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## **9. PREPARING TEACHERS FOR RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN LESOTHO**

When students and professors are thinking on the same page, they will start to understand each other's viewpoint, thereby making researching a paper easier. (Masakale)

Lesotho's population is concentrated in rural areas. Understanding the complexities of providing education to these areas is of paramount importance. Among the issues facing authorities charged with this task is preparing teachers to work in rural contexts. This chapter draws on the findings of a study of secondary teachers and their experiences of working in rural Lesotho. Findings indicate that inadequacies in teacher preparation programs may be undermining these teachers' success and sustainability.

### CONTEXT

#### *Geographic Location*

Lesotho consists of four regions/ecological zones: the lowlands; the Senqu river valley; the foothills; and the highlands/mountains. Altitude is the main distinguishing factor. The lowlands sit at around 1,000 metres above sea level. Their population of 201 per km<sup>2</sup> makes them the most densely populated area. The highlands/mountains rise to 3,500 metres above sea level. They are characterised by extremely low temperatures in winter (Bureau of Statistics Lesotho, 2004), with heavy snowfalls. They make up the largest region (70% of the land area) but are the least densely populated with only 20 people per km<sup>2</sup> (Nyabanyaba, 2010).

#### *Economic Status*

Lesotho is resource poor. The average daily survival income is M8 (AUD \$0.80). Rural households are the poorest, with a daily survival income far below \$1 (Bureau of Statistics Lesotho, 2006). Approximately 70% of the Lesotho population live in rural areas (FinScope, 2011). The rural unemployment rate is over 40% and about 50% of rural people live below the poverty line (Bureau of Statistics, 2006; May et al., 2002). The poverty assessment (PA) and household

budget surveys (HBS) show that the predominantly mountainous districts tend to be the poorest.

#### *The Education System and Attrition*

Lesotho applies the 7–3–2–4 model to schooling: 7 years of primary; 3 years of junior secondary; 2 years of senior secondary; and 4 years of tertiary (Mturi, 2010). Exam fees must be paid at the end of each level (Mturi, 2010). Those who can afford the cost and perform well progress to the next level. The Lesotho Examinations Council administers primary school leaving exams (PSLE) and the junior certificate (JC) exams locally. Success through education requires continuous participation and satisfactory exam performance at each level (Ntho & Lesotho Council of Non-Government Organisations [LCN], 2013). Success defined in terms of exam performances is virtually non-existent in Lesotho's rural schools, even for those who stay in school longer. When Free Primary Education (FPE) began in 2000, only 48,000 of the 180,000 pupils enrolled in Grade 1 (approximately 27%) managed to sit for the PSLE (Chiombe, 2007 cited by Morojele, 2012). Only 50% of children enrolled in secondary education completed the cycle (Ntho & LCN, 2013). The focus on English is a major reasons for this, among myriad others (Mulkeen, 2006). As Mulkeen et al. (2007) point out:

All schooling after third grade in Lesotho is in English. Prior to the mid-1980s, many children did not continue past fourth grade, dropped out while struggling to complete the grade, or failed the grade because they had not learned enough English. (Mulkeen et al., 2007, p. 101)

This focus on English may deter rural secondary teachers who often see even the brightest children get lost in the system. Rural children are demotivated to persist with schooling because they see no chance of progressing to higher education and no prospects of economic returns from it (Lekhetho, 2013). Available education may not be accessible, affordable, acceptable or adaptable (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in Australia [HREOC], 2000a, 2000b).

#### *The Implications of Low Quality Education*

Education must be of good quality for a country to achieve improved results from providing it. The Dakar Framework for Action dictates that universal access to primary education should focus on providing “good quality” and “meaningful learning outcomes” (UNESCO, 2000, pp. 15-17). Ntho and LCN (2013), and Moloi et al. (2008) report that FPE, together with the school feeding program, have established almost universal access to primary school. Even so, many children continue to leave school without having attained significant literacy levels (especially in English and Mathematics). Shortages of trained teachers, physical facilities and learning materials are among the causes of poor quality education in rural Lesotho (Mothibeli & Maema, 2005). There is evidence of a correspondingly low performance in literacy rates in rural areas in Sub-Saharan African countries

(Mulkeen, 2006). It is against this background that this study explored strategies Lesotho could apply to attract and retain more qualified teachers for rural schools.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Lesotho's rural areas are characterised by high birth rates, low economic activity, inadequate services (including educational facilities), teaching by unqualified teachers, low progression and completion rates in school, and high poverty rates (Mothibeli & Maema, 2005; Mulkeen, 2006; Ntho & LCN, 2013). Qualified, motivated teachers are critical if children are to access quality education. Rural children are reportedly hard to teach and would benefit from learning from qualified teachers (Mothibeli & Maema, 2005). They are often taught by unqualified teachers due to "a shortage of qualified teachers" and because the "difference that qualified, caring educators can make ... is often underestimated" (Ntho & LCN, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, it is important that strategies to attract and retain quality teachers for rural secondary schools are devised and implemented so that the education system can achieve its intended goal of improving Lesotho.

Literature on education provision in Lesotho is mostly in the form of quantitative studies commissioned by international organisations and focused heavily on primary education, especially after the implementation of FPE, even though the first cohort of this initiative have entered secondary education with indications of even lower pass rates (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). There is little information about the quality of teaching at secondary level and the experiences of qualified teachers working in rural secondary schools in Lesotho.

## METHODS

The study reported in this chapter used a qualitative methodology for its "[focus] on the quality and texture of events rather than how often those events occur" (Kilbourn, 2006, p. 552). Participants were studied in situ, allowing the researcher to understand the study topic through the meanings they conveyed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In essence, qualitative research facilitates scrutiny of the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to their experiences by focusing on the participants' opinions (Punch, 2005; Lietz & Zayas, 2010).

Six participants were purposively selected; four qualified teachers employed in rural secondary schools in Lesotho and two unemployed qualified secondary school teachers. Each teacher was interviewed with the aim of exploring strategies the Lesotho Government could use to attract and retain qualified teachers for rural secondary schools. The interview transcripts were analysed for emergent themes.

### *Literature Review*

Literature on staffing rural schools in Lesotho and Southern Africa is thin. However, there is extensive literature from other contexts like Australia that demonstrates a correlation between teachers' negative perception of rural teaching

and life, and their reluctance to take rural postings, causing shortages of qualified teachers in rural areas (Lock, 2007; Masakale, 2005; Mulkeen, 2006; Sharplin, 2002). Data collected from pre-service teachers prior to, and after a one-week placement in rural and remote schools showed an increased understanding of the rural context in each place, and a more positive perception and attitude towards rural teaching and life, demonstrated by teachers' preparedness to take up rural postings (Boylan, 2004; Boylan & Hemming, 1992; Lock, 2007; Masakale, 2005; Munsch & Boylan, 2008; Sharplin, 2002). Masakale (2005) suggested that such a rural placement program may be beneficial if governments and churches (as the schools' co-owners and managers), and communities supported it collaboratively.

Despite the one-week rural practicum program achieving significant positive results, some authors have suggested that pre-service teachers could be prepared more comprehensively through participating in a semester-long, on-campus training program coupled with an extended rural-based practicum (Boylan, 2004; Smith-Davis, 1989). This model has practical relevance to Africa and could be applied in the Sub-Saharan context to address the challenge of shortages of teachers in rural and remote areas. It is difficult to predict the outcome of western programs if these are adopted in the Sub-Saharan context because most pre-service teachers in western countries come from urban backgrounds (Munsch & Boylan, 2008). In Africa, pre-service teachers often come from a combination of urban and rural areas, with rural people showing more willingness if given the opportunity, as identified in Zimbabwe (Mhishi et al., 2012).

## FINDINGS

The purpose of teacher training is to equip teachers-to-be with the content, knowledge, understanding and skills required to teach in a diversity of settings. However, the majority of teachers interviewed indicated that they were unprepared for teaching in rural settings. A key theme arising from the interviews was preparing pre-service teachers for appointment to rural schools in Lesotho. Three other themes were linked to this: irrelevant content; placements lacking context and time; and insufficient duration of teaching practice.

### *Irrelevant Content*

Two of the participants explained that the training they received was inadequate and not on a par with actual practice. Keketso (employed) explained:

We are not trained in such a way that what they are training us there at the university is already like what is going to happen in a school environment. We are completely taught things that are different from what we are going to teach here. It's like we are prepared to come and work in the offices; not to come and teach here; the actual content that we are [going to] teach is something very irrelevant ... to what we teach in schools.

Libolao (unemployed) agreed, saying, “I think the way they are teaching there at the institutions, it’s like they are preparing us to teach in urban areas only”. Also, in Lesotho there are instances when teachers are required to be specialists in topics without adequate background knowledge. Teachers need to educate themselves in such areas, but this is often impossible in rural areas where there are no libraries and other facilities to support their knowledge (Lewin, et al., 2000; UNESCO-IBE, 2006). It is impracticable at the very least.

*Placements Lacking Context and Time*

Interviewees revealed that pre-service placements had not prepared them for rural and remote teaching because they were focused on urban contexts, and then only for a short duration. Libolao (unemployed) said:

It is a must that we do our teaching practice where it is accessible, where it will be easy for them to come and check you there because if you are at the rural area, it won’t be easy for them to reach the place. They only allocate [place us] to urban areas because they will be telling you that, “No, we don’t have money to go to those schools. Those places are far, we can’t go that far”. They only place us around here; only to the nearest schools to the university.

Libolao (unemployed) also said she went to teach in a rural school oblivious of how to manage rural children. This experience is not unique to Lesotho. Australia’s Rural and Remote Education Advisory Committee (RREAC, 2000) has observed that often teachers face unfamiliar professional and social situations when they reach rural schools. Therefore, it would benefit the education system to ensure that pre-service teachers are multi-skilled for diverse environments.

It seems that the financial and time constraints of supervising students in remote areas have led Lesotho’s teacher training institutions (Mulkeen, 2006; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008; Ntho & LCN, 2013) to discourage rural placement at the peril of teacher training effectiveness. Many authors advocate for relevant training and teaching experience before teachers are employed (Lewin, 2004; RREAC, 2000).

*Insufficient Duration of Teaching Practice*

Lewin (2004, p. 12) explains that:

At one or more points during the training period trainees spend anything from a few days to several months working in schools [referring to the countries in the study viz Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Trinidad and Tobago] as classroom teachers under supervision.

Lesotho College of Education (LCE) has extended its teaching practice time from six months to one year while the National University of Lesotho (NUL) has extended it from a few weeks to three months; still not enough according to the teachers who graduated from NUL. Keketso (employed) elucidated:

It's true, they do give us 3–4 months, I think, for teaching practice, but I still feel that is not enough because in that three months, that is when you will be...still trying to understand your learners. And then, three months has elapsed, you haven't understood anything...

Lewin (2004) concurs that duration affects placement effectiveness. Shorter durations limit comprehensive learning, relationship building with learners and understanding of duties. Longer periods raise difficult problems of support and mentorship, mainly related to costs in developing countries: "TP is often the most expensive part of initial training because of the costs of travel, subsistence, supervision, and assessment" (Lewin, 2004, p. 12; see also Mulkeen, 2006). There are real economic and logistical problems in providing practical experience for large numbers of students in countries with poor infrastructure and low student numbers in schools (Lewin, 2004). Either student teachers are crowded into schools near colleges (e.g. in Lesotho, Ghana and South Africa), or they select schools that will accept them and where they can find accommodation, which may be distributed across a wide geographic area, as in Malawi (Lefoka et al., 2001). If the latter, it becomes expensive and time-consuming for tutors to visit; if the former, the experience may be largely at demonstration schools atypical of the schools where trainees will work (Lewin, 2004). This is an example of a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) inherent in Lesotho's rural secondary education.

Two participants felt training was adequate. Tlalane (employed) said, "Really, I was well trained because the syllabus I was trained in prepared us for both rural and urban teaching. It didn't choose". Khothatso (employed) felt that training must be generic to "allow people to adapt creatively to their diverse contexts". Participants' opinions need to be interpreted relative to their profiles. Many had not intended to be teachers; definitely not in rural locations. Their lack of intrinsic motivation and passion for remote teaching may underlie their inability to adapt.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Exploration of ways to improve the preparation of graduates for rural teaching is recommended. Participants recommended that more qualified teachers, equipped with appropriate skills to function in difficult rural locations, and willing to teach there, are needed. There is a known link between increased willingness and preparedness to teach in rural locations, and having pre-service teachers taught about rural education and experience teaching practicum in rural schools (Boylan & Hemmings, 1992; Lock, 2007; Masakale, 2005; Sharplin, 2002).

Congruent with the literature, participants suggested that training institutions could encourage undergraduate teachers to teach in rural areas by furnishing them with contextual information and a robust understanding of rural schools' and communities' fundamental needs. This requires training institutions to increase their knowledge about rural places so they can competently inform and inspire their learners, and help them take advantage of benefits inherent in rural places. Pre-graduation rural placements may be another way to give students first-hand experience of teaching and living in a rural community. Other alternatives include

strategising to counteract pre-service training pedagogical and/or content deficiencies by designing ongoing school-based or regional-based professional development for rural secondary teachers. This may also reduce the number of school days lost when teachers attend similar workshops in distant urban towns.

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