of deaths in every corner of the community: these children are lost at sea, starved to death in the deserts of Libya, killed by armed gangs and/or robbed by criminals in the wild desert between Agades and Sabah. The tragic loss of a child is particularly painful in a society where there is no proper social security system.

In addition, throughout Gambian society irregular migration is widening the imbalance between the genders. If boys continue to undertake these perilous journeys, there is the risk of having a disproportionate number of girls in the remaining population.

Addressing the situation

There is the need for appropriate measures to curb this threat to our students. We need to create a variety of opportunities that young people, as the products of the Gambian education system, can harness. This would raise students' confidence in the existing system in The Gambia. We could design the education system and curriculum to promote a greater sense of national pride.

The whole idea of travelling to Europe is a highly-regarded one in sub-Saharan Africa. The remittances and exchanges accrued from this enterprise can contribute positively to the Gambian and other countries' economies. However, irregular migration to Europe such as I have described above is yet to match the benefits of regular and well-managed migration.

Regular migration could be made easier and fairer. Many aspiring migrants spend huge sums of money at European embassies, only to have their visa applications rejected without clear reason. In these circumstances, some feel that the only way to salvage their family from the shackles of poverty is to take the 'backway' to Europe, even if they risk dying in the attempt.

Responding to 'Muhammed's perspective'

Muhammed's description of the situation in The Gambia offers primary teachers a real challenge: how can we present a voice from The Gambia to our students without de-contextualising it: 'flattening' it out so that it becomes the sole opinion or representative of the issue? It reminds me of Fran Martin's discussion of difference during her time as GA President (Martin, 2012), which warned us of the dangers of telling a single story.

Muhammed's piece demands context, which for the pupils in my class needs linking with their personal narratives. They are exposed to a migration narrative through the media and through opinions that their families may express. They may have direct experience of migration themselves, or indirectly through peers: some pupils have come to us as refugees or asylum seekers, some as economic migrants and some as part of the EU's freedom of movement. These narratives conflict, corroborate and overlap with what pupils see or hear elsewhere.

What is migration?

Before Muhammed's piece can be directly addressed, the class would need to think about what migration means. On the smallest scale possible, why do people move house within a city or town? This highlights push-and-pull factors and can be based on pupils' lived experiences. From there, it is possible to 'zoom out' to a discussion about why people might want to move to different countries. This requires careful handling, especially if pupils are likely to re-present information that is overly biased or opinion as fact. Establishing ground rules that create a safe exploratory space is vital. Philosophy for Children (see web panel) offers pupils language structures and patterns that help them to agree and disagree with their peers.

Migration in The Gambia

Looking at Muhammed's account specifically, I would ask the class why some of his students are eager to leave The Gambia. This requires broader geographical context: an understanding of where The Gambia is and what it is like. I would compare some of the push and pull factors that Muhammed discusses with those that the class has listed previously - to establish the common experience of wanting to move somewhere 'better', or away from somewhere 'worse'. We would also discuss the idea of a 'backway', and how strongly the young men must feel to take such a risky decision. This could be linked to other migration/refugee crises, documented in journals like *The Week Junior* or *First News* (see web panel). Both offer balanced views that are challenging but accessible.

In order to prevent Muhammed's explanation being taken as the single story (Griffiths and Allbutt, 2011), it is necessary to examine his piece as an opinion. I would ask the pupils, 'Does this text support the young people who choose to take the "backway"?', 'What does he think they should do?' and 'What is the impact in Gambia of all the young men departing?

After these discussions have concluded, it would be important to compare what the pupils thought about migration before and after. Before the lessons, pupils could seal their ideas in an envelope, to be compared with their thoughts afterwards. This could lead into a broader discussion of how we may (or may not) change our minds based on what we see and hear.

The promise of a better future in Europe lures children as young as 14 from the shores of the Gambia. Photo © Ben Ballin.

References

Griffiths, H. and Allbutt, G. (2011) 'The danger of the single image', *Primary Geography*, 75, pp. 16–17.

Martin, F. (2012) 'Editorial', *Primary Geography*, 79, pp. 4–5.

WEB RESOURCES

First News: *www.firstnews.co.uk*

SAPERE Philosophy for Children, Colleges, Communities: *www.sapere.org.uk*

The Week Junior: *www.theweekjunior.co.uk*

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