

Intensifying Quality Education For All Through ODL In Lesotho Primary Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for teacher training and preparation is generally regarded as a means of improving both, the shortage of qualified teachers and the quality of instruction in primary schools. While there is no doubt that many countries face challenges of teacher supply, there are equally serious challenges of teacher deployment. According to Mulkeen (2005), in many countries there are qualified teachers in urban areas who are unemployed, while there are unfilled posts in rural areas. In his view, this pattern of surplus and shortage is strong evidence that the problem of teachers for rural schools will not be solved simply by providing more teachers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teacher supply in Lesotho

The supply of newly qualified teachers in Lesotho is very limited since the main source of qualified teachers for the primary schools in Lesotho is the Lesotho College of Education (LCE), which trains teachers through the full-time and part-time modes of programme delivery. Reports from the Ministry of Education and Training (2006), have shown that, the DTEP is used by the government, as a powerful tool for improving the shortage of qualified teachers and the quality of instruction in schools. Since quality does not exist in isolation from its context, it is widely acknowledged that the nature and quality of the teachers who staff rural and remote schools impact the quality and equity of educational experiences for the people in these areas (Madamombe, 2007).

Poor quality of primary education in Lesotho is a matter of concern (World Bank, 2005), that is associated with severe shortages of teachers and high repetition rates, especially in the lower primary standards. It is for this reason therefore, that Khechane, Mapetla, Monaheng-Mariti, Phamotse, and Phatela, (2005), note that the total number of newly qualified teachers each year does not meet the demands arising from teacher attrition. It is believed that Lesotho is not producing enough newly qualified teachers to meet the demands of the primary education. This withstanding, not much seems to have been documented that clearly show the deployment pattern of qualified teachers to be able to determine the cause and effect for teacher attrition.

Rural Schools and Teacher Supply

The focus on the difficulty and complexity of rural education provision, quality teachers, and teacher professional development means that we need to place attention not just on the state employing body, but also on the process of initial teacher education as currently organized and offered by the college sector (Mapetla, (2008), Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, and Millwater, (1999). Clearly, teacher education is not only implicated in the provision of quality teachers for rural and remote schools; but also in the retention of such teachers.

It is true that recruiting and retaining adequate numbers of qualified teacher for the remote rural schools may not be an easy task; given that many newly appointed teachers are often unfortunately placed in the position of accepting a job in a location they do not find desirable (Lauricella, 2005), but simply accept the job in order to gain employment. White (2003), may therefore be justified, that many young teachers appointed to rural schools begin planning where they will move to shortly after their arrival in such placements.

While this kind of practice may be common among teachers in many parts of the world, Lesotho has, yet another unique experience. One unusual feature of the Lesotho primary teachers' system is the presence of unpaid 'volunteer' teachers in some schools. The 2004 school census captured a total of 354 such teachers (Khechane, et al, 2005). These volunteer teachers are typically young school leavers who cannot find a job, and who volunteer to teach in the local school with the intention to gather the requisite experience to be admitted in the DTEP and also, in the hope of getting employed if a vacancy arises.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study intends to examine the role that Distance Teacher Education programmes play in attracting and retaining primary school teachers for schools in the remote rural areas. The paper specifically focused on factors affecting the movement of Distance Learners from one school to another for the past five years, that is, 2005-2009; the effects of the teachers' movements on pupils' teaching and learning processes; and the strategies that ODL institutions use to attract and retain learners during and after their training as teachers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study therefore, addressed the following questions:

1. What are the factors influencing distance learners to move from one school to another during their training as teachers?
2. What are the views of Tutors and Head-teachers about the learners' movement from one school to another?
3. What strategies do Distance Education Institutions use to attract and retain teachers for rural schools?
4. How prepared are distance learners to serve as teachers in their practicing schools even after they have completed their training as teachers?
5. In the light of the results from this study, is there anything that could be done differently to improve the deployment of teachers in Lesotho?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This is a 'small scale' case study which assessed the role that Open and Distance Learning Programmes have in attracting and retaining primary school teachers for remote rural schools. The study focused on a single ODL programme; that is, DTEP of the Lesotho College of Education (LCE). Bryman (2001) asserts that the most common use of the term 'case' links it with a setting, such as an organisation. Case studies can also "be used as a means of identifying key issues which merit further investigation" (Bell, 1999: 11). The study therefore, used quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data that provided answers to research questions. Through this approach, both themes and statistical analysis were presented in order to give clear descriptions and explanations of factors thought to affect the recruitment and retention of primary school teachers in rural school.

Population and Sample

The population for this study included learners who were in their fourth and final year of a Distance Teacher Education Programme of the Lesotho College of Education, Head teachers in schools where learners were placed, and Full-time tutors programme tutors. These groups were selected because of their relatively longer period of time they had spent as primary and secondary beneficiaries of the programme; hence their ability to share experiences and perceptions on what the college should do to attract and retain teachers for schools in the rural areas. Learners came from 6 clusters, representative of six DTEP regional centres. (A cluster means two or more sites merged together for programme administrative purposes while a site refers to a 'constituency' that comprises a group of learners. The distance learning programme has 18 Clusters in all that operate as centres for scheduled contact sessions.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were administered to 100 respondents, comprising 80 learners, 10 head teachers and 10 distance education tutors from (6) administrative regions within which Distance Teacher Education Programme operates. The clusters were selected on purpose in that, only those that were considered to fit into the definition describing 'rural schools' in the reviewed literature were included in the sample. The questionnaire comprised of closed as well as open-ended questions which allowed the respondents to give their views and descriptive accounts of their experiences.

Interviews

Interviews were also conducted for 45 distance teacher learners, 10 tutors, and 10 head teachers from 10 sampled schools where distance learners were located. Interviews for learners were conducted on dates set for face-to-face contact sessions; the time in which questionnaires were also distributed to respondents. Data from the Head teachers were collected during scheduled visits to schools where learners practise their teaching. Data were collected through focus groups. Questions for interviews were semi-structured with open ended prompts, for respondents to be able to raise other relevant issues which they were encouraged to talk about (Cohen & Manion, 1985: 293). Interviews were conducted face to face and were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Documented Records

Records reflecting the movement of teachers, including those who were on a DTEP were made available in most of the schools that were visited except in only 2 schools where the Head teachers were not available. These were reviewed and analysed to obtain data for the study.

PILOTING THE QUESTIONNAIRES

The questionnaire had been piloted on ten (10) primary school teachers from schools other than those sampled. Feedback from the pilot study initiated change in the use of a phrase 'remote rural schools' in question 2.15, which the researcher assumed was the cause for the question to be generally unanswered.

DATA ANALYSIS

Views on the role that Distance Teacher Education Programmes play in attracting and retaining primary school teachers for the rural areas in Lesotho are very important for ODL practitioners. Data for this study was therefore classified into themes that were recorded in form of statistical tables as they provided simple interpretations of findings. It was also important to consider comments given by learners and tutors; as a result,

FINDINGS

Findings from this study provided basic information on placement of distance learners in schools, in the first instance; as volunteers, their reasons for choosing to work as volunteers in schools, and finally, the challenges they encounter as a result of their voluntary service as indicated below:

How Distance Learners Found Jobs as Volunteer Teachers

- Went around schools negotiating for placement as a volunteer
- Their relatives found jobs for them
- Members of parliament within their constituencies found jobs for them

Reasons for Distance Learners to Work as Volunteer Teachers

- To gain teaching experience required for admission into a Distance Teacher Education Programme
- To get a salary in order to earn a living
- Needed something doing - had stayed home for a few years after completing form Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC)

The Learners' Experiences of Studying, and Working as Volunteer Teachers

- Difficulty in attending tutorial centres due to financial problems
- Disruption of good family relationships due to financial dependency
- Forced to drop out of the programme only to continue latter when funds are available
- Learned to prioritise needs
- Encouraged to hard work - motivation to prove oneself beyond life's challenges

Table 1: Location of Teaching Practice Schools for Learners on a Distance Teacher Education Programme in 2010

Location of School	Frequency N=80	Percentage
Urban area	22	28%
Rural area	58	72%
TOTAL	80	100%

Table 1 shows that 72% of the learners who were on a distance education programme taught in remote rural schools. It should be noted that for purposes of this study, such schools were defined as schools that are characterised by difficult travel, poor infrastructure, unfavourable climate, and dispersed population. Although schools included in this study were considered to have met these criteria, 28 % of the respondents classified their schools as located in the urban area; implying that schools in such localities can sometimes enjoy similar improvements to those in the urban areas.

Table 2: Numbers of Teachers who moved to Different Schools between 2005 and 2009

Period in Years	Respondents			
	Distance Learners		Head teachers	
	Frequency N=80	Percentage	Frequency N=10	Percentage
2005	8	10%	0	00%
2006	6	08%	1	10
2007	9	11%	2	20
2008	10	13%	0	00%
2009	12	15%	1	10
TOTAL	45	57%	3	30

From table 2, we learn that for three consecutive years 2007-2009, the number of distance learners who transferred from their work places to different schools accumulated from 11% to 15%. 2006 is the only year that saw a relatively minimal number (08%) of learners changing schools. In 2005, only 10% of the respondents transferred to other schools. As a result, 57% of the respondents had changed schools within the period of 5 years. However, the movement by head teachers was relatively low as it ranged between 00% and 10%. It is only in the year 2007, that 20% of the teachers moved to other schools. Only one factor was raised by the head teachers during interviews as a reason for their movement. They had all applied for positions as head teachers in schools other than those they previously worked in.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Distance Learners' Movement From One School To Another In The Course of Their Studies

Views of Distance Learners	Frequency N=80	Percentage
Personally - Related Factors		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial constraints • Avoid cheating practices – urged to pay tribute to school for the job given • Transferred to a private school in order to get a salary • Family issues – forced to join the family 	18	22%
	2	03%
	10	12%
	2	03%
Job-Related Factors		

• End of service as a substitute teacher	5	06%
• Moved to a school with a grant	24	30%
• Loss of job – volunteers no more needed in that school	4	05%
• To be on the waiting list for a possibility of a grant	3	04%
• Transferred to another station within the same parish	9	11%
ODL-Related Factors		
• To affiliate with other learners for group discussions	1	01%
• Inadequate support by school principals	2	03%
TOTAL	80	100%

The above table reflects a number of points that were raised by the respondents as factors that had contributed to their movement from one school to another as ODL learners. These were classified into three sub-headings as follows: personal, job and learner-related factors. From this information, it can be inferred that a majority of distance learners (56%) change schools because of factors that directly affect their jobs. Other contributing factors were attributed to learners as individual persons since 40% of them fell in that category. A relatively fewer number of learners transferred to other schools (03%) because of issues that affected their studies.

Views of Tutors and Head-Teachers about the Learners' Movement during their Training in ODL

Tutors' Views

- Affects maintenance of accurate records for learners at site, cluster and regional levels
- Confuses packaging of accurate numbers of learner support materials – leading to shortages during distribution
- Wastes time during the recording of students' marks – normally easy trace learners by sites

Head teachers' Views

- Affects pupils progress in learning – it takes time for some pupils to get used to different teachers
- Does not make much difference because volunteer teacher are paired with class teachers
- Creates staff shortages because some of them are placed as class teachers

The Learners' Views on their Preparedness to Teach in Rural Schools as Qualified Teachers

When asked about how prepared they were to continue teaching in their practising schools even after completing their studies as qualified teachers, a majority of the respondents mentioned that they were willing to stay on provision that:

- Schools got a grant for them;
- Communication improved as there was poor network coverage; making it difficult for teachers to connect with their families;
- There would be better roads – teachers had to walk for long distances to and from school (2hrs return trip from the bus stop on daily basis);
- Suitable schooling was made available for their children – eg, good nursery schools and secondary / high schools;

Some of them stated that they were not prepared to stay as they already had plans to study through part-time basis; which was not possible in that environment, hence the need for them to move away. On the other hand, locals indicated that they would continue to work in rural schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Attracting teachers for rural schools has proved to be a challenging task for many countries. Just like teachers elsewhere, teachers in Lesotho see rural areas as places offering fewer opportunities for those who would like to advance in their studies. The differences in the living conditions between urban and rural settings appeared to be another significant factor for attracting teachers to rural schools.

The study raised the following points as strategies that ODL institutions could use to motivate and retain teachers for rural schools:

- Selection criteria for admission into the DTEP should consider localities of the applicants
- Encourage subsidised fees for learners who come from difficult areas;

In order to improve the deployment of teachers in Lesotho, the study suggested that:

- Local teachers should be recruited to fill grants in local schools;
- Criteria for admission into the distance teacher education programme should compliment criteria for filling teaching posts which should also consider place.
- Consider revising the hardship allowance fee paid as an incentive to attract and retain teachers located in rural areas as it is generally acknowledged to be small to encourage highly qualified teachers to serve in remote schools.
- The thirteenth cheque should be paid to teachers located in hardship areas as motivation for them.

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