

Quality Rural Secondary School Education in Zimbabwe: Challenges and Remedies

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Abstract

The challenges that Zimbabwean rural schools face in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers cannot be overemphasized. The purpose of this study was to investigate some the challenges associated with teachers and teaching in rural Zimbabwean communities as well as identifying strategies that can be implemented to improve the working conditions of teachers as well as teaching in rural areas of Zimbabwe. The descriptive survey research methodology was adopted for this study. Data for the study was gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews with teachers (80) and school heads (20) posted in Gokwe district rural secondary schools who were selected by a method of cluster sampling. The study established that Zimbabwean rural areas are characterized by various challenges that negatively influence the delivery of quality education such as poor socio economic background, lack of basic infrastructure for teaching and learning, the problem of attracting and keeping qualified teachers in rural schools, poor funding and limited resources. Furthermore the low status accorded to the teaching profession, poor salaries of teachers, inadequate accommodation, limited career and professional development opportunities as well as poor working conditions were cited as obstacles to quality and effective teaching. In order to address challenges to achieve quality education in rural schools the following strategies were suggested: awarding financial bonuses, incentives and a hardship and retention allowance to teachers who are willing to teach in rural areas; provision adequate physical infrastructure in the schools; provision of scholarships for teachers seeking further their education and ensuring that teacher training institutions should have programmes to prepare teachers for the conditions of rural teaching. The study is significant in that it identifies promising areas on which the government can work on to provide quality education to the rural folk so that they can successfully participate in the national and global economy. The study is also significant in that it provides an platform and springboard for the government to improve and enhance the professional status and attractiveness of the teaching profession.

Keywords: rural schools; rural teachers; teacher education; professional development; quality education.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a key investment in any country as it plays a crucial role to sustainable human and economic development. Thus investment in education is widely recognized as a means of supplying the critical human capital required for sustained economic, social and technological development of a nation. It is therefore important that nations invest heavily in education to ensure that the young, whether in rural or urban community, are equipped with knowledge, skills and competencies to enable them to contribute meaningfully to national development (Adedjei and Olaniyan, 2011). The fight against the prevalence of extreme poverty and hunger in rural areas can only be successful through the provision of adequate education and training of the human capacity needed for rural development. This can only be ensured by having caring, competent and high quality teachers in our classrooms (Greenwalls, 1996). This is why policy makers at all levels are focusing on teacher quality with emphasis on the issues of teacher recruitment, preparation, licensing and certification standards, as well as professional development.

As noted by Burnett & Lingam, (2007) all initiatives in educational development and provision, hinges on the availability of quality teachers with suitable pedagogical skills, knowledge and characteristics. Presently, the quality of education offered to children in many rural schools is poor. Thus, many parents are unwilling to invest in their children's education because they are not convinced of its quality and value. Consequently, in many rural schools across the continent of Africa, low student enrolment and high dropout are widespread (Adedjei and Olaniyan, 2011).

Lingam (2012), further observes that due to their remoteness these schools differ greatly from those in urban areas such as in terms of children's learning outcomes, they do not perform as well as urban schools. A contributing factor could be the quality of teachers posted to teach in rural schools (Bauch, 2001). Contributing to this debate, Weeks (1994) in Lingham (2012) notes that such schools are hardly visited by educational advisers and thus further contributing towards poor teacher performance. To

worsen the situation well-qualified teachers prefer to teach in urban schools (Burnett & Lingam, 2007; Learning Together, 2000). Eppley (2009) also noted, “successful teaching in a rural school is different than successful teaching in other settings” (p. 1). The inherent physical and social characteristics of rural communities can result in novice teachers in rural areas experiencing unique and perhaps more profound isolation.

Though brief, the preceding literature describes some rather unfortunate trends relating to the condition of education in rural schools. The picture that emerges, then, is that rural schools encounter a lot of difficulties as well as challenges due to lack of high quality teachers, the knowledge gap between the urban and rural schools is widening and rural children are falling behind their urban counterparts because the schools are in bad shape physically. It is quite evident that teachers in rural schools face greater challenges that are not compatible with their urban counterparts. This study therefore investigates the effects of the apparent neglect of rural schools by identifying some of the challenges commonly associated with teachers and teaching in rural communities as well as suggesting strategies that can be implemented to deal with these challenges.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rural schools have provided generations of children and young people with knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to become autonomous, responsible and productive citizens. Schools thus play a vital role in developing and sustaining rural communities and are crucial to Zimbabwe’s sustainability and the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)s; inter alia, eradication of poverty and hunger; and realization of universal basic education by 2015.

For many families in rural Zimbabwe, accessing quality education in the local area is becoming increasingly difficult due to a number of factors. Poor quality of schooling is evident in many ways in the public school system, especially in the rural areas (Mulkeen, 2005); and is exhibited in the rate of absenteeism and the inability of children to read and write effectively (Adedeji and Bamidele, 2003). The statement of the problem is therefore: What are the challenges commonly encountered by Zimbabwean teachers, students and schools in rural communities?

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of providing quality education to rural day secondary schools in Gokwe district of Zimbabwe and to identify strategies which might be adopted to address them. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What challenges do Zimbabwean rural teachers, students and schools face in implementing the secondary school curriculum?
2. How can these challenges be addressed?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design employed for this study was a descriptive survey in which multiple methods were used to obtain, explain and understand the viewpoints of participants in this research. The study used the descriptive survey method since the main focus was to gather information among teachers and school heads about the challenges faced by teachers and teaching in rural day secondary schools.

Population and Sample of the Study

All secondary school teachers and school heads working in Gokwe district 2011 – 2012 constituted the population of this study. Eighty (80) teachers and twenty (20) school heads working in Gokwe district 2011 – 2012 constituted the sample of this study in which the method of cluster sampling was used.

Research Instruments

The instruments used for data collection were a questionnaire and focus group interviews. Two sets of questionnaires were administered to school heads and teachers respectively. The questionnaire items were both closed and open-ended and solicited for both quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose of the focus groups was to validate and inquire into key themes and trends apparent in the questionnaire survey data. Two different types of focus groups were established and included groups of Secondary school heads and teachers respectively.

Data Collection Procedures

The research was conducted in Gokwe district secondary schools with teachers and school heads. The researcher first got approval from the parent Ministry of Education Sports Arts and Culture to conduct the research. The researcher then went on to get permission from the regional and district offices to conduct research in the schools. Secondary school heads and teachers in Gokwe district were then approached by the researcher to discuss the purpose of the study and to seek their consent for completing the questionnaires and also to participate in the focus group meetings and interviews. Participants who indicated interest in participating in the focus group meetings and interviews and returned consent forms were involved in the study. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to participants. After the explanation, participants were invited to fill in the questionnaire and to participate in focus group meeting. Data were collected over a five week period in 2012.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the identified challenges commonly associated with teachers and teaching in rural day secondary schools.

Challenges Facing Rural Education in Zimbabwe

From the school heads' perspective, Zimbabwean rural areas are characterized by various factors that negatively influence the delivery of quality education. These rural areas are remote and poorly developed consequently many of these rural schools are poor and disadvantaged, lacking basic infrastructure for teaching and learning, roads and other transport, electricity and information communication technologies (ICTs). Thus most rural areas have a poor socioeconomic background which invariably plays a role in quality education. Van den Berg (2008) has noted home background (socio-economic status) to be an important determinant of educational outcomes, and that education strongly affects earnings. The socio-economic realities of rural areas put the learners at a disadvantage to start with as they lack books and learning materials that they need.

Furthermore the rural areas are not attractive for teachers because of limited resources. This finding is consistent with findings of Surty (2012) who found that South African rural areas and schools find it difficult to attract good and suitable teachers, because there are less financial resources available. For the same reason, it was difficult to retain teachers in rural areas as well as finding suitable accommodation as another challenge for teachers in rural areas. Teacher shortages as well as specialist teacher shortages such as science and mathematics teachers in rural areas have also been confirmed in Australia (Hudson and Hudson, 2008) and England (Harris and Farrell, 2007). The findings of this study further confirm those of Barley (2009) who notes that American rural schools have difficulty recruiting and retaining new teachers because of teaching conditions unique to rural schools.

The difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers in disadvantaged communities have been highlighted, for example, in a recent World Bank study that focused on 'teachers for rural schools' (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). This study found that there were particular problems in rural communities associated with teacher housing, the employment of female teachers, teacher utilization, and the communication difficulties related to district management of rural schools.

Focus group discussions with school heads on challenges facing rural education in Zimbabwe revealed that access to education is constrained and limited by factors associated with distance and with population density. These make access to education

provisions both more difficult and more expensive. Other factors such as location of the school itself, curriculum breadth, range of community support services and availability of information communication technologies also impact on rural schooling. These rural schools are also constrained by circumstances of location and population: they are usually smaller in size, have fewer resources (budgets are linked to student numbers) and are more limited in the range of studies that they can offer.

Waxman, Connell and Gray (2002) note that access to technology is crucial in today's schools. Given the enormous potential of distance learning for rural schools and the universal necessity for today's students to be "computer literate," an adequate education system must ensure that the technology needs of rural students are addressed. Contributing further to this debate Hobbs, (2004) says that technology is also critically important for rural schools because long distances and sparse populations define many rural places, making it difficult and potentially expensive to offer students a high quality curriculum. Technology is the vehicle through which small rural schools can offer students an advanced, varied, and cost-effective curriculum.

One of the greatest challenges being faced by rural education in Zimbabwe as cited by the school heads is that of poor funding in rural schools. The budget allocated to the Ministry of Education Sports Arts and Culture is inadequate as a result this has caused widespread problems in both students' enrolment and teacher commitment to teaching. According to Morgan et al, (2006) poor funding of education results in poor salaries as well infrastructure and facilities and this heavily compromises on the quality of education delivered to rural students. Many rural schools lack the essential infrastructure to enable them function as safe, efficient and effective schools. The physical state of classrooms is very poor, with floors full of holes, roofs and ceilings broken and pertinent facilities in a poor state of repair.

4.2 Challenges Facing Teachers in Rural Areas

Teachers who participated in this study lamented the low status accorded to the teaching profession by noting that it is one of the most undervalued professions. Teachers are not particularly well paid, and the poor salary of teachers, when compared with their counterparts who are engaged in other professions with comparable level of education and experience, is one of the challenges teachers have to cope with. The salaries of teachers are seriously inadequate consequently; many teachers are forced to find additional income to augment their poor earnings, which invariably will have a serious negative impact on their overall performance. Opportunities for teachers to earn additional income from private coaching of students and school based

incentives which is common in many urban areas, appear to be quite limited, mainly because of widespread poverty in rural areas. The above findings are in agreement with those of Osterholm, Horn and Johnson (2006) who noted low salaries as a major obstacle to recruiting teachers to teach in rural areas in America. Jimerson, (2003) argues that recruiting and retaining quality teachers can be achieved by increasing teacher pay across the board to an “adequate” level that will help address the status of the teaching profession by elevating salaries to a point where they approach what other professionals earn.

Focus group discussions with teachers also noted that the quality of life in the rural areas may not be as good as in urban areas. Accommodation is poor and teachers have to share accommodation, school facilities, resources as well as recreational activities are inadequate in rural areas. The findings are consistent with those of Akyeampong and Stephens (2002) who found out that in Ghana teachers have expressed concerns about the quality of accommodation, while in Tanzania teachers have also lamented classroom facilities, school resources, and access to leisure activities (Towse et al. 2002). Teachers further noted that career advancement and opportunities for further studies are often unavailable or very difficult to come by in the rural areas a finding consistent with that by Hedges (2000) who says that urban areas offer easier access to further education than rural areas, and in addition, teachers in rural areas are less likely to have opportunities to engage in other professional development activities. In addition teachers have raised health concerns in accepting offers to teach in rural schools. Most rural health service centers are not easily accessible. As noted by Akyeampong and Stephens (2002) and Towse et al. (2002) teachers may perceive that living in a rural area involves a greater risk of disease and less access to health care.

McClure et al., (2003) have also identified inadequate housing, economically, deficient surrounding communities, and an expectation that teachers will teach multiple grade levels or multiple subjects as challenges for teacher in rural areas. On the other hand, Eppley (2009) identifies sub standard school facilities, and accommodation together with the poor socio-economic background of many rural communities as additional challenges rural teachers face. The teachers surveyed in this study also cited difficult working conditions as a challenge they face in rural areas. Such findings do concur with those of Luekens, Lyter, Fox, and Chandler, (2004) who found that poor working conditions are frequently cited as primary reasons why teachers leave the field. Working conditions cited by teachers as challenges include lack of basic resources and materials, lack of a strong professional community, ineffective

leadership, and discipline issues. Teachers report that large class sizes and the physical conditions of schools impair teaching.

Strategies for Dealing with the Challenges

Teachers and quality teaching are critical factors to the development of any educational system. Any socio-economic strategy, aimed at improving schools and human development must, of necessity, emphasize the advancement and working conditions of teachers (Adedeji and Olaniyan, 2011). As part of this study teacher and school heads were asked to identify strategies that can be implemented to counter the challenges raised in this research. The participants identified the following strategies as crucial to the provision of quality education in rural areas.

Improving the Working Conditions of Teachers

The strategies that can be implemented to improve the working conditions of teachers must focus on teachers’ salaries and other financial incentives. Teachers should receive salaries that reflect and are commensurate with being part of the teaching profession and their contributions to the society as well as wages that at par with colleagues with similar qualifications in other professions in the private sector. In addition teachers in rural areas should be compensated with additional financial incentives, in the form of hardship allowance and travel allowance higher than their urban counterparts. If teachers are paid an adequate salary they will not leave the teaching profession for better paying jobs. According to Mulkeen, (2005) other countries such as Mozambique do award financial bonuses to teachers who are willing to teach in rural areas.

Lowe (2006) suggests offering incentives, bonuses and salary increases to teachers as a strategy of retaining them. Contributing to this debate, Osterholm, Horn and Johnson (2006) note that one way of improving the working conditions of rural teacher is to offer salaries that are competitive thus motivating individuals to join the teaching profession. The authors suggest other financial incentives such as tuition support, loan forgiveness, and signing bonuses. Such incentives are seen as a motivating factor for teachers to accept position in rural areas. The interviewed teachers also suggested a system of retention allowances to be paid every month for teachers teaching in rural areas. The teachers suggested the retention allowance to be pegged at 60% of their basic salary as this will go a long way in boosting motivation and morale amongst teachers. As part of the process of improving their working conditions, participant in this study highlighted the need for intrinsic motivators such as esteem and professional satisfaction which call for recognition of teachers as professionals and that they should actively participate policy making and curriculum development.

As part of improving their working conditions participants in this study highlighted the need for the government to provide adequate physical infrastructure in the school, including water, latrines, electricity, since infrastructure around the school makes a positive difference to teachers' attitudes to work. The teachers noted the need to have road networks leading to rural area and school improved so that they become easily accessible. Kremer et al. (2005) have noted that teacher attrition in rural schools is more correlated with daily incentives to attend work: teachers are less likely to leave schools that have better infrastructure, and that are closer to a paved road.

Career and Professional Development for Teachers

As noted earlier on one of the challenges teachers in rural school face is that career advancement and opportunities for further studies are often unavailable or very difficult to come by in the rural settings, the participants highlighted the need for career development incentives package for rural teachers. Such incentives include scholarships for teachers seeking further their education while working in a rural area and attain a higher qualification. Apart from scholarships the participants noted that the parent Ministry of education should invest in quality staff development. Research studies have indicated that high-quality staff development programs lead to improved classroom teaching and employee retention, especially in small and rural schools (Lowe, 2006). However it is saddening to note that such efforts are hindered due to a shortage of funding.

The participants noted that they are called upon to implement contemporary educational trends and embrace new ways of delivery therefore the need for them to attend professional development and career advancement courses. By being involved in professional development, the participants noted that it is a way to improve the quality of instruction in classrooms. Borko, Elliott and Uchiyama (2002) have reported changes in teachers' practice that seem to result from their participation in professional development. Contributing to this debate Billingsley (2004a) emphasizes professional development as a method of retention for her targeted group of special education educators. On the other hand McGlamery and Edick (2004) also recommend professional development as a tool to retain teachers, especially those who are likely to burn out after only two years in the profession. The ministry of Education should thus support additional professional development among its work force. The teachers also highlighted the need to have a cohesive professional body to control and regulate the conduct of teachers in the country just like the other professions such as medicine, finance, banking, accountancy, engineering

and law. The participants also noted that this professional body should pay particular attention to the professional works and activities of teachers and ensure that not just anybody is made to perform the functions of a teacher, especially if the person is not professionally qualified.

Teacher Preparation for Rural Settings

An important factor in improving the teaching conditions of rural schools is to focus on preparing teachers to teach in rural settings. The teachers that are recruited to teach in rural schools must be prepared for the conditions of rural teaching. They not only must have the credentials they need, but they should also be aware of the nature of small schools in rural communities (Barley and Brigham, 2008). The teachers who participated in this study noted the need for teachers to have some experiences to prepare them for teaching in rural communities. Barley and Brigham, (2008) have identifies areas such as developing and adapting curriculum to the needs of students in rural communities, creating self-directed professional development practices, using a variety of resources and technology to reduce the barriers of isolation, and functioning effectively in community service areas other than teaching as critical in preparing teachers for rural teaching. On the other hand Monk (2007) sees the need to better incorporate rural teaching into teacher preparation programs.

Lingham (2012) also notes that a teacher's ability to meet the challenges and responsibilities of myriad work responsibilities depends to a large extent on their professional preparation. He further notes that the theoretical and practical components of the training program need to be compatible with the work expected of teachers in schools such as those located in rural settings. Thus for effective teaching practices in rural schools, teachers need adequate professional preparation during their initial teacher education program and also ongoing education and training whilst they are in service. UNESCO (1995) highlights that teachers with good professional preparation are a catalyst not only for the provision of quality education for all children but also in terms of national development.

The school heads who participated in the study highlighted the need to recruit locals for teacher training since many teachers are reluctant to teach in rural areas and assisting local residents with potential to become teachers, in obtaining the needed education and training. This finding is consistent with Monk (2007) who suggests a "grow your own" strategy, where teacher preparation programs recruit prospective teachers from rural areas, and in some cases make course arrangements to allow them to stay in their area while they pursue their education. Contributing to this debate, Boyd et al. (2005), found that proximity to home matters because new teachers

seek positions if not at home, at least in regions similar to those where they grew up.

CONCLUSION

Teacher play a pivotal role in any education system and they are the most important determinant of student learning is the classroom, yet as a result of the poor environment under which teachers work, especially in the rural areas, the quality of education has been adversely affected. This study attempted to highlight the challenges that teacher and teaching face in rural Zimbabwean schools. It was found out that many rural schools find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers. The study also revealed that rural schools do not have the financial capacity to offer incentives to teachers as compared to their urban counterparts therefore fail to attract teachers to teach in rural schools. Furthermore it has also been shown that career and professional development opportunities for teachers are often more limited in rural and remote schools. Other challenges that rural education faces include poor working conditions of teachers, poor remuneration of teachers, and lack of adequate resources, inadequate accommodation and dilapidated buildings. The study also revealed that it is important for government to improve the working conditions of rural teachers by paying rural teachers a monthly retention allowance pegged at 60% of their basic salary as this will go a long way in boosting motivation and morale amongst teachers. Further, government should provide scholarships for teachers seeking further their education while working in a rural area and attain a higher qualification as well as investing in high-quality staff development programs that can lead to improved classroom teaching and employee retention in rural schools. There is also need for a cohesive professional body to control and regulate the conduct of teachers in the country just like the other professions such as medicine, finance, banking, accountancy, engineering and law. This professional body should pay particular attention to the professional works and activities of teachers and ensure that not just anybody is made to perform the functions of a teacher, especially if the person is not professionally qualified. Finally teacher training institutions should have programmes to prepare teachers for the conditions of rural teaching

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Because of time limitations, the research was conducted only with a small population of privileged teachers and school heads in Gokwe district. Therefore, to generalize the results the large Zimbabwean population of teachers should have involved more education district in more provinces in the country. The extension of the study period of the research to a year in order to visit more education districts in the country could have made the findings more conclusive.

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