

RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND POLICY

Simon O. Akpakwu,

Abstract

In Nigeria today, teachers in rural schools are faced with a lot of pressing concerns. Such concerns include inadequate preparation of many teachers to provide relevant curricula for students in rural areas, teacher shortages and turnover, increasing levels of violence in and around school campuses and the issue of funding inequities that exist between rural schools and their more affluent urban counterparts. In the light of these persisting issues, this paper provides an overview of teacher supply and demand demographics in rural schools and addresses the four aforementioned critical staffing concerns. For each area, the paper analyses the basics that educational managers and leaders in rural schools need to be familiar with to comply with the dictates of sound educational policy. The paper finally highlighted the implications of these concerns to educational policy in Nigeria.

Introduction

In Nigeria, educational managers and leaders are increasingly being faced with the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified personnel, assessing teacher performances, planning appropriate development opportunities for teachers, and providing adequate working conditions for staff members. In addition to dealing with these staffing dilemmas, educators in rural settings in the country, face even more pressing concerns with which their urban colleagues may be less familiar. More specifically, these concerns include increasing levels of violence in and around campuses, funding inequities that exist between rural and their more affluent urban counterparts, and inadequate preparation of many teachers to provide relevant curricula for students in rural settings. Further more, given the reluctance of many teachers to teach in rural schools and the excessively high attrition rates of those who do, rural school leaders constantly struggle to maintain a full cadre of highly qualified teachers who are committed to high academic achievement for students in the rural school settings.

It is in the light of these persisting issues, that this paper provides an overview of teacher supply and demand demographics in rural schools and addresses four critical staffing concerns namely, rural teacher preparation, rural teacher shortages and turnover, school violence and rural school funding.

Rural Teacher Preparation

A variety of authors have argued that traditional approaches to teacher preparation and recruitment have not provided a sufficient number of teachers who are willing and prepared to teach in rural areas (Mattai, 1991; Zimpher and Ashburn, 1992). Unfortunately, the public and indeed many teachers seem to believe that rural schools should take responsibility for its high attrition rate.

The author's opinion on this matter is that, teacher preparation institutions such as NTI, Colleges of Education and Universities should assume accountability for fulfilling their mission of preparing effective teachers for all the schools in the country. Collaborating this opinion, Okebukola (1996), asserted that Colleges of Education in the country run Pre-NCE courses with ridiculously low entry requirements. He maintained that, at the completion of the NCE programmes, the same "bottom liners" go into the first degree programmes in education. Okebukola further maintained that at the university level, teacher preparation in the country in content and pedagogy components is poor thereby accentuating teacher mediocrity in schools.

Although research studies consistently demonstrate that a high percentage of

(Goodlad, 1990), the placement of student teachers in inappropriate settings may limit the individual teacher's ability to be stimulated to continue the professional growth process. Difficulties can arise when novice teachers are placed in exemplary classrooms with favourable environment and successful teachers. In particular, these novice teachers may not gain a realistic perspective and are then not ready to perform successfully in challenging classroom situations like in most rural schools where almost everything is

lacking. As Schwartz (1996) maintains, by preparing future teachers for placement in more typical rural settings, teacher educators not only subscribe to the idea that all children have a right to a decent education, they also provide opportunities for the novice teacher to prepare to teach all children properly.

Prospective teachers must therefore begin to think and talk about teaching as they pass through their preparation, much as law students learn to “talk law” and medical students learn to “talk medicine”. When such a dialogue is absent, educational managers and leaders impart the inappropriate perceptions that teachers bring to their school assignment. In sum, policies regarding teacher preparation must be explicit and dominant in all course work as well as clinical and field studies. Curriculum development is a dynamic process. For the curriculum to become truly reflective of the diverse needs of the children of rural schools; it must be transplanted in the teachers during their preparation so that they can “talk teaching” properly.

Teacher Shortages and Turnover in Rural Schools

In Nigeria, regardless of how many teachers are being prepared by the National Teachers Institute (NTI), Colleges of Education, and Universities, a shortage of certificated teachers at all levels of the educational system, has continued to be a critical issue of concern. This is because majority of the job openings remain in the large urban areas. Most of the schools in rural areas are owned by communities and single proprietors who cannot afford to recruit enough qualified teachers and pay them attractive salaries and allowances enjoyed by their counterparts in government and government grant-aided schools in urban settings. Russo and Haris (1997) maintains that for various reasons, new and returning teachers are not attracted to teaching assignment in rural schools even in the face of a severe teacher shortage.

Even undergraduate teachers preparing to be teachers would consider teaching in an urban school than in a rural school. In a random survey carried out by this author among undergraduate teachers in Benue State, it was found out that many of them prefer working in parastatals and local government offices in rural areas than teaching in rural schools. This may be attributed to better conditions of service in these areas as against the poor conditions of service faced by the teachers in rural schools.

To compound the situation, many of the country’s highest teacher attrition rates appear to occur in rural schools. For example, in the random survey referred to above, approximately one of every five beginning teachers leave after one year, and about one of every three teachers leave after three years of teaching. Many of these teachers move to better working conditions in urban and suburban areas after they have acquired relevant experience in rural schools.

To alleviate teacher shortage in the rural areas in the country, many school managers resort to hiring un-certificated, mis-assigned, or even emergency-credentialed teachers who are unprepared to assume teaching responsibilities in rural schools. In the author’s opinion, this is wrong because such teachers are not experienced and matured enough to teach properly in rural schools. As Haberman (1990). has argued, the teaching profession should recruit old teachers who have attained a level of personal maturity and a good sense of personal identity that can enable them to work effectively in difficult teaching situations in rural settings. Collaborating this, Ortyoyande (1998), asserted that, since the teacher is the determinant of quality education, the tendency for policy makers and educational managers to recruit, train, and retain half-baked bottom liners and left-overs in the teaching profession should be avoided. And in the words of Omole (2003), since “teaching requires a vast range of knowledge, ability, skill, judgment and understanding, it requires a thoughtful, **caring** and committed person at its centre”.

Rural School Violence

One serious issue that is becoming a major public concern and which is partly responsible for high attrition rate of teachers in rural schools in the country is that of school violence. Undoubtedly, various interrelated factors contribute to the high attrition rates of rural schools. However, the overriding concern of rural school personnel today relates to safety issues and violence within the school setting. Public opinion and newspaper publications indicate that teachers in Nigeria are distressed about the increasing levels of violence in and around public schools. Investigations reveal that more rural teachers maintain that violence or the threat of violence has made their colleagues and

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students less enthusiastic about attending school in rural areas. Without first establishing discipline and maintaining order, teachers cannot begin to educate their students and apart from education, the school has obligation to protect pupils from mistreatment by other children, and also to protect teachers themselves from violence by the few students whose conduct in recent years has prompted national concern. Accordingly, rural teachers and students have a right to teach and learn in safe and hospitable environments. School officials must therefore provide learning climates that are free of violence and fear.

Federal and State legislations are therefore urgently needed to curb student violence in rural schools to provide the ideal teaching and learning climates for both teachers and rural schools.

In addition, agencies and school managers should establish strategies for dealing with increasing levels of violence in rural areas. The use of tough measures like authoritarian rule, metal detectors, and law enforcement personnel by school managers to deal with school violence, does not sufficiently address the underlying causes of school violence nor explain the vulnerability to its occurrence. Noguera (1995), suggested that rather than use "get-tough" measures to deal with school violence, successful schools address violence by maintaining small schools, treating students as individuals, creating welcoming and supportive environments, involving parents in the school, and emphasizing relationships instead of roles among teachers and students.

In addition to these strategies, it is the opinion of the author that if school violence is to be curbed, new strategies in addition to the ones earlier mentioned should be instituted. Rural educators must be prepared to deal with violence in the schools by using long term approaches such as incorporating conflict resolution strategies into the curriculum, involving students in peer mediation of conflicts, and adding parent education as part of school programming.

Rural School Funding

Another very critical issue contributing to the difficulties of teachers in rural schools is the inequitable and inadequate funding levels found in these schools, particularly when compared to their urban counterparts. Overwhelming evidence indicates that disparities in funding rural and urban schools continue to exist (Okebukola, 1996; Obanya, 2000; Omar, 2003). As a result, many rural schools are understaffed, have few and obsolete facilities and learning materials, provide few course offerings and have over worked teachers with numerous class preparations. With facilities and teaching materials clearly inferior to those in urban schools, teachers in rural schools work in deplorable conditions and most frequently spend their personal money on such basics as exercise books, writing materials, chalk etc, especially in community and single proprietary schools not grant- aided by government. All these factors reflect the lack of appropriate school funding in rural schools as compared to their more affluent urban counterparts.

There must therefore be a broader acknowledgement among educational managers and teachers as well as policy makers that the ability of educational leaders to better meet the needs of students in rural settings is more than a simple issue of equal access. They must realize that there must also be equal outcomes and equity in funding both urban and rural schools.

Implications for Educational Policy

1. Unequal access to knowledge, unequal outcomes, and inequities continue to exist because educational policies and legislation have not properly provided effective resources for schools populated primarily by rural students. It is tempting to say that as a result of the above, the conditions of rural schools will never change unless concerted and committed efforts are made in the new millennium by all stakeholders in education. This calls for the fact that the educational policies in the country should lay more emphasis on the redistribution or equal distribution of resources among rural and urban schools in the new millennium. Such a redistribution or distribution should favour rural schools in order to narrow the widening gap of funding inequities, which is presently and dangerously skewed against rural schools.
2. Policies should encourage teachers who understand rural communities to translate this information into relevant curriculum and instruction to create classrooms that can respond to the needs and aspirations of students. Thus, more emphasis should be placed on rural

teacher- community relations to enhance mutual understanding between the two towards effective instruction in the classroom.

3. The Federal and State governments should enact legislations on safety concerns in schools to reduce the high level of attrition in rural schools. In addition, policies should ensure that school managers adopt the use of long-term approaches such as incorporating conflict resolution strategies into the curriculum, involving students in peer mediation of conflicts and adding parent education as part of school programming to deal with rural school violence.
4. for curriculum to be truly reflective of the diverse needs of the children of rural schools, policies should ensure that it is transplanted in the student teachers during their preparation so that they learn to “talk teaching” properly, much as Law students learn to “talk Law” and Medical students learn to “talk medicine”.
5. Finally, successful outcomes for different students become a reality only when the stakeholders hold themselves accountable for meeting the diverse needs of teachers and students in rural schools. This accountability includes recruiting and retaining teachers, preparing all teachers to work with rural students, providing adequate funding and other resources for rural schools, and examining policies and programmes that impede equal access, equal outcomes and equity in rural schools.

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