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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 one factor 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. We suggest one solution to break the cycle of low female achievement in rural areas is through use of distance education to prepare local women to take on teaching roles within their own communities. In the programme reported here aspiring female teachers are supported to take on the role of 'learning assistants' in their local community primary school whilst 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, we explore the backgrounds and motivations of applicants to the programme and 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

Women's participation in the teaching profession is pertinent to achievement of both the Education MDGs and the EFA goals (UNESCO, 2011). A common factor in countries who have achieved the UPE and gender parity goals is a substantial increase in the number of women primary school teachers (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011). The training and deployment of women teachers has contributed greatly to meeting capacity and, equally importantly, women teachers have influenced conditions in schools and classrooms such 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; UNGEI, 2008; UNESCO, 2000). Women teachers can challenge and change school culture and pedagogy in ways which offer girls greater encouragement towards success and achievement; they are able to advocate for girls in schools and to offer role models which are different to those habitually offered to girls in rural areas. In a Malawi study both parents and teachers expressed the view that women teachers also play a role in upholding moral standards and 'offer personal counselling to girls' (Kainja & Mkandawire quoted in Commonwealth Secretariat, 2011 p18) The absence of women teachers, combined with a lack of gender sensitive approaches in schools is argued to contribute to the perpetuation of female under participation and achievement (Gaynor, 1997).

But strategies for recruitment of women teachers, particularly to 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 teaching particularly when countries are concerned with ensuring quality in teacher recruitment. Secondly in many countries there is often little interest in becoming a teacher amongst 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). Then, once qualified, women teachers are frequently extremely reluctant to work for extended periods in rural areas. Finally encouragement for women to enter teaching (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 which, I suggest, can only be tackled at a local level taking account of available routes into teaching and gendered realities facing women in poverty in rural areas. These considerations underpinned the design of the innovative project in Malawi reported here, the project uses distance learning and a structured school placement to prepare rural women for entry into the profession.

The Malawi context

In rural Malawi there is a dearth of qualified female primary teachers and this is acknowledged to be a major factor hindering progress towards the EFA goals in these areas. Primary pupil enrolment in Malawi increased dramatically following the introduction of free primary education in 1994 but, according to the latest expert estimates, Malawi will not 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 perform less well than those in urban areas at all levels (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 standard 8 are less likely to pass the PSLCE (Primary School Leaving Exam) than their male peers. (MOEST, 2007).

Across the country female teachers comprise just over one third of the current primary teacher workforce (38%, Malawi Government, 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 the Nsanje district primary teacher workforce comprised 93 trained females and 485 trained males. Even within 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 women teachers as role models and gender discrimination and exclusion of girls can be unchallenged with gender disparities remaining deeply engrained (UNESCO, 2010a; UNGEI, 2008).

The reasons for this gender distribution of teachers in Malawi are complex. In comparison with many other countries in the region there is relatively low overall female recruitment to the profession (World Bank, 2010). Despite efforts to address the gender imbalance in the primary teaching force, 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 we have data, details in table 1. In addition drop-out and turnover 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 area (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 husband's employment often precludes deployment to rural areas (Kadzamira, 2006).

In Malawi most primary teachers enter the profession through one of two routes. The traditional campus based IPTE programme (Initial Primary Teacher Education) is run by Primary Teacher Training Colleges 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 within the capacity of the IPTE programme, the government implemented a new ODL (Open Distance Learning) programme for teacher training in rural areas (MOEST, 2008). This two and a half year programme is scheduled to run for three cohorts each of approximately 4,000 trainees. After an initial 4 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 materials 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 5 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 4 years of secondary schooling, but 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.)

Much existing work in this area has focused on attracting greater numbers of female applicants to teaching and then persuading them to work in rural areas; tactics include changing attitudes of newly trained teachers, integration of inexperienced teachers into community life and improving living and working conditions (Casely-Hayford, 2008). However whilst such approaches may, in the short term, improve gender parity in pupil access and outcomes, they do not offer sustainable solutions to female empowerment through education in these communities – such measures generally favour women from more urban areas who will have little interest in long term teaching in rural areas. Rather, we suggest, there is a need to consider how education of women in these communities can be

reshaped to support development of their capabilities including becoming a teacher. These women are familiar with the context of their communities and can act as symbols of female agency, challenging expectations of life opportunities currently largely limited to domestic or farm work.

The pilot programme reported here (MATSS) adopts such an approach; it utilises distance learning to support females from rural areas to gain the qualifications and confidence to become teachers in their own communities, thus disturbing 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 (MOEST, 2008).

The programme has been designed by the Open University, UK (OU), in partnership with FAWEMA (Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi). The project framework and approach 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. It is one of a number of initiatives with which FAWEMA are involved, along with other Development Partners such as UNICEF, in advocacy for gender-responsive pedagogy, gender mainstreaming and mobilization of girls' education including mothers groups, school management committees and girls' clubs.

MATSS Programme structure

The Malawi Access to Teaching Saltire Scholarship (MATSS)ⁱⁱ programme aims to increase the number of qualified women primary school teachers in rural Malawi through targeting and supporting women in rural communities to apply to formal teacher training (IPTE or ODL). The MATSS programme 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 is recruiting cohorts of 500 women in each of two years across four districts. These are women who aspire to be primary school teachers and who have previously studied for the MSCE but failed to achieve the requisite number of subject passes for the Certificate (MSCE) and are thus 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 whilst also studying for their MSCE in the priority subjects of Maths, Physical Science, Biology and English. Distance learning materials have been developed to support both MSCE study and the structured work placement in the local school - a School Experience Handbook. For MSCE study scholars are supported by a local tutor and within 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 their experiences in the school, to identify ways of helping her if she is encountering difficulties and to verify completion of activities within the School Experience handbook.

This school experience dimension acts to induct scholars into the teaching profession as a para-professionals and aims to serve two functions. Firstly the scholars are positioned to support pupil learning and as female role models for girls throughout the school. Secondly this experience enables scholars to find out if they remain committed to teaching 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, for example Akyeampong and Lewin (2002, p344) suggest that many beginning teachers experience a 'reality shock' when they

first start as qualified teachers. The period of structured classroom working offered by this programme might be hoped to offer some preparation for this reality, better equipping potential trainees for future discussion of classroom life (Akyeampong and Stevens, 2002).

Scholars receive a modest bursary to cover travel expenses and personal hygiene and presentation, and towards the end of the year there is support and guidance on making an application to 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) as well as development partners including DfID and CIDA. All the programme materials were originated by local teachers and teacher trainers, critical reading was undertaken by Malawian practitioners and developmental testing carried out with female students and teachers in Malawi. All materials are Open Educational Resources, available under a Creative Commons, Share Alike license, allowing users to use, reproduce and integrate with other resources without copyright costs. The resources are available on the TESSA website at www.tessafrica.net.

Programme enactment

To develop the programme framework we drew on experience with distance learning programmes (Moon, Leach & Stevens, 2005), similar projects with learners in the Malawi context (Chakwera, 2009; Pridmore & Jere, 2011) and the complementary basic education (CBE) programmeⁱⁱⁱ) to ensure that it was contextually appropriate.

Distance learning materials are informed by situated learning theory in which skills and knowledge are acquired through authentic contexts and by communicating with peers and experts (ref) . Study materials include large numbers of practical activities for scholars to undertake, complemented with reflective writing about their learning and discussion of activities with each other and with more experienced mentors and tutors.

Activities 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 headteacher was asked to nominate a mentor to work with the scholars.

Mentoring as promoted here draws on the practice of experienced teachers supporting a teacher learner for their period in the school (McIntyre, Hagger & Wilkin, 1993). Mentors support scholars in negotiating the initial stages of the intricate process of becoming a para-professional, extending support beyond classroom practices to include discussion of whole school and community concerns (Mtika & Gates, 2011). Wenger (1998) suggests that the experiences of the mentors can serve as 'paradigmatic trajectories', they provide details of how the school and teaching actually works and set possibilities for newcomers –the scholars. Mentors, through workshops and guidance materials, are encouraged to guide scholars in developing organisational skills, appropriate behaviour and negotiating the boundary between learner and para-professional. Guidelines for the selection of the mentor strongly suggested that she should be a qualified female teacher, providing a socially secure relationship where 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 potentially additional sources of professional support for the scholar as well as offering practical support. In several cases we have observed teachers' families looking after scholars' children and in a few schools the headteacher has allowed their very young babies into the school.

For their MSCE study scholars are allocated to two tutors, local secondary school teachers with experience of teaching MSCE in either Maths / Science or English. Tutorial groups meet every week at the local TDC or secondary school to discuss progress and support MSCE study and revision and on alternate weeks the tutor is present to structure and lead the

session. We wanted to recruit female tutors, however there is a marked gender imbalance among teachers in secondary schools in Malawi which is particularly acute in rural areas. As a consequence in the first year of the programme only two out of forty MSCE tutors are women. The MSCE materials follow the specified MSCE curriculum drawn up by the Malawi National Examination Board. However all scholars have previously studied for MSCE and there is insufficient time within the year –long programme to revisit every detail of the syllabus. The distance learning materials thus focus on key topics and ideas within each subject selected by teachers, teacher trainers and examiners, the group chose topics which featured frequently in MSCE assessment and where candidates, in the experience of these experts regularly achieved low marks.

Scholars have always been placed in pairs (and often in groups of 4-5 women) at primary schools and only at schools where there is already at least one woman teacher. We hope this facilitates peer support and on recent visits we noted schools where the scholars were meeting each day for collaborative study of the MSCE workbook and discussing their response to the School Experience materials. Placement in pairs or larger groups is also an attempt to reduce the possibility of gender violence (Leech et al, 2002); these women lack the authority of teachers and could be open to prejudice and abuse from male teachers or older male learners.

Thus participation in the programme is a process that enables 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 for 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 Teacher Development Centre (TDC). A representation is shown in Figure 1.

The programme is running in two districts in the South Region, Mwanza and Chikhwawa, and Dedza and Ntchisi districts in the Central region (Malawi has 34 Educational Districts organised in 6 Divisions). We analysed multiple data sets to select these districts: the number of qualified female teachers; pupil: teacher ratio for trained teachers; MSCE pass rates of females; drop-out rates for females in primary education; and adult female literacy (EMIS data for Malawi, 2009). Consideration was given to the education priorities for districts (District Status Reports 2009, UNICEF) and logistical issues were factored in – communication and transport networks across Malawi are not well developed outside the main centres of population. In addition the activities of other NGOs and projects were reviewed (to identify possible synergies and partnerships) and discussions were held with ministry officials before a final selection was made. The four rural districts selected have low scores in all the EMIS data points considered and resident officials in each district expressed interest in supporting the programme. Prior to launch an extensive series of ‘sensitization’ 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.

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 1700 submitted applications. Selection was 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 entering the teaching profession.

At the beginning of the programme (April 2011) scholars attended a two-day residential induction meeting in their own district facilitated by teacher training lecturers, local and national education officers and gender experts from FAWEMA and other NGOs. These sessions familiarised scholars with the materials and programme methodology as well as enabling scholars to meet each other, mentors and tutors. Induction leaders emphasized the benefits of peer support and other support mechanisms in the programme (mentor, tutor, other members of the community) and the importance of scholars taking responsibility for their own learning, progress and success in the programme.

Methodology

Integrated through the programme is a longitudinal study of the scholars and their interactions with the programme. This study explores 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 the changes they lead to in the scholars. The programme structure is being employed to enable data collection at fixed points during programme delivery – some of the data is used for reporting to funders and programme evaluation. Data collection includes application forms and reports from the two cohorts of scholars, their mentors and their tutors, supplemented with interviews with samples from each group. In addition data from workshops (group exercises and tutorial plans for example) is being gathered along with classroom observation of tutorials and school lessons with a small sample of the scholars. The findings presented here are from the early stages of the project, drawing on analysis of the applications (written and oral) of 500 scholars accepted in cohort one, together with semi-structured interviews with a small sample (12) of scholars from two districts (Mwanza and Chikhwara) and with mentors (4) and tutors (4) in two districts (Dedza and Ntchisi) - logistical and resource issues limited the number of such interviews which could be carried out.

The programme selection process required applicants to describe their previous school experience, MSCE results, interest in the programme and to undertake an extended written task in English:

- 1) Describe a situation in your life where you overcame something difficult
- 2) What was your strongest subject at MSCE level? Why was this?
- 3) What are the qualities of a good teacher?
- 4) Why are women teachers important?

Finally all applicants were asked to attend an oral interview conducted in English and to speak with the women interviewers (FAWEMA and a local NGO) for approximately ten minutes about a topic linked to their educational experiences and aspirations.

The selection process posed several challenges; transport, practical issues associated with verifying applicants residency and prior qualifications and difficulties in the recording and categorisation of applicants' responses. Interviewers had little experience of note taking during interview and the resulting summaries (in a pre-supplied template) were frequently extremely positive and offered little differentiation between applicants. Eventually these were not used to inform selection but were included in the research strand of the project. For the next cohort aspects of the application process are being refined to focus the interview questions more sharply on applicants' motivation and future plans and to give greater consistency in the data capture of applicants' prior achievements and experiences.

The semi-structured Scholar (12) interviews were carried out at the induction sessions by members of the UK project team, this may have influenced the way that the participants expressed themselves. The interviews were carried out in English and many interviewees

appeared to struggle to find appropriate language and their responses are highly likely to have been conditioned by involvement of 'outsiders' with the project. The scholar interviewees were selected against prior levels of achievement in the MSCE and age. Their interviews provided 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 this was 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 of the project; the schools were sampled for 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-taped and full transcripts of the interviews were produced later.

Initial analysis of the qualitative data (applications and interview transcripts) involved critically examining individual responses to open-ended questions, categorising the responses, and finally deriving themes from them. This was undertaken separately by three members of the UK project team who then agreed on the categories for each response. Use of the same conceptual categories for the interview and application data enabled us to describe and analyse the data sets within the same conceptual framework.

Findings: Characteristics of the Scholars

Age: No age limits were placed for application to this programme, older women with family ties may be more likely to stay in their own communities rather than leave to pursue opportunities in urban areas. Successful applicants covered a wide age range with several aged over 35 years and a few under 20 years, 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 comprised mainly untrained teachers already working in schools who were subsequently undergoing upgrading. Our Scholars span a wider age range; this might be because in this programme we are keen to look at applicant's potential and motivation rather than their current skill set and experiences. It is perhaps worth noting that the use of tasks as part of the interview process was perceived as innovative and novel for selection of teacher trainees.

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 5 years, figure 2. But there were some Scholars who had first attempted the MSCE examination as long ago as 1984. As we would expect it is usually the older Scholars who have had several attempts at the MSCE but these were a small minority - in total only 54 Scholars from the cohort of 500 had attempted the MSCE examinations on more than one occasion.

To obtain a full MSCE certificate requires five or six passes at MSCE (depending on the number of credits) including passes in key subjects – Maths, one of the Sciences and English. It is passes in these subjects that our Scholars lack (table 4) although the average number of passes for Scholars on this programme is close to 6 as shown in table 3. 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 materials and teacher training are all through the medium of English and it was felt that proficiency in English would give applicants the greatest chance of success.

Analysis of areas of poor prior attainment (table 4) in the MSCE data reveals that Maths is particularly problematic and this is reflected in Scholars' open-ended comments, almost all

Scholars identified this as their weakest subject in school. Lack of books and equipment, poor teaching including lack of encouragement from the teacher, and teachers without relevant qualifications were all frequently suggested as reasons for low attainment in Maths. Many expressed low self-esteem in Maths and Science, a possibly preventing them attaining higher academic levels in these subjects.

Family experiences of education can be highly influential in a trainee's choice of teaching as a career and other researchers have explored educational attainments of trainees' parents (Coulthas and Lewin, 2002). This was not an explicit line of investigation for us but scholars' mothers' experiences emerged as a key theme in scholars' application writing. Many gave descriptions of mothers struggling to care for several children without partner support, 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.' (C052)^{iv}

All applicants had left school at least a year previously so we looked at their activities and employment prior to entrance to the programme. We were interested in perceived potential return to the individual of participation over continuation in their current occupation or employment, and the extent to which 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.

However gathering data on the previous occupation of the scholars was highly problematic, many scholars appeared to have difficulties interpreting this question and over half the cohort responded 'none' or did not answer. The in-depth interviews lead us to suggest that many of the women have been 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. But in Mwanza district 12 scholars are already engaged in Education related work, 'nursery teacher", volunteer teacher' and so on. It is difficult to draw conclusions from this data beyond noting that few of the scholars have had any employment within the regular waged sector, the majority were engaged in farming and / or domestic work before starting on 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: Scholars' responses indicated that for many the programme serves a purpose aligned more closely with adult basic learning needs (as articulated in EFA goals) than with more conventional reasons for teaching found in studies in the developing world (Van Der Linden & Manuel, 2011).

The majority of Scholars expressed extrinsic motives for joining the programme, focussed around meeting materialistic needs, a wish to be financially independent and to be able to support dependents;

'I think it's better to work so that I should assist my family, my relatives.' (C15)

Many mentioned the desire to contribute to their local community or country by supporting children's learning and reducing the pupil-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.' (MO25)

Approximately a third of the responses included a gender dimension, expressed as acting 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'. (M133)
'they can give courage to the ladies' (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.' (C004)
'the second thing is that it helps for the country not to have a gender bias.' (C053)

Good teachers and teaching: Scholars inevitably bring with them a view of teaching formed from their own experiences of 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 youth or adults) or in other education related roles. These ideas form the basis of what 'teaching is 'supposed' to be' (Bullough et al., quoted in Akyeamong and Stevens, 2002). Scholars placed considerable emphasis on personal behaviours, personal qualities and moral values of teachers with many describing a teacher as someone who needing a smart, clean appearance and to be dedicated, punctual, reliable, resourceful, tolerant, hardworking and honest and 'of good character' (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' (C013)

Scholars' responses indicated that they perceived an interest in, and commitment to, nurture learners was key to being a good teacher; many emphasized the importance of the relationship between learners and teacher. A good teacher was described as caring and friendly to learners, creating a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom;

'a good teacher should not be fearful to learners'.
'... to make sure when children making wrong that they be loved.' (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.' (C013)

Many Scholars felt that women teachers were more likely than male teachers to possess these qualities and to be able to advise learners. Women were held to be more accustomed to hard work and less likely to be distracted by drink and to enter into inappropriate relationships with female 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' (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’ (C072)

‘women easily understand children because most women are mothers so they have a spirit of love for children’ (CO99)

However a small minority of the Scholars expressed a different moral position; they 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.’ (C070)

Learning experiences: 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 - again usually parental but occasionally of self, pregnancy and the behaviour of husbands had all caused difficulties for regular school attendance. Similarly economic hardship (often as a result of the lack of harvest in particular years) had resulted in interrupted schooling for many of our scholars, usually because of insufficient family funds for school fees, clothing and study materials. For some scholars a need to be engaged in income generating activity whilst at school had interrupted their study. And for some scholars gender expectations and prejudices had impacted on their schooling:

‘ parents they encourage you to get married instead of school.’ (C072)

‘ My parents believe that a boy have a right to go to school not a girl’ (C057)

Finally many of our scholars expressed negative experiences of school including an absence of encouragement or interest from teachers, physical punishment and inappropriate behaviour from male teachers. Teaching approaches within secondary schools were felt to have been inadequate, insufficiently engaging and inclusive with unattractive conditions in school classrooms. Many had experienced a feeling of failure at their grades in crucial public exams (MSCE, JCE or the primary leaving exam), although for some this had been mitigated by success at a later date. Threaded through these stories was the lack of possibility for agency which many of the women felt in their own educational experiences and their low self-esteem linked to their prior educational attainment.

Discussion

Increasing the number of female teachers in rural areas in developing countries demands innovative measures to attract and retain teachers in local communities - ‘community teachers’. The programme described here is one response to these challenges, aiming to offer authentic situated learning experiences with high levels of support. Crucially whilst the project fits with global aims (Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3) it takes into account specific contextualizing factors in Malawi and harnesses existing systems. However 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 support design.

This programme attracted large numbers of applicants with an appetite for resumed study to achieve the MSCE and a desire to progress to becoming a teacher. There are few studies from the developing world looking at factors which influence teaching as a career choice and even fewer which look at trainees from more marginalised groups. A recent study of secondary school trainee teachers in Malawi indicated teaching is frequently a profession of last resort for those who have failed to gain university places (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. Our scholars were much less likely to hold clearly formed views about their future roles and I suggest that as women in rural communities few possibilities have been open to them to develop their capabilities. This distance education programme offers them a rare 'second chance' to further their education whilst remaining in their communities and continuing with domestic responsibilities, the vast majority of scholars expressed a commitment to remain in and contribute to their own communities. As they progress through the programme we intend to explore the outcome on their identities and aspirations.

These women perceive teaching as an essentially pastoral activity; appearance and personal behaviours, particularly nurturing, are foregrounded as characteristics of a good teacher, underpinned by good academic qualifications (MSCE) and competency in English. Descriptions of good teachers contained little reference to teaching or classroom learning, 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, perhaps, a greater emphasis on pastoral care for pupils. (Akyeampong and Stevens, 2002; Coults and Lewin 2002; Towse, Kent et al, 2002). These views are influenced by participants' own experiences of schooling and family life, for example there were a significant number of Scholars who draw on their experiences with childcare or care of ill relatives, to align themselves with their future role as a teacher. I suggest holding such views allows these women to visualise themselves as teachers without overtly challenging many prevalent cultural expectations of themselves as women within their communities. These women have multiple responsibilities in their own communities which are not reduced while participating in the programme..

The materials prepared by the programme adopt a highly participatory approach, seeing the learner as agentive (Bruner, 1996) and encouraging interactions with peers, relations and friends. There are a large number of activities and self and peer assessment. But scholars' participation in activities and the meanings they construct will be highly influenced by their relationship with their tutor and mentor and their views of learning 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 within the programme can be deeply challenging for mentors, not least because the materials for the programme suggest new perspectives and ideas on learning which mentors find unfamiliar and possibly threatening. In interviews 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 completing in the actual workbook. Furthermore the presence of the scholars as 'Leaning Assistants' may itself threaten the identity of the teacher /mentor, particularly if they have become accustomed to being the sole adult in their classroom. ^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 enactment of the project approach to learning problematic. Firstly the selection of the curriculum topics; tutors are often dismayed to find that the materials do not cover all aspects of the syllabus and use additional materials to supplement those in the programme, this can cause 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 school lessons. Thirdly the project team are keen that the Scholars are not perceived as ‘failures’ or deficient in their knowledge but rather treated as mature learners with extensive funds of knowledge to draw on. But for many tutors this attention to individual needs (characteristic of distance learning tutoring) is in tension with their customary ‘teacher-centred’ pedagogic practice.

Concluding remarks

The programme is still in its early stages and as yet we have 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 materials aim to develop scholars’ skills, knowledge and confidence as they juggle study with work and family duties. Initial data from our first cohort of scholars indicates they feel strongly that their presence is important to girls and to pupils generally although many lacked confidence in particular areas of study and their ability to succeed academically.

But our analysis to date indicates several areas where there is emerging non-alignment of project design and enactment. 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 which limit female empowerment – there is non-alignment between the learning approach inherent in the distance learning materials and the practices in tutorials and mentor sessions. Thus a key part of programme working is increasing our understanding the tutors’ and mentors’ histories of participation and learning brought to the programme together with their views of the scholars. Without this, I suggest, we will be unable to disrupt tutors’ practices and support them in rethinking their teaching styles, this has implications for the types of learning activities that these distance education tutors are requested to carry out with their students 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. Merely increasing the number of women teachers will not advance the gender equality agenda, we also need different thinking about pedagogy, teaching and learning in relation to learners’ identities to make any sustainable shift in the learning outcomes for females in these rural communities.

For our funder the key success indicator is the number of scholars who progress to qualified status and who, once qualified, remain in their local community. But we are well aware of the need to research rather than just report this initiative, to continue the more in-depth studies to understand the contribution it is making to our understanding of distance learning (materials and support design) and pedagogy. We hope this will enable the programme impact to be viewed through a more nuanced and contextual lens, embracing a broader set of indicators (Unterhalter, 2003) and taking account of the social and learning experiences of the scholars, their future activity and the influence of their presence in the participating

primary schools alongside consideration of the impact of programme participation on other players – mentors and tutors, and their practices.

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Figure 1: Support for Scholars in the MATSS programme

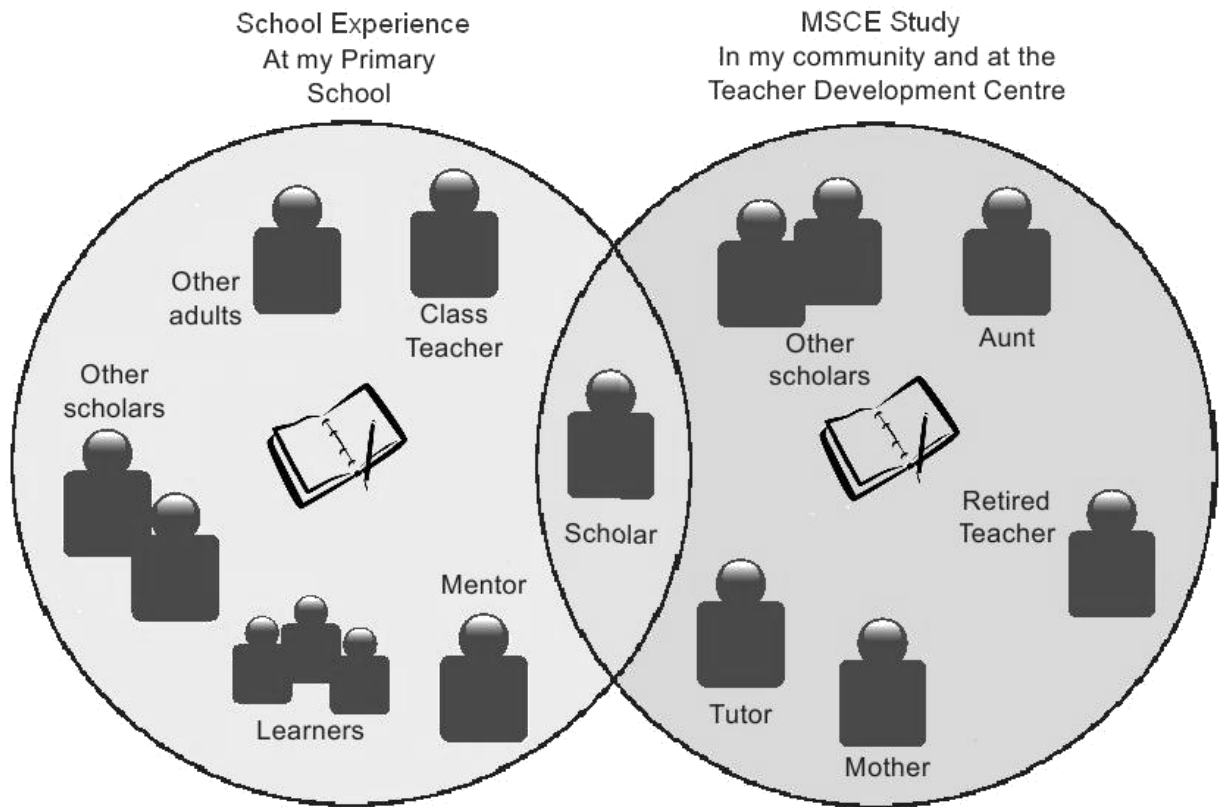


Figure 2: Date Scholars sat MSCE Exam

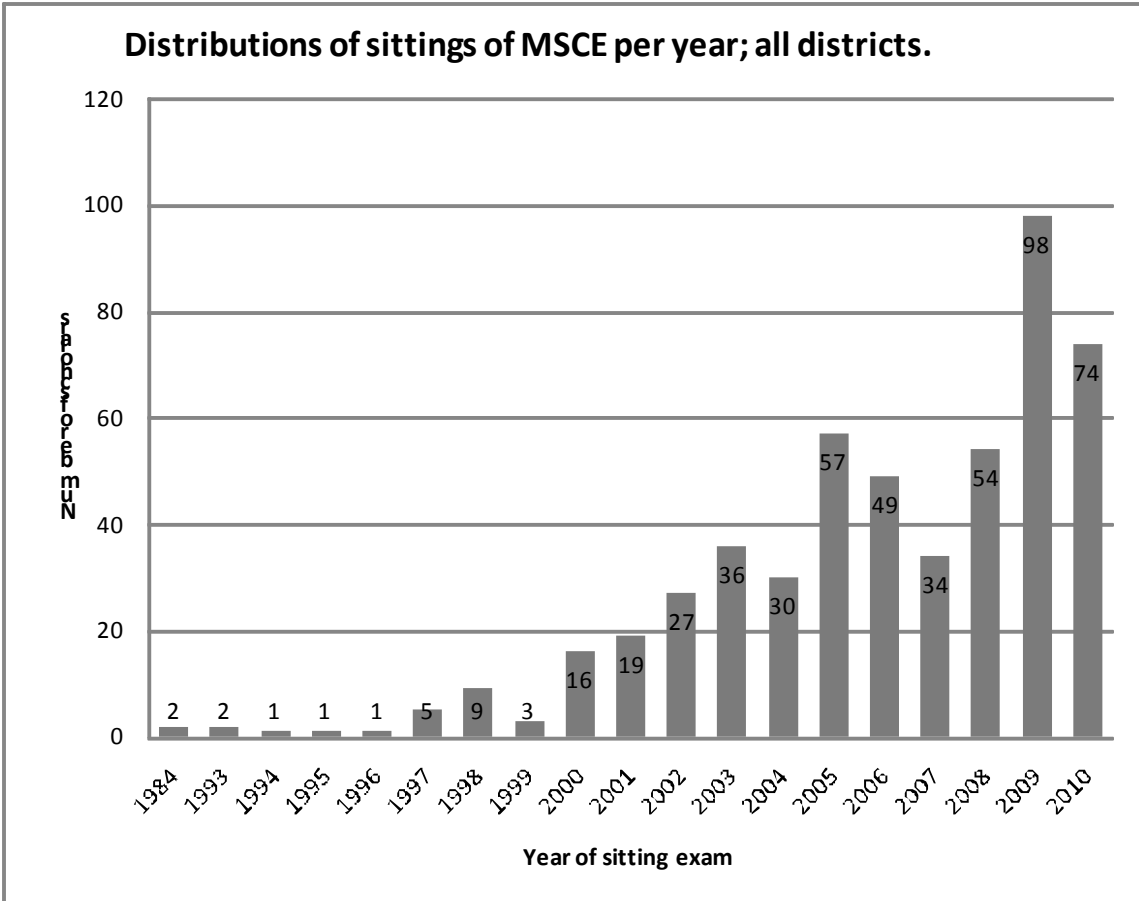


Table 1: Female teacher trainee recruitment

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

% female	45%	45%	55%	40%
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Table 2: Age distribution of Scholars across the 4 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

<u>District</u>	<u>Number of subject passes</u>	<u>Average passes per candidate</u>	<u>Average passes in the key subjects per candidate</u>
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	Maths	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	449²	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	489^{vi}

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 co-operation 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.