

SUPPORTING INDUCTION TO THE TEACHING PROFESSION FOR WOMEN IN MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

Gender parity in primary and secondary education has yet to be achieved in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Malawi. The presence of female teachers is recognised as positively impacting on girls' enrolment and learning success, but in many rural areas in Malawi, there are few qualified female teachers working in primary or secondary schools.

This paper contributes to the current debates on how to address this gap in qualified female teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas. One suggested solution to breaking the cycle of low female achievement in rural areas is the use of distance education to prepare local women to become teachers in their own communities. In the programme reported on in this paper, aspiring female teachers are supported to take on the role of "learning assistants" in their local community primary schools while studying to achieve the qualifications necessary for application to a formal primary teacher training course.

Using applications, interviews and workshop data from the early stages of the programme, the backgrounds and motivations of applicants to the programme are explored. The paper also discusses the implications for the design of this distance learning programme, emerging constraints on the achievement of programme intentions and areas for further study.

Keywords: Learning assistants; Malawi; women; rural schools; teachers; distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

A common factor in countries that have achieved the universal primary education (UPE) and gender parity goals, is a substantial increase in the number of female primary school teachers (Commonwealth Secretariat & UNESCO, 2011). The training and deployment of female teachers has contributed to meeting capacity. Equally important, female teachers have influenced conditions in schools and classrooms in such a way that their presence correlates with increased retention and learning gains of girls, particularly in rural areas where the challenges of girls' education are greatest (Herz & Sperling, 2004; United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, 2008; UNESCO, 2000).

Female teachers can challenge and change school culture and pedagogy in ways that offer girls greater encouragement towards success and achievement. They are able to advocate for girl pupils and to offer role models different to those habitually offered to girls in rural areas. In a Malawian study, both parents and teachers expressed the view that female teachers also play a role in upholding moral standards and "offer personal counselling to girls" (Commonwealth Secretariat & UNESCO, 2011:18). The absence of female teachers, combined with a lack of gender-sensitive approaches in schools is argued to contribute to the perpetuation of female underparticipation and achievement (Gaynor, 1997).

However, strategies for the recruitment of female teachers, particularly in rural areas, are problematic. Firstly, the number of girls who successfully complete secondary education is frequently small. This limits the pool of potential recruits to the teaching profession, particularly when countries are concerned with ensuring quality in teacher recruitment. Secondly, in many countries there is often little interest in becoming a teacher among older girls in senior secondary schools. Teaching is regarded as a low-status profession to those who have opportunities to access other professions and occupations (Casely-Hayford, 2008).

Qualified female teachers are frequently extremely reluctant to work in rural areas for extended periods. Overt encouragement for women to enter the teaching profession (feminisation of the profession) gives rise to concerns that this will be associated with a loss of status for the profession and lower earnings (Drudy, 2008). These are complex issues that demand greater attention to the gender realities of rural women when designing and implementing teacher education programmes such as the new distance learning initiative, which aims to support women who are entering the teaching profession in Malawi described here.

The Malawi context

In rural Malawi, the shortage of qualified female primary teachers is acknowledged to be a major factor that hinders progress towards the Education for All (EFA) goals. Primary pupil enrolment increased dramatically following the introduction of free primary education in 1994, but it is unlikely that Malawi will achieve universal primary education or gender equality in education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2011). As in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the gap between goals and the current situation is greatest in rural areas, home to 80% of the population. Here, primary school drop-out rates are high and pupils at all levels perform poorer than those in urban areas (Malawi Institute of Education, 2009). This disadvantage is compounded for girls. Fewer rural girls than boys complete primary school and those girls who do reach grade 10 are less likely to pass the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) than their male peers (Republic of Malawi, 2007). At junior secondary level, the pass rate of boys is almost 20% higher than that of girls (Malawi National Examination Board, 2010).

Across the country, females comprise just over one third (38%) of the current primary teacher workforce (Republic of Malawi, 2008), but these average figures mask considerable geographical differences. In 2008, Lilongwe City had 2 011 trained female teachers and 298 trained male teachers, while Nsanje district's qualified primary teacher workforce comprised of 93 females and 485 males. Even in a rural area like Nsanje, female teachers are more likely to be located at a peri-urban area or growth point. Thus, girls in rural schools frequently have no experience of female teachers as role models. Gender discrimination and exclusion of girls can be unchallenged, with gender disparities remaining deeply ingrained (UNESCO, 2010a; UNGEI, 2008).

The reasons for this gender distribution of teachers in Malawi are complex. In comparison to many other countries in the region, female recruitment to the profession is relatively low (World Bank, 2010). Despite efforts to address the gender imbalance, the percentage of females recruited to the standard Initial Primary Teacher Education programme (IPTE) has only been above 50% in one of the last four years for which there are data (details in Table 1). This is not surprising, as expectations of academic success in Malawi are generally lower for females. This is more pronounced in rural areas (Kamwendo, 2010). In addition, the drop-out and turnover rates of female teachers in rural areas are high (Kruijer, 2010). Many female teachers are reluctant to be deployed to rural areas or request transfers away

from rural areas after only a short time. Female teachers tend to prefer living in the cities. They perceive that there are more opportunities for development and career progression in the cities, housing is poor in rural areas (there is little official housing and a lack of other suitable housing) and they are often without basic services (running water and electricity). Most crucially, dominant gender expectations act against teaching in a rural area. For unmarried women, it is often felt to be unsafe to live alone in rural areas and for married women, their husbands' employment often precludes deployment to rural areas (Kadzamira, 2006).

In Malawi, most primary teachers enter the profession through one of two routes. Primary teacher training colleges run a traditional campus based on the IPTE programme with an average combined annual output of 4 000 new primary teachers. In 2010, recognising that the demand for primary teachers would never be met with the capacity of the IPTE programme, the government implemented a new open distance learning (ODL) programme for teacher training in rural areas (Republic of Malawi, 2008). This two-and-a-half-year programme is scheduled to run for three cohorts, each of approximately 4 000 trainees. After an initial four-week induction, trainees spend almost all their time in schools and are paid 90% of a qualified teacher's salary. The programme follows the same curriculum as the IPTE, but with the material adapted for distance learning.

To encourage teachers to remain in rural areas, trainees on this programme must commit to remaining in their placement school (selected by local officials) for five years following qualification. Applicants to both programmes are required to have successfully obtained a full Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), usually taken at the end of four years of secondary schooling. For the ODL programme, the requirement for MSCE credit in English has been removed. (It is too early to assess the impact of the ODL programme on the number of qualified female teachers in rural areas.)

Many previous initiatives in the region have focused on attracting greater numbers of female applicants to teaching and then persuading them to work in rural areas. Tactics include changing the attitudes of newly trained teachers, integrating inexperienced teachers into community life and improving living and working conditions (Casely-Hayford, 2008). Such approaches may improve gender parity in pupil access and outcomes, but they do not offer sustainable solutions to female empowerment through education in these communities. These measures generally favour women from more urban areas who have little interest in long-term teaching

in rural areas. It is suggested that there is a need to rather consider how the education of women in these communities can be reshaped to support the development of their capabilities, including becoming teachers. These women are familiar with the context of their communities and can act as symbols of female agency, challenging the expectations of female life opportunities, which are currently largely limited to domestic or farm work.

The pilot programme reported here (MATSS) adopts such an approach because it utilises distance learning to support females in rural areas to gain the qualifications and confidence to become teachers in their own communities. This disrupts the cycle of rural female underachievement. The programme is congruent with government policies to increase female enrolment in teacher training and the overall number of teachers (Republic of Malawi, 2008). MATSS was designed by the Open University (OU), UK, in partnership with Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi (FAWEMA) and builds on the extensive experience of TESSAⁱ (led by the Open University, UK) in developing resources and programmes for student teachers in sub-Saharan Africa.

MATSS programme structure

The Malawi Access to Teaching Saltire Scholarship (MATSS)ⁱⁱ programme aims to increase the number of qualified female primary school teachers in rural Malawi through targeting and supporting women in rural communities to apply for formal teacher training (IPTE or ODL). It combines distance learning study and practical school experience to provide a pathway to a teaching career for women who may be marginalised from formal learning, not only by being female and rural, but also by their ages and life circumstances. In its initial stages, the programme recruited two cohorts of 500 women each over two years (2011 and 2012) across four districts. These women aspire to be primary school teachers, they have previously studied for the MSCE but failed to achieve the requisite number of subject passes for the certificate (MSCE) and are consequently ineligible to apply for a formal teacher training place.

During their year on the programme, the women are known as scholars. They spend four days each week in a local primary school working alongside a teacher in a Standard 1 or 2 class while also studying for their MSCE in the priority subjects of Mathematics, Physical Science, Biology and English. Distance learning materials have been developed to support both MSCE study and the structured school placement



in the form of a school experience handbook. During MSCE study, scholars are supported by a local tutor. At the primary school, each scholar is allocated a mentor who is encouraged to act as a “critical friend”, meeting regularly with the scholar to discuss her experiences in the school, to identify ways of helping her if she is encountering difficulties and to verify the completion of activities in the school experience handbook.

This school experience dimension acts to induct scholars into the teaching profession as para-professionals and aims to serve two functions. Firstly, scholars are positioned to support pupil learning and as female role models for girl pupils. Secondly, through this experience, scholars find out if their commitment to teaching persists when exposed to the realities of classroom life. Previous studies have concluded that many trainee teachers in sub-Saharan African contexts can feel poorly prepared by their college courses for the demanding realities of classroom life. Akyeampong and Lewin (2002:344) suggest that many beginner teachers experience a “reality shock” when they first start as qualified teachers. The period of structured classroom work offered by this programme aims to offer some preparation for this reality, better equipping potential trainees for the future discussion of classroom life (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002).

Scholars receive a modest bursary to cover travel expenses and personal hygiene and presentation. Towards the end of the year, there is guidance on applying for the IPTE and/or ODL teacher training programmes. The programme is guided by a Steering Group, which includes key stakeholders from the Malawi government (Head of Basic Education, Head of Department for Teacher Education and Development) with development partners including the Department for International Development (DfID) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). All programme material was created and critically read by local teachers and teacher trainers, and developmental testing was carried out with female students and teachers in Malawi. Material includes open educational resources, available on the TESSA website under a Creative Commons, Share Alike licence, allowing users to use, reproduce and integrate with other resources without copyright costs.

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

To develop the programme framework, the research drew on experience with distance learning programmes (Moon, Leach & Stevens, 2005) and similar projects with learners in the Malawi context (Chakwera, 2009; Pridmore & Jere, 2011), including the complementary basic education (CBE) programmeⁱⁱⁱ.

The distance learning material (MSCE and school experience handbooks) is informed by situated learning theory in which skills and knowledge are acquired through authentic contexts and by communicating with peers and experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Frequent, practical activities are complemented with reflective writing tasks and prompts for discussion with peers and more experienced mentors and tutors. Activities, particularly those in the school experience handbook, encourage scholars to engage in ongoing conversations with their practice and that of the teachers they are working alongside. In each school, the head teacher nominates a mentor (an experienced teacher) to work with the scholars. Mentors support scholars in negotiating the initial stages of the intricate process of becoming a para-professional, extending support beyond classroom practices to include a discussion of the whole school and community concerns (McIntyre, Hagger & Wilkin, 1993; Mtika & Gates, 2011).

Through workshops and guidance material, mentors are encouraged to guide scholars in developing organisational skills, appropriate behaviour and negotiating the boundary between being learners and para-professionals. Wenger (1998) suggests that the experiences of mentors can serve as “paradigmatic trajectories”. They provide details of how the school and teaching actually work and set possibilities for the scholars. Guidelines for the selection of the mentor strongly suggested that she should be a qualified female teacher, who offers a socially secure relationship in which the scholar can learn and grow as an emerging professional. This has not always been possible and a small percentage of mentors are qualified male teachers. Other teachers and the head teacher are potential additional sources of professional and practical support. Teachers’ families looking after scholars’ children were observed and a few head teachers have allowed very young babies to accompany scholars to school.

To support MSCE distance study, scholars are allocated one tutor for Mathematics/ Science and another for English. These are usually local secondary school teachers with experience of teaching MSCE. Tutorial groups meet every week at the local

Teacher Development Centre (TDC) or secondary school to discuss progress, and on alternate weeks, the tutor is present to structure and lead the session. The researchers wanted to recruit female tutors, but the gender imbalance among secondary school teachers is particularly acute in rural areas. As a consequence, only two (out of 40) MSCE tutors in the first year of the programme are women. The MSCE materials follow the specified MSCE curriculum drawn up by the Malawi National Examination Board.

Scholars are always placed in pairs (and often in groups of four to five) at primary schools where there is already at least one female teacher. This both facilitates peer support and attempts to reduce the possibility of gender violence (Leach et al, 2002); scholars lack the authority of teachers and could be open to prejudice and abuse from male teachers or older male pupils.

Participation in the programme is a process that embraces evolving competence in the tools and practices of teaching. Curriculum subjects are understood as sets of social practices undertaken by members of a community, and there is a conscious attempt to highlight scholars' relationships between their own developing subject knowledge (MSCE) and their school practices with young pupils. Scholars are positioned with potential multiple sources of support (both formal and informal) through a network of people in the primary school, community and secondary school or TDC. A representation of this is shown in Figure 1.

The programme launched in two districts in the south region, Mwanza and Chikhwawa, as well as the Dedza and Ntchisi districts in the central region (Malawi has 34 educational districts organised in six divisions). Multiple data sets were analysed to select these districts. These included the number of qualified female teachers, the pupil-to-teacher ratio for trained teachers, the MSCE pass rates of females, the drop-out rates of females in primary education, and adult female literacy (Republic of Malawi, 2009). The district education priorities were considered (UNICEF, 2009) and logistical issues were factored in.

Communication and transport networks across Malawi are not properly developed outside the main centres of population. In addition, the activities of other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and projects were reviewed to identify possible synergies, partnerships and discussions held with ministry officials before a final selection was made. These four rural districts have low scores in all the Education Management Information System (EMIS) data points considered, and

resident officials expressed interest in supporting the programme. Prior to launch, an extensive series of “sensitisation” activities were held in each zone (local area) in conjunction with the local District Education Office. Such activities served to raise awareness of the purpose of the programme and attempted to confer “legitimacy” with local leaders.

The recruitment of scholars is administered by FAWEMA, with support from other NGOs operating locally. Interest in the project exceeded expectations with several thousand women attending information sessions and 1 700 submitting applications. Selection was done against a number of transparent criteria, which included residency in the zone, prior completion of secondary schooling (MSCE), achievement in English at MSCE level and commitment to becoming a teacher.

At the start of the programme, scholars attend a local two-day residential induction meeting facilitated by teacher training lecturers, local and national education officers and gender experts from FAWEMA and other NGOs. These sessions familiarise scholars with the material and programme methodology, and enable them to meet each other, mentors and tutors. Induction leaders emphasise the benefits of peer support and other support mechanisms (Figure 1), as well as the importance of scholars taking responsibility for their own learning, progress and success in the programme.

METHODOLOGY

A longitudinal study placing the scholars at the centre of the enquiry, exploring their experiences of the programme relative to their own development and changing identities, is integrated with the programme. This includes the exploration of resources the women bring to the programme, how these are recognised, utilised and legitimised and how the learning opportunities of the programme are experienced and they lead to changes in the scholars. Including the perspective of tutors and mentors is also important. Data collection is at fixed points during programme delivery. Some of the data is used for reporting to funders and programme evaluation. The findings presented here are from the early stages of the project. They draw on an analysis of the applications of 500 scholars in cohort one, together with semi-structured interviews with a small sample (12) of scholars from two districts (Mwanza and Chikhwara) and with mentors (four) and tutors (four) in two districts (Dedza and Ntchisi). Logistical and resource issues limited the number of such interviews that could be carried out in these early stages.

The programme selection process had multiple stages. The initial application form required^{iv} a description of applicants' previous school experience, MSCE results and interest in the programme. Applicants were then invited to attend a recruitment centre to undertake an extended written task in English (one hour). The following items were included in the task:

- Describe a situation in your life where you overcame something difficult.
- What was your strongest subject at MSCE level? Why was this?
- What are the qualities of a good teacher?
- Why are female teachers important?

An oral interview was also conducted in English with female interviewers (FAWEMA and a local NGO) for approximately ten minutes. The interview verified the applicant's identity and involved an unstructured discussion on one topic (from a list) linked to educational experiences and aspirations. Approximately 1 000 applicants went through this process.

The selection process posed several challenges. These included transport, practical issues associated with verifying applicants' residency and prior qualifications, as well as difficulties in the recording and categorisation of applicants' interview responses. It became apparent that interviewers had little experience of note-taking during the interviews and the resulting summaries (in a pre-supplied template) offered little differentiation between applicants. Consequently, a large number of candidates scored full marks on all criteria. Due to their limited reliability and validity, only limited use was made of these interview notes in applicant selection and the research. For the next cohort, aspects of the application process are being refined, but it is perhaps worth noting that this selection process was perceived as innovative for its inclusion of open-ended questions linked to motivation and prior experiences.

Twelve semi-structured scholar interviews were carried out at induction sessions by members of the UK project team. This may have influenced the way that the participants expressed themselves. Interviews were carried out in English and many interviewees struggled to find appropriate words. Furthermore, their responses are highly likely to have been conditioned by the involvement of "outsiders" of the project. Interviewees were selected against prior levels of MSCE achievement and age. Interviews generated detail on the scholars' rationale for participation in the programme and their prior education and life experiences, including the challenges

of completing the MSCE. In addition, they provided insights into scholars' views about the behaviour and attributes of a "good teacher" and how these were informed by their beliefs about teaching and learning. Mentor and tutor interviews were undertaken at schools visited by the project team in the first three months after the project launch. Schools were sampled based on the number of scholars, pupil roll and location, but the project team had little knowledge of the mentors or tutors prior to the visits. Interviews were audio-recorded and full transcripts of the interviews were produced later.

An initial analysis of the qualitative data (applications and interview transcripts) involved critically examining a random sample of individual responses to the four open-ended questions to develop categories. This was undertaken separately by three members of the UK project team, who then agreed on a coding frame to apply to the entire sample of 500 successful applicants. The same frame was used for the scholar interview data to enable them to describe and analyse the data sets within a common conceptual framework.

Findings: characteristics of the scholars

Age: No age limits were placed on applicants to this programme, as older women with family ties may be more likely to stay in their own communities rather than leaving to pursue opportunities in urban areas. Successful applicants covered a wide age range, with several individuals being over 35 years of age and a few under 20 years of age. The majority of scholars are aged between 20 and 30 years (detailed information is given in Table 2).

There is little data for comparison. Coultas and Lewin (2002) found the average age of female trainees in Malawi to be similar (25.9 years), but their cohort mainly consisted of untrained teachers already working in schools who were subsequently undergoing upgrading. The scholars of the current project span a wider age range, but it is not possible to know whether this is due to the nature of the programme or its application process, which paid greater attention to potential and motivation than typical Malawian teacher training programmes.

Educational qualifications: All scholars were required to show evidence of previous MSCE study. The majority of scholars had attempted the MSCE examinations in the last five years (Figure 2). However, there were some scholars who had first attempted the MSCE examination as long ago as 1984. A minority (54 scholars from the cohort of 500) had attempted the MSCE examinations on more than one

occasion. As could be expected, these were almost entirely older scholars (aged over 30).

To obtain a full MSCE certificate requires five or six passes at MSCE (depending on the number of credits), including passes in key subjects – Mathematics, one science subject and English. Although the average number of passes for scholars is close to six (Table 3), they lack passes in the key subjects (Table 4). The high number of passes in English is a reflection of the selection criteria for the programme; fluency in written English was given primacy as a selection criteria. The MSCE examinations, the project material and teacher training are all through the medium of English and it was argued that proficiency in English would give applicants the greatest chance of success.

An analysis of areas of poor prior attainment (Table 4) in the MSCE data reveals that Mathematics is particularly problematic, and this is reflected in scholars' comments. Over 80% identified this as their weakest subject in school. A lack of books and equipment, poor teaching, including a lack of encouragement from the teacher, and teachers without relevant qualifications were all cited as contributing factors to low accomplishment in Mathematics. Many expressed low self-esteem in Mathematics and Science and constructed themselves as low achievers. Nevertheless, the fact that they reached the final years of secondary school positions these females as high achievers in their own communities.

Family experiences of education can be highly influential in a trainee's choice of teaching as a career, and other researchers have thus explored the educational attainments of trainees' parents (Coultras and Lewin, 2002). This was not an explicit line of investigation in the current study, but scholars' mothers' experiences emerged as a theme in scholars' backgrounds. Many described their mothers struggling to care for several children without partner support, mothers suffering abuse from partners and other family members, illness and low levels of maternal qualifications. A minority drew directly on this experience to rationalise their interest in the programme and their determination to be economically active and independent.

"My father died in 1991 and we have raised in a difficult life because my mother dropout from school in standard 2, so had no chance to get employed and she did not know how to run a business." (sic) (C052) 4

All applicants had left school at least a year previously, so their activities and employment prior to the programme were scrutinised. The researchers were interested in perceived potential return to the individual while in their current occupation or employment. The extent of this perceived return was linked to a view of teacher training as a stepping stone to teaching or to employment in other potentially more lucrative sectors. Data on the previous occupation of the scholars is fragmented with more than half of the cohort responding “none” or failing to answer this question. Interview data leads the researchers to suggest that many of the women who did not respond are involved in farming, house-work and domestic labour. There were small differences across the districts; for example, in Ntchisi district there were no scholars already engaged in education-related work and over 90% of those who responded described themselves as farmers or working in the home. However, in Mwanza district, 12 scholars were already engaged in education-related work. This included “nursery teacher” and “volunteer teacher”.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from this data beyond noting that few of the scholars have had any employment in the regular waged sector, and that the majority was engaged in farming and/or domestic work before starting with the programme. For these failed MSCE candidates, there are scarce opportunities for further training or education and limited openings for formal employment in rural areas.

Motivation for teacher training: The majority of scholars expressed extrinsic motives for joining the programme. These motives were focused around meeting materialistic needs, a wish to be financially independent and to be able to support dependants.

“I think it’s better to work so that I should assist my family, my relatives.”
(Respondent C15)

Many mentioned the desire to contribute to their local community or country by supporting children’s learning and reducing the pupil-to-teacher ratio:

“So it is my ambition to help the villagers and village head men to help all the children who don’t like to go to school... we want to empower all the children surrounding us.” (Respondent MO25)

Approximately a third of the responses included a gender dimension. These individuals wanted to act as a role model for girls in their local community:

"Assist girls to work hard at schools in order to go to university, not only boys." (Respondent M133)

"They can give courage to the ladies." (Respondent M138)

This extended to a desire to contribute to the development of their local communities and country:

"Because it helps to reduce women's ignorance in the country." (Respondent C004)

"The second thing is that it helps for the country not to have a gender bias." (Respondent C053)

Good teachers and teaching: Scholars inevitably bring with them a view of teaching formed from their own experiences. These experiences could include interacting with teachers in different roles as learners, parents of school learners and, for a few, working as volunteer teachers (in schools or in non-formal education situations with the youth or adults) or in other education-related roles. These ideas form the basis of what "teaching is 'supposed' to be" (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002). Scholars placed considerable emphasis on the personal behaviour, personal qualities and moral values of teachers. Many described a teacher as someone who needs a smart, clean appearance and to be dedicated, punctual, reliable, resourceful, tolerant, hard-working, honest and "of good character" (Respondent C027). At a classroom level, there was an emphasis on commitment to learners through caring and parenting: "... good women teacher is able to teach girls how to do their own cleanliness." (Respondent C013)

Scholars' responses indicated that they perceived that nurturing learners was key to being a good teacher. Many emphasised the importance of the relationship between learners and teachers. A good teacher was described as caring and friendly to learners, which creates a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom:

"A good teacher should not be fearful to learners." (Respondent M96)

"... to make sure when children making wrong that they be loved." (sic) (Respondent C15)

Teachers with such qualities were held to be role models for learners and more widely, in the community: "... to set a good example to friends." (Respondent C013)

Many scholars felt that female teachers were more likely than male teachers to possess these qualities and that they would be more capable of advising learners. Women were believed to be more accustomed to hard work and less likely to be distracted by drink and to enter into inappropriate relationships with learners. Their presence could reduce the gender differentiation and shift dominant cultural views about what it is to be “feminine” in schools: “... because a system of women abuse can be slow down in the schools” (Respondent C108).

Experience of childcare and knowledge of children was frequently cited as a skill that women would bring to teaching. There was a perception of teaching as an extension of childcare and activity in the domestic sphere.

“She teach pupils like her children.” (sic) (Respondent C072)

“Women easily understand children because most women are mothers so they have a spirit of love for children.” (Respondent C099)

A small minority of the scholars argued that studying and working in schools would prevent women from engaging in other types of “undesirable activities”.

“They can improve their education standard instead of going to the wrong places like bars and doing sex with married mens; they can be busy with teaching.” (sic) (Respondent C070)

Experiences of learning: Applicants’ writing revealed experiences of high levels of poverty and frequent interruptions to their learning. Barriers and constraints to learning included illness, economic issues and parental expectations. Experiences of bereavement (usually parental), illness (usually parental but occasionally themselves), pregnancy and husbands’ behaviour all inhibited regular school attendance. Similarly, economic hardship (often as a result of poor harvest) interrupted schooling for many of the scholars. For some, there were insufficient family funds for school fees, clothing and study material and for others a need to be engaged in income-generating activity instead of attending school. For some, gender expectations and prejudices had impacted on their schooling:

“Parents they encourage you to get married instead of school.” (sic) (Respondent C072)

"My parents believe that a boy have a right to go to school not a girl." (sic)
(Respondent C057)

Many scholars expressed negative experiences of school. Teaching approaches, particularly in secondary schools, were felt to have been inadequate, insufficiently engaging or inclusive, with unattractive conditions in school classrooms. Many experienced an absence of encouragement or interest from teachers, physical punishment and inappropriate behaviour from male teachers. While these conditions and teacher behaviour affect both boys and girls in schools, the lack of value associated with girls' education and dominant male behaviour, including sexual harassment, suggest that the impact on girls was greater. Many had experienced a feeling of failure at their grades in crucial public exams (MSCE, JCE or the primary leaving examination). However, for some, this had been mitigated by success at a later date. Threaded through these scholars' stories was the lack of possibility for agency in their own educational experiences and low self-esteem regarding educational attainment.

DISCUSSION

Increasing the number of female teachers in rural areas in developing countries demands innovative measures to attract and retain community teachers. The programme described here is one response to these challenges, aiming to offer authentic situated learning experiences with high levels of support to rural women as they start to become members of the teaching profession. Crucially, while the project is aligned with global aims (Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3, UNDP 2013), it takes into account specific contextualising factors in Malawi and harnesses existing systems. However, the key to success in such a programme is developing an understanding of participants, their motivations, aspirations and prior experiences of learning and an understanding of the positions of those supporting them – their tutors and mentors – to inform materials and the design of support systems.

This programme attracted large numbers of applicants with an appetite for resumed study to achieve the MSCE and a professed desire to progress to becoming teachers. The initial work shows that many of the scholars construct themselves as failing in particular school subjects (especially Mathematics) and have negative experiences of secondary schooling. But many see themselves as agents challenging societal expectations and they want to re-invent their identities. There are few developing-world studies examining factors that influence teaching as a career choice and

even fewer that investigate trainees from more marginalised groups and their learning trajectories to becoming professionals. A recent study of secondary school trainee teachers in Malawi indicated that teaching is frequently a profession of last resort for those who have failed to gain university admission (Mtika & Gates, 2011), confirming similar findings from an earlier study of primary teacher trainees (Coults & Lewin 2002). In these studies and others (Towse et al, 2002), teaching was seen as a “stepping stone” to a higher-status professional activity. The scholars of this programme were much less likely to hold such views about their future roles, and as women in rural communities, few possibilities have been open to them to develop their capabilities.

Scholars perceive teaching as an essentially pastoral activity. Appearance and personal behaviour, particularly nurturing, are foregrounded as characteristics of a good teacher, underpinned by academic qualifications (MSCE) and competency in English. Descriptions of good teachers contained little reference to the practice of teaching or classroom learning, and lesson planning was the only teaching skill mentioned. The social construction of the primary school teacher held by many scholars was synonymous with the constructs of “female” and “mother”. There is much in common here with the views of beginning teachers in other environments in sub-Saharan Africa, but with a greater emphasis on pastoral care for pupils (Akyeampong and Stevens, 2002; Coults and Lewin 2002; Towse et al, 2002).

Such views are influenced by participants’ own experiences of schooling and family life. A significant number of scholars drew on their experiences with childcare or care of ill relatives to align themselves with their future role as teachers. Holding such views allows these women to visualise themselves as teachers without overtly challenging prevalent cultural expectations of themselves as women in their communities. Their multiple responsibilities in their own communities are not reduced while participating in the programme.

The material prepared by the programme adopts a highly participatory approach, seeing the learner as agentive (Bruner, 1996) and encouraging interactions with peers, relatives and friends. There is a large number of activities as well as self- and peer assessments. However, scholars’ participation in activities and the meanings they construct will be highly influenced by their relationships with their tutors and mentors, and the views of learning held by these tutors and mentors and what they judge to be important (McCormick & Murphy, 2008). For the programme team, this mediation of the approach to learning by tutors (and mentors) poses critical

challenges in achieving programme aspirations.

The mentoring dimension of the programme can be deeply challenging for mentors, not least because the programme material suggests new perspectives and ideas on learning that mentors may find unfamiliar and possibly threatening. Interview descriptions of the mentoring process revealed a hierarchical relationship between mentor and scholar. For example, some mentors insist that scholars write out answers to activities in draft for correction before completion in the actual workbook. Furthermore, the presence of the scholars as “learning assistants” may in itself threaten the identity of the teachers/mentors, particularly if they have become accustomed to being the sole adults in their classrooms^v.

The MSCE assessment framework is a key influence on the learning and teaching process, but the tutors – their views on pedagogy learning and knowledge – will also influence the way the curriculum is implemented and valued, as will their relationships with the scholars (McCormick & Murphy, 2008).

Various factors make the programme's approach to learning problematic. Firstly, the selection of the curriculum topics is challenging, because tutors are often dismayed to find that the material does not cover all aspects of the syllabus, and may use additional materials to supplement those in the programme. This can cause information overload for the scholars. Secondly, the majority of tutors have little experience of distance learning, and struggle with this role. Many want to conduct tutorial sessions in the same manner as teacher-led transmission of knowledge. Thirdly, the project team is keen that the scholars are not perceived as “failures” or deficient in their knowledge, but should rather be treated as mature learners with extensive funds of knowledge to draw on. For many tutors, this attention to individual needs (characteristic of distance learning tutoring) is in conflict with their customary “teacher-centred” pedagogic practice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The programme is still in its early stages and, as yet, there is only limited data on the scholars' experiences to inform the development of the programme and to assess its success. Although distance education is not widespread in Malawi and few participants have any prior experience of it, the programme has been widely welcomed by participants, local leaders and key education stakeholders. Harnessing the flexibility of distance learning, the material aims to develop scholars' skills,

knowledge and confidence as they juggle study with work and family duties. Initial data from the first cohort of scholars indicates they feel strongly that their presence is important to girls and to pupils generally, although many lack confidence in particular areas of study and in their ability to succeed academically.

The analysis to date indicates several areas where there is emerging non-alignment of project design and implementation. One such area concerns gender dynamics at a local level in the practices of tutors and mentors. Emerging evidence suggests that the prevailing attitudes of some members of these groups may be sustaining conditions that limit female empowerment. There is non-alignment between the learning approach inherent in the distance learning material and the practices in tutorials and mentor sessions.

Thus, a key part of programme is to increase researchers' understanding of the tutors' and mentors' histories of participation and learning brought to the programme, together with their views of the scholars. Without this, it will be difficult to disrupt tutors' practices and support them in rethinking their teaching styles and expectations for the scholars. This has implications for the types of learning activities these distance education tutors are requested to carry out with the scholars and the forms of guidance and induction for this group. Similarly, for mentors, there is a need to support them to think critically about their practices. Historically, distance learning programmes in Africa have given little attention to the perspectives of tutors, particularly with regard to issues of gender and poverty. Distance learning offers a path into teaching to groups previously under-represented in the profession, particularly women in rural areas. However, a successful programme requires different thinking. This different thinking includes pedagogy, teaching and learning in relation to learners' identities to make any sustainable shift in the learning outcomes for females in these rural communities. This refers to both women on the programme and the girls in schools.

For the funder of the project, the key success indicator is the number of scholars who progress to qualified status and who, once qualified, remain in their local communities. Researchers are aware that there is a need to continue studies to understand the contribution it is making to their understanding of distance learning (material and support design). One should scrutinise the social and learning experiences of the scholars, their future activity and the influence of their presence in the participating primary schools. One should also consider the impact of programme participation on other role-players – mentors and tutors, and their practices.

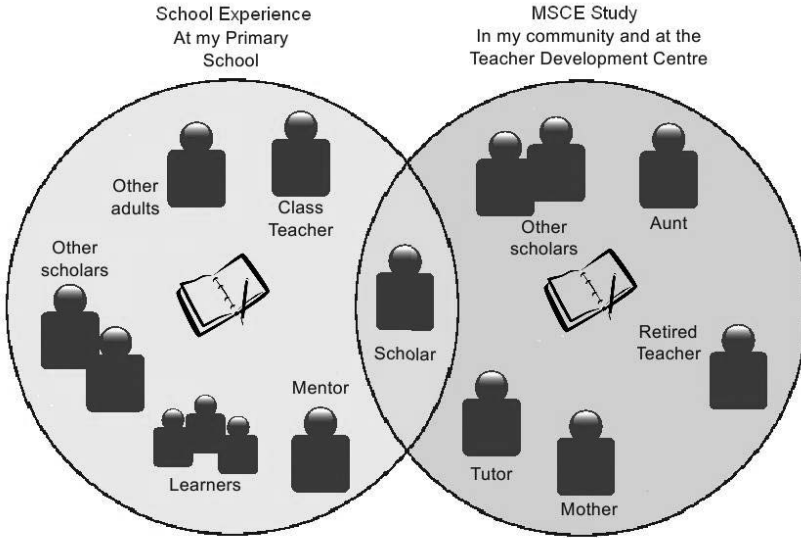


Figure 1: Support for scholars in the MATSS programme

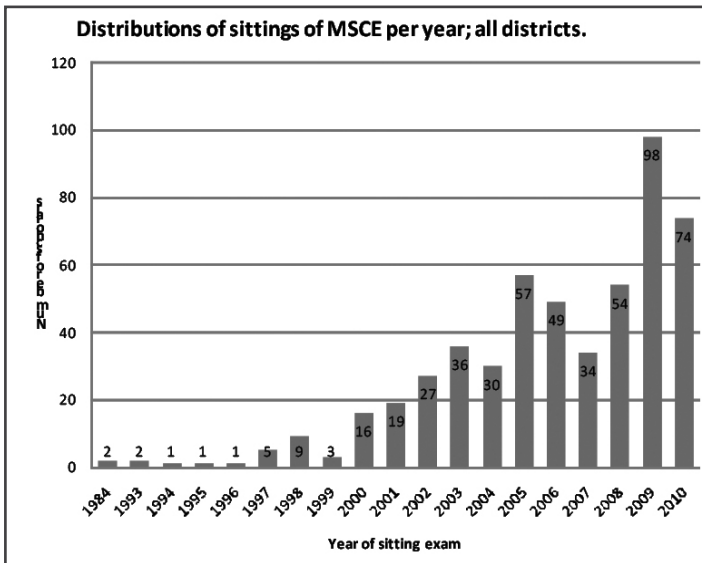


Figure 2: Date scholars sat MSCE examination

Table 1: Female teacher trainee recruitment

Cohort	IPTE 1	IPTE 2	IPTE 3	IPTE 4
Year	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
Female intake	1276	1272	2,166	1,521
% female	45%	45%	55%	40%

Table 2: Age distribution of scholars across the four districts, 2011

Age band (%)	Chikhwawa	Dedza	Mwanza	Ntchisi	Total
<20	3%	2%	1%	8%	3%
20–24	49%	44%	41%	48%	45%
25–29	24%	38%	29%	31%	31%
30–34	13%	12%	17%	7%	13%
35+	6%	3%	8%	0%	5%
Data not available	5%	1%	3%	7%	4%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: Scholar MSCE passes in each district

District	Number of subject passes	Average passes per candidate	Average passes in the key subjects per candidate
Chikhwawa	668	5.6	1.9
Dedza	735	6	2.0
Mwanza	822	6	1.8
Ntchisi	536	5.2	1.7

Table 4: Passes in key subjects per district

District	Biology	Physical Sciences or Science	English Language ¹	English Literature	Mathematics	Total
Chikhwawa	55	19	108	0	42	224
Dedza	71	24	111	1	40	247
Mwanza	67	21	139	1	43	271
Ntchisi	47	13	91	3	27	181
Total	240	77	449	5	152	923

Table 5: scholar prior occupations

	Business related	Education-related	Office/ Admin/ secretarial	Farming/ agriculture/villager	Family/ housewife/carer	Sales/ shop work	Domestic work	Student	Other	None	Blank (none given)	TOTAL
Total	16	19	3	97	50	4	2	13	4	47	234	4896

1 Prior to 2010 there was only one MSCE for English.

ENDNOTES

- i. www.tessafrica.net
- ii. MATSS is a joint programme from the Open University, UK (TESSA), and FAWEMA (Forum of African Educationalist Women in Malawi) with other local partners and is funded by the Scottish government as part of the cooperation agreement which was signed between Scotland and Malawi in November 2005, outlining four key areas of engagement: civic governance, sustainable economic development, health and education. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/International/Africa/Malawi>.
- iii. Run by GTZ, this programme uses unemployed secondary school leavers to support the learning of children who have dropped out of primary school.
- iv. Numbered quotes are from the scholar application forms. Other quotes are from interview data.
- v. Experiences of mentors on the programme are being explored in another strand of project investigation, to be reported in 2012.

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