

Improving the quality of Education at Rural Schools in Namibia

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Abstract: - Schools in rural areas are faced by diverse challenges with the potential to negatively affect successful teaching and learning. This requires appropriate interventions to improve school performance in spite of the rural-based challenges. The purpose of this study was to explain the measures whose implementation can yield improved learner performance and general quality of education at rural schools, with the aim of sustaining good rural school performance in standardised examinations. Case study design was used, which sampled teachers and education officials. Data was collected by means of a literature study, individual and focus group interviews. The data was analysed thematically.

The findings revealed that education at rural schools can be improved by ensuring a conducive working environment, that is fully and well-resourced with all the teaching and learning essentials. The financial incentive that was being given to teachers need an increment, to be realistic and outweigh the challenges teachers were facing, alongside justifiable categorisation of schools according to which payment amount were made. In addition, rural schools need sufficient budget allocation to contain their operational and development expenses. An increase in budgetary allocation will also make resources available for vocational education curriculum as not all learners are academically gifted. Moreover, rural schools should capitalise on the advantages of school cluster system and share resources for improved school performance. Successful consideration and implementation of these measures are recommended as being helpful to rural schools in pursuit of good academic performance, in a sustainable fashion.

Keywords: Financial incentive, rural schools, school cluster system, quality of education, vocational education.

I. THE BACKGROUND

The increasing spending on education over eons and the relatively low achievements by rural schools has led education policy makers to increasingly consider reforms for improving the effectiveness of public spending on education (Litheko, 2012; Kobakhidze 2010). Among a number of reforms that have been considered, the idea of introducing a financial incentive for teachers has received favourable attention by education stakeholders worldwide (Emiliana & Ilana, 2005; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008; Roland, 2011). This idea was believed to bring about much needed educational improvement at rural schools as a result of teacher motivation. However, the extremes of living and working in rural areas are quite intense, beyond a mere monetary intervention as motivation.

Living in rural areas needs to be well understood in terms of the prevailing living conditions. Equally, working in rural areas especially when a person does not have prior experience and exposure working under such conditions presents challenges. Living and working in rural areas has not been researched extensively. As a result, the needs of the residents of rural areas are not adequately addressed (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean 2005), thereby depriving rural residents of well-being and not realising their full potential.

In the case of Namibia, the government implemented interventions relates to financial incentive and housing for rural school teachers, as motivation efforts to enhance rural school performance. While the idea of a financial incentive sounds best in attracting and retaining qualified teachers at rural schools (Guarino, Santibanez, Daley & Brewer, 2004; Figlio, 2002), the evidence on the effectiveness of financial incentive is very limited, mixed and not convincing (Glewwe, Ilias & Kremer 2003; Kobakhidze, 2010; Lavy, 2009; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2011; Vegas, 2007). This dispels the assertion that monetary motivation is key in motivating teachers and improve school performance. Thus there is a need to explore other measures that can complement financial incentive in rural schools, for improved quality of education.

Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the regions with the highest rate of poverty and hunger in the world (IFAD 2011:2). Applied to education, learners living in rural areas of sub-Saharan African countries, including Namibia, are at great risk of failure and school drop-out as their parents cannot afford to provide the basic needs for them. In terms of Maslow's Needs theory, basic needs form the basis of human existence and endeavours and, when not satisfied, humans cannot aspire for higher ideals. Considering the deteriorating and adverse conditions of rural areas, human motivation is negatively affected as a result of unsatisfied needs. Therefore, Namibia being part of the sub-Saharan region is not an exception to the hardships of living in rural areas.

It becomes clear that similar to other parts of the world, there are numerous difficulties associated with living in Namibian rural communities, as this living relates to lack of basic goods and services which translates into poverty. Poverty implies lack of resources for rural residents and educators, which minimise their social interaction and isolates them from professional development programmes which can result in low levels of education and inability to take part in

competitive employment opportunities. These difficulties deprive rural residents of essential services due to the location of their residence, which makes the provision of resources and facilities almost impossible to them. Despite government efforts to make education accessible to all citizens irrespective of locality, providing quality education to rural citizens still remains a challenge. This study sought to explain feasible measures whose implementation can result in improved standard of education in rural schools.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Regardless of their locality, schools are expected to produce graduates competent enough to propel national economies. As such rural schools which often faced various hardships, should ensure that the rural-based challenges are kept at minimum not to cause detrimental effects to teaching and learning and compromise the quality of output. To fulfil this expectations, all schools should employ an army of qualified and motivated teachers to provide quality teaching (Chireshe & Shumba, 2011; Legotlo, 2014; Steyn, 2002). Despite this expectation, the school performance in rural Namibian schools have not been very impressive (Namwandi, 2014; NANTU, 2011). In an attempt to address this problem, this study sought to explain the strategies for improving the quality of education at rural schools, with the aim of sustaining good performance at rural schools.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for this study is described according to the following layout.

3.1 Research design

The purpose of this study was to explain the strategies for improving the quality of education in rural schools. In executing this purpose, a case study design was used. A case study allows an exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project or programme functioning in a real-life context, and provide specific and contextually rich data (Simons, 2009). An explanatory case study design was relevant to this study, to enable the researcher to ask the measures for improving education at rural schools from participants' perspectives in their own environment and allow participants to explain why they think those measures matter, in assisting teachers to teach better for learners to learn better.

3.2 Sampling and participants

Participants consisted of five school principals, two education officials and twenty eight teachers. Participants were sampled from two education offices and five rural schools of Omusati region, Namibia. Participants were sampled using non-probability sampling techniques. In non-probability sampling, the researcher has no way of forecasting or guaranteeing that each member of the population will be represented in the sample and some members of the population have little or no chance of being sampled (Leedy & Omrod, 2005). In non-

probability sampling, the researcher has the prerogative to judge the population and produce the sample.

School principal participants were sampled by means of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves researchers handpicking the participants to be included in the sample on the basis of the researcher's judgments of participants' typicality to the phenomenon of study (Chiromo 2009). As principals were in charge of schools as learning institution in rural areas, they were better positioned to articulate rural-based issues and how they influenced teaching and learning activities at their schools.

Teacher participants and two education officials were sampled using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of non-probability sampling technique where the sampled members indicate other members who could provide rich information for the study (Chiromo, 2009). School principals and education officials assisted the researcher in getting hold of long-serving teachers and education officials in the region. Long-serving teachers in the teaching fraternity in a rural setting were well-positioned to outline the conditions that compromised successful teaching and learning in rural areas, and suggest measures for dealing with these conditions. Similarly, long-serving education officials who discharge education administration and management in Omusati region rural set-up, could equally contribute meaningful insights to the research intentions.

3.3 Data collection methods

Data was collected by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation. The researcher reviewed existing literature pertaining teaching and learning at rural schools and the effectiveness thereof. To complement the data from the literature study, an empirical investigation was commissioned, which used individual and focus group interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with school principals, on a voluntary basis, at their respective schools, as well as with two education officials at their respective offices.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with teachers at their respective schools, in a focus group of six teachers. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to generate a considerable amount of data about the participants' collective opinions and experiences with regard to rural school teaching and improvements. Focus group participation was voluntary, and all members of the focus group and other participants were given background information about the study.

As focus group interviewing explores the views of diverse groups of people, the researcher was able to unpack different perspectives within the group in relation to the topic of discussion (Choy, 2014). In addition, asking a group of people to respond jointly to common questions can yield varied and detailed data on the same topic (Dudwick, Kuehnast, Jones & Woolcock, 2006). The questions for both the individual and focus group interviews were open-ended questions in order to

provide opportunities for both the researcher and participants to discuss certain topics in more detail for clarity of mind. The open-ended nature of the questions provided opportunities for the participants to provide as much information as possible regarding rural education improvement and allowed the researcher to prompt participants for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

3.4 Data analysis

The data was analysed according to the themes and patterns which emerged as a result of a process of inductive categorisation (Atieno, 2009; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The findings were interpreted and discussed in relation to the existing literature findings. The interpretation and discussion also made use of the verbatim excerpts from the interview data as these excerpts carry authenticity and weight of the research findings.

IV. TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FINDINGS

The trustworthiness of the research findings were established by triangulation and member checking.

4.1 Triangulation

Triangulation is the use of multiple methods to data collection in order to enable these methods to complement each other and to confirm that the data present common codes and themes (Kahn & Best, 2006; Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Omrod, 2005). According to Guba (1981), the use of different methods in a study compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. This study employed data triangulation as one of the types of triangulation.

Data triangulation involves using different sources of information to increase the trustworthiness of the study findings (Creswell, 2014). Triangulation involves using different sources of research instruments, such as interviews, focus group discussions or participant observation that utilises different informants to enhance the quality of the data from different sources (Anney, 2014). The researcher has used different data collection methods in this study, which included individual interviews with school principals and education officials, as well as focus group interviews with teacher participants. These multiple methods all produced data that complemented each other in addressing the research goals. The similarities in responses of the informants represents the credibility and authenticity of the research findings.

4.2 Member Checking

Member checking seeks to establish whether the participants agree with what the researcher have written about the data they provided during the inquiry (Ary et al, 2010). Member checks requires that the data interpretations and discussions as they are derived are continuously tested with participants from whom the data was solicited (Guba, 1981). The aim is for researcher to solicit feedback and share his or her interpretations of the data with the participants to help clear

up miscommunication, identify inaccuracies and help obtain additional useful data.

For this study, the researcher went back to the participants and shared the interpretation and discussion of the findings with them. This was meant to establish common grounds on the data analysis and interpretation with participants. This iterative process ensured that the findings that were presented were indeed a true and genuine reflection of the original data collected from the participants.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to explain the strategies for improving the quality of education at rural schools. Informed by the views of the participants, the data was analysed thematically and arrived to the themes which relates to the working environment, revisiting financial incentive, budget allocations, vocational education and school cluster system. These themes are explained next as research ultimate findings.

5.1 Working environment

The working environment as the setting where teaching and learning takes place comprises issues relating to physical facilities, surrounding infrastructure and teaching and learning resources. With regard to physical facilities, proper accommodation for teachers is important, the absence of which forces teachers to commute or to be transferred to other schools. Government must provide adequate and proper housing for teachers so that they could use their salaries and financial incentive for other expenses instead of spending all their money on commuting and renting costs. If housing is provided adequately, “*more teachers will be attracted to rural schools and their motivational levels will be much higher than what they are now*”. Making the school environment conducive for teaching and learning firstly implies “*teachers’ housing to reduce commuting*”.

Another aspect related to facilities that are important for teacher motivation, and the improvement of the quality of education at rural schools relates to sufficiency of classrooms to counter teaching and learning actions under trees with its exposure to weather conditions. Related to sufficient classrooms is the need for reasonable teacher-learner ratios that “*do not compromise the quality of teaching*”. Linked to classrooms and reasonable class sizes are sufficient laboratories and libraries. “*Rural schools must have laboratories for experiments to help learners understand Physical Science and related subjects better*”.

Libraries stocked with “*contemporary publications and resources and library assistants to help learners use the library, are prerequisites for effective learning at rural schools, and may contribute to levelling learners’ knowledge with global demands*”. Related to libraries, is well-equipped resource centres to enhance learners’ access to knowledge, and for young graduate teachers to have access to resources for professional development. Young graduates are demotivated to remain at rural schools without any resource

centres because the absence of resource centres intensifies teachers' feelings of professional isolation in rural areas. Professional growth necessitates resource centres at rural schools in order for teachers to facilitate relevant information competently to learners. Participants suggested a resource centre to be built at one of the schools that is comfortably accessible to most of the schools in the area enabling teachers of surrounding schools easy access.

Linked to proper housing for teachers and the availability of laboratories and libraries to enhance teaching and learning as previously discussed, is the need for hostels for learners at schools in desolated rural areas. These hostels are needed in order *"to groom our own learners because if we could have our own hostels and take on our learners throughout their whole school life, they may continue performing well throughout, as we know their learning styles and how best to help them to learn better"*.

Hostel facilities for rural learners are important in ensuring a consistent focus on school work, and countering distractions relating to excessive home chores with learners' families. Consistency with learning is also enhanced by hostel facilities for learners in that continuity of assistance with specific learning styles is possible with learners being retained at the same school for their whole school life, in the care of teachers who have been with them all along their schooling and knows their learning well.

Linked to classrooms, laboratories, libraries and a central resource centre, participants emphasised the need for sports facilities to attract young graduates and to ensure a more holistic development of learners by providing them with a basic extra-curricular programme. Emphasised was placed on the crucial need for regular visits by subject specialists from the Regional Office to capacitate teachers who were teaching subjects for which they were not trained.

With regard to infrastructure needs to ensure qualified teachers were retained at rural schools, emphasis was placed on the upgrading of road networks, *"especially the roads in the villages because during rainy seasons teachers drive their cars through deep water"*. If tarred roads were too expensive to construct, participants anticipated well-maintained gravel roads which *"will motivate teachers to stay at rural schools even if the financial incentive was low"*.

It was clear that regardless of the financial incentive, teachers needed certain facilities and a road infrastructure in their working environment, basic to normal functioning of humanity and acceptable learner performance.

5.2 Revisiting financial incentive

A first action of the suggested revisiting is increased amounts for teachers to ensure that the financial incentive amount is on par with the challenges teachers in rural areas are facing. The financial incentive be increased to a thousand Namibian dollars per month, *"because 750 Namibian dollar is not enough compared to the challenges that teachers were*

facing". Such an increase will serve as a motivating factor *"because the current amount is too little to make an impact on the lives of teachers"*. Not making an impact on quality living, pertained to the financial incentive not being enough for car repairs due to mechanical breakdowns caused by a poor road infrastructure, or for the cost of renting. For that reason, *"the government should increase financial incentive amount in order to attract qualified teachers to schools in rural areas as they [teachers] will then rest assured that the money they will receive is enough for them to cater for their needs"*.

The second action with regard to revisiting the financial incentive relates to a fair categorisation of schools. Schools were not placed appropriately in the category they deserved. The result was that teachers were receiving a financial incentive amount that was not realistic considering the challenges they were facing. Categories were not fair as *"there is no way you can give the same amount to a school that is 50km away from the main road and the school that is 15km away from the main road. It is not fair. The imbalances in the categorisation of schools should be rectified"*!

It was clear that there were guidelines provided for placing schools into categories, but these guidelines were not properly followed. The revisiting endeavour therefore relates to ensuring that the guidelines are meticulously and fairly applied in categorising schools. As the financial incentive was suspended for a period of time, participants anticipated the suspension to have related to fair categorisation with re-implementation. However, after the financial incentive resumed, some schools still concluded that they were not properly categorised.

The third action required from a revisiting of the financial incentive relates to the implementation of an extra financial incentive for notable performance in addition to the existing financial incentive amount. Such an incentive is needed to motivate teacher dedication especially with regard to schooling exit levels such as grades 10 and 12. There is a need to *"put some strategies in place to motivate teachers to improve academic performance by way of using financial incentive. In addition to the default financial incentive amount, those teachers with improved results should be given additional financial incentive amounts to motivate them"*.

The Ministry of education should link the financial incentive to the performance of the learners, especially at grade ten and grade twelve performances. If a teacher's subject improved by a certain percentage, that teacher should receive a certain amount, in addition to the common basic amount given to everybody.

The financial incentive was initially paid to qualified teachers only for them to locate and remain in rural schools to improve learner performance. However, the mode of implementation changed to include all staff members in the financial incentive allocations. However, participants stressed the importance of a financial incentive exclusively paid to good performing

teachers in order to improve learner performance in desolated rural schools. Considering the current socialistic approach of allocating financial incentive to teaching and non-teaching staff regardless of performance, there is no motivation for qualified teachers to excel in their teaching careers. Linked to the financial incentive allocated to good performance only, participants stressed the importance of an additional financial incentive as motivation for highly qualified teachers to locate to rural areas. Highly qualified teachers “*can be attracted by giving them additional financial incentive on the basis of their qualifications to vacate urban areas knowing they will be employed where there are better benefits*”. An additional financial incentive should therefore be used to attract highly qualified teachers to rural schools, with the sustaining of that financial incentive dependent on persistent good performance as measured by learner performance in exit grades, grade 10 and 12.

A fourth action needed for improved functioning of the financial incentive relates to the taxation of the financial incentive amount resulting in participants not really having additional remuneration due to an increased taxable amount. Treasury rules require that any taxable income disbursed by the state should be subjected to taxation. The financial incentive was therefore not an exemption to treasury rules as the financial incentive was paid by the state. An approach to avoid the financial incentive being taxed was suggested, that “*perhaps what they should do is to say, look, this is your salary and this is your tax amount from your salary. After deducting the tax from the salary, they can now add the financial incentive amount. Otherwise, if financial incentive amount is made part of the gross salary and get deducted, teachers do not get anything, especially if their tax bracket shifts to the next level of taxation. Teachers will only be satisfied if financial incentive is tax-free*”.

It is essential that the financial incentive be increased and exempted from tax deduction. Alternatively, the financial incentive amount should be increased to such a level that even if the amount is subjected to taxation, teachers still enjoy an improvement in their payment.

5.3 Budget allocations

Changes are required in national budgetary allocations in order to meet the demands of education at rural schools. The amount of money allocated to every school’s development budget was not enough to fulfil the needs of rural schools. It was found out that “*the budget for capital projects needs to be revisited and increased to cater for the materials required at rural schools. For example, right now we need more than 200 classrooms in Omusati Region, but we only get a budget enough to construct about 10 classrooms*”.

The views of participant concurs with the findings in literature about inadequate government funding, which disables schools to secure sufficient instructional materials and facilities for all learners enrolled at their schools (Loeb, Darling-Hammond & Luczak 2005; Howley, Rhodes & Beall, 2009). In the case of

Namibia, as of the year 2017, the budget allocation for the education directorate of Omusati Region decreased as a result of budget cuts to national budget, due to adverse economic climate conditions. The directorate’s operational budget decreased by 47.7%, while the development budget decreased by 41.9% in 2017 (Hilukilwa 2017:1).

The shrinking national budget allocation implied challenges with developmental projects at rural schools to such an extent that planned capital projects could not take off. Since budget cuts were necessitated by an adverse economic climate, once the economy stabilises again, regional budget allocations should increase to address matters such as “*dignified housing for staff*” and “*financial support to take learners on excursions*”. When teachers take learners on excursions at their school, “*it is our own cars, our own fuel and our own food that we make available to learners*”.

In 2017, the shrinking budgets also resulted in a grounding of government vehicles in the Omusati Education Directorate making it difficult for subject advisors to travel to schools in rural areas to provide assistance to teachers, especially for the subject areas teachers were not trained. It was clear that participants were under the influence of harsh economic realities and the debilitating effect thereof on operational and development budget allocations. However, the approach of doing what is possible with what is available within the specific context, should apply to rural school teaching ensuring that teaching and learning occurs according to acceptable standards.

5.4 Vocational education

Many learners’ potential was not developed due to the excessive focus on academic schooling. Learners at rural schools were all compelled to take academic subjects regardless of the fact that some of them were more practically inclined. As a result, many learners did not succeed in passing academic subjects, and because their practically-inclined aptitudes were not catered for, these learners were eventually prone to unemployment, living unproductive lives in society. Emphasised was placed on the need to foster the acquisition of vocational skills alongside academic subjects. Society was failing because “*the kind of education that we are giving to the nation does not address the needs of the nations’ market demands. We are being told that unemployment is high but we have graduates sitting at home*”.

It was clear from the interviews with participants that there was a need to introduce learners to a vocational education curriculum from the early grades of schooling. Learners who were not able to succeed with academic subjects would then be catered for by providing them with vocationally-related skills for ensuring an independent adult life. All-rounders succeeding in both vocational and academic subjects would enjoy a more holistic education, preparing them for professional careers such as doctors, engineers, actuaries and artisans. It was acknowledged, however, that schools needed

to be provided with enough resources to cater for the provision of both vocational and academic subjects.

5.5 School cluster system

Emphasis should be placed on a well-functioning school cluster system at rural schools for the sharing of resources. Grouping rural schools together that were geographically close in order to share facilities, instructional materials and cooperative learning practices would improve learner performance at rural schools. By sharing educational resources and teaching methodologies, and ensuring that available human capital were exploited to the advantage of all members of the cluster population, rural schools in Namibia were able to ensure proper teaching and learning.

Although a cluster system for educational provisioning was introduced in Namibia in 1996, it was not successful as school principals who were leading the implementation of the cluster system in their Circuits, felt that they were exploited as they were not remunerated for the extra work they were doing. In this regard, it was confirmed that although a school cluster system was implemented at rural schools in Namibia for the constructive sharing of available services, “*they have now abolished the cluster system, because principals were doing works without pay*”.

Participants emphasised, however, that a school cluster system was essential for schools in rural communities with limited resources to share resources in order to improve their learner performance. While the implementation of a school cluster system in Namibian rural areas was a positive move for education decentralisation and learner performance, successful implementation failed as the system did not have a legal policy framework and there were no resources made available to schools for the implementation and management of school cluster activities (Shikalepo, 2012).

Operations of the school cluster system were dependent on the budget of the school which was regarded as the cluster centre, rendering the school cluster system ineffective. In addition to have been appointed as school principals for their own schools, some school principals had to perform duties as cluster centre principals and they also had to act as Circuit Inspectors. However, school principals were not paid for these additional responsibilities due to the lack of a legal basis for the cluster system functioning. Schools have stopped using the school cluster system due to its perceived exploitative nature. Nevertheless, participants agreed that the school cluster system for educational provisioning must be reinstated. This implies that government must revisit shortfalls and consider recommendations to ensure proper functioning for the sake of optimal educational provisioning in rural areas, resulting in improved learner performance.

VI. SUMMARY

This article provided an explanation of the findings of the study which sought to explain the measures that can be implemented to improve the quality of education at schools

located in Namibian rural communities. The findings revealed that Namibian schools located in rural communities indeed face various challenges which hinders effective teaching and learning. It is thus important to devise measures for implementation in order to improve the quality of education at rural schools in spite of challenges. The study find out that various measures can be implemented to perfect teaching and learning at rural schools. These measures relates to an improved working environment, well equipped with classroom and accommodation facilities, as well as well-resourced libraries and laboratories.

The amount of financial incentive that was in implementation at rural schools needed to be increased, so that it weighs out the challenges that teachers were facing at rural schools. Accompanying this increase was the proper categorisation of schools according to which teachers were to receive the financial incentive amount. In addition, the central government should increase the budgetary allocation to rural schools in order to satisfy their development and operational expenditures. The budget allocation should be increased in order to cater for an additional, vocational education curriculum requirements, to capacitate learners who were not academic inclined, yet vocational-oriented. Due to the limited resources at rural schools, schools should take advantage of their proximity to each other and exploit the advantages of school cluster system for sharing instructional and assessment resources, for improved quality of output.

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