

Supporting induction to the teaching profession for women in Malawi

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Abstract

More than half of the countries of Sub Saharan Africa have yet to achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education. The presence of female teachers as role models is recognised as an incentive for girls' enrolment and learning success but in many rural areas in Malawi there are few qualified teachers working in primary or secondary schools.

In this paper we outline the characteristics and rationale of a new programme designed to address this issue in Malawi; over a period of a year women in rural areas take on the role of 'learning assistants' in their local community school whilst studying to achieve the qualifications necessary for application to a formal primary teacher training course. Study towards the school leaving examinations is through supported open learning using original open content materials. We examine the design of the programme and in particular the support provided to participants, personal support as well as embedded support in the self-study resources. Using initial analysis of data from the early stages of the project we explore the backgrounds and motivations of the applicants to the programme and emerging constraints on the achievement of programme intentions.

Keywords

Learning assistants, Malawi, women, rural schools, teachers, distance learning

Introduction

Malawi urgently needs teachers for rural primary schools. Following the introduction of free primary education in 1994, primary school enrolment rapidly increased from 1.8 to 3 million pupils but Malawi is not yet on track to achieve universal primary education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2011). A major factor hindering progress towards the EFA goals is a persistent shortage of trained primary teachers, particularly in rural areas where 80% of the population resides. Despite a number of schemes to train large numbers of primary teachers, such as the Malawi Integrated In-Service Teacher Education Programme ((MIITEP) (Kunjue, Lewin & Stuart, 2003) the primary pupil: teacher ratio remains well above the average for the region at 78:1 (Malawi Government, 2008). This average figure masks massive disparities both between and within schools; whilst in urban areas pupil: teacher ratios can be as low as 35 to 1 (Zomba district, 2008), in rural areas the average can be as high as 134 to 1 (Phalombe district, 2008). Across rural areas of Malawi more than 8000 teachers are handling classes with more than 90 learners with the worst overcrowding in standards 1-4 (Malawi Government, 2008). In visits to project schools we have observed classes of over 200 in standards 1 and 2 while in standard 8, in the same school, there can be classes with fewer than 30 pupils.

The Malawi Government has set a 60:1 primary pupil: teacher ratio target but achieving this will require over 14,000 new teachers (MOEST, 2007). This is in addition to replacements for teachers who retire or leave the profession; attrition rates for teachers in Malawi are high for the region and approximately 10 % of existing teachers are lost to the system each year through illness due to HIV. Poor teacher housing and dire conditions in schools are also major contributing factors to the high turnover (Government of Malawi, 2004). This rural / urban divide is also reflected in official pupil data; analysis reveals differences in the levels of both participation and attainment of urban and rural learners - urban pupils perform better than those in rural areas at all levels (Malawi Institute of Education, 2009). And in the rural areas this disadvantage is compounded for girls; fewer 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) - in 2006 the pass rate was 68.8% for girls, whilst 78.5% of boys who took the examination passed (MOEST, 2007).

Female teachers are recognised as part of the conditions for encouraging girls to stay in school and perform well (UNGEI, 2008) but in rural Malawi there is a dearth of female primary teachers. It is common for rural schools to have no female teachers or only one; only 10% of rural children will have a female teacher. Across the country female teachers comprise just over one third of the current primary teacher workforce (38%, Malawi Government, 2008) but again these average figures mask considerable geographical differences: in 2008 Lilongwe City had 2,011 trained female teachers and 298 trained males while the Nsanje district primary teacher workforce comprised 93 trained females and 485 trained males. Even within a rural area like Nsanje, the 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 the gender distribution of teachers are complex; in comparison with many other countries in the region there is a relatively low overall female recruitment to the profession and high drop-out and turnover of female teachers in rural areas. 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. There is a

perception from teachers that there are more opportunities for development and career progression in the cities; housing is poor in rural area (little official housing and a lack of other suitable housing) and they are often without basic services (running water and electricity); and, 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 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 the ODL programme has slightly lower entry qualifications; the requirement for credit in English at MSCE has been removed.

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.

This is not surprising given the low participation and attainment of female pupils in secondary education; through 2004 to 2008 the percentage of female pupils in upper secondary school classes remained at just under 40% and pass rates for females for the MSCE (Malawi School Certificate of Education) were considerably below those for males, for example in 2006 32,602 female students sat for the MSCE and only 29.98% passed. Of the 45,922 male students who sat for the MSCE, 45.15% passed (Government of Malawi 2006).

(It is too early to assess the impact of the ODL programme on the number of qualified female teachers in rural areas.)

Currently there are many volunteer teachers and untrained teachers without MSCE, including females, working in Malawi primary schools who not eligible for formal teacher training. Upgrading of their academic qualifications to MSCE is provided by the Malawi Teachers Union but this carries substantial costs to participants including a long residential study period away from home.

It is within this context that the Open University, UK (OU), in partnership with FAWEMA (Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi) conceptualised a programme intended to address the lack of female teachers in rural areas. The objective of the scheme is to recruit females from rural areas to become teachers in their own communities. Many rural women do not successfully complete their secondary school studies (MSCE) and are hence ineligible for application to a formal teacher training programme or lack confidence to be successful in such an application. The starting point for our programme is women living in rural areas who wish to become primary school teachers in their own communities. Our

programme provides a 'bridge' into formal teacher training for these women; it embraces academic study of MSCE (Malawi Secondary Certificate of Education) subjects through supported distance learning together with induction into the teaching profession through a structured placement in a local school, aiming to raise the profile of women in positions of responsibility in rural schools. The project framework and approach builds on the extensive experience of TESSAⁱ (led by the Open University UK) in developing resources and programmes for teacher learners 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 girl's education including mothers groups, school management committees and girls' clubs.

This paper contributes to the current debates on how to address the gap in qualified female teacher recruitment and retention, to support female education in rural areas. We examine the design of the programme and in particular the support provided to participants, personal support as well as embedded support in the self-study resources. Using initial data from the early stages of the project we explore the backgrounds and motivations of the applicants to the programme, to understand how and why they have previously struggled with their schooling and the outcomes of the programme for these rural women participants. (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002; Coultas & Lewin, 2002).

Programme structure

The Malawi Access to Teaching Saltire Scholarship (MATSS)ⁱⁱ programme aims to increase the number of suitably qualified female applicants from rural communities in Malawi to formal teacher training programmes. It is hoped this will lead to an increase in the number of qualified women primary school teachers working in rural areas of Malawi. The programme provides a pathway into a teaching career through supported study and practical school experience and in its initial stages the programme is recruiting cohorts of 500 women in each of two years across four districts. During their year on the programme participants (Scholars) spend 4 days / 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 for each of these subjects and Scholars, in groups of 20, receive support from a tutor recruited from a local secondary school. They are encouraged to meet each week at a local Teachers' Centre or Secondary school and each fortnight they are joined by their tutor.

More unusually, the Scholars' engagement in school life is intended to be guided by a structured workbook (School Experience handbook) which offers a number of activities, case studies and readings concerned with children's development and learning and advice on working in collaboration with the class teacher. The format of this workbook, drawing on a participatory pedagogy, models the pedagogy which Scholars are encouraged to adopt in their interactions with learners in schools.

Each Scholar is allocated a mentor within the primary school – chosen by the headteacher – 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. 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 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. 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 including in rural areas. All resources developed in the project are Open Educational Resources, available under a Creative Commons, Share Alike license; this allows 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 intentions

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. The school experience dimension of the programme aims to serve two functions; the Scholars are positioned to support pupil learning in specific school classes - perhaps even acting as role models for girls throughout the school, and the scheme offers a relatively low risk way for 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; Akyeampong and Lewin (2002, p344) suggest that many beginning teachers experience a 'reality shock' when they first start as qualified teachers. The period of prior working within a school offered by this programme might be realistically proposed to offer some preparation for this reality, better equipping potential trainees for future discussion of classroom life (Akyeampong & Stevens, 2002).

The project design positions Scholars as developing para-professionals within a community of practice at the school (Lave & Wenger, 1998); the motivation to become a more central participant is hoped to provide a powerful incentive for engagement in the learning activities. These activities within the School Experience materials encourage Scholars to engage in ongoing conversations with their practice and that of the teachers they are working alongside. The aim is the development of an open, reflective attitude towards learning and inquiry, towards the possibility of solving problems experienced within classrooms and one's own learning. There is a conscious attempt to support Scholars in linking their own subject knowledge learning to their experiences in the school classroom with young learners.

Consideration of curriculum features heavily in the planning of all the programme strands and for study towards the MSCE the 'specified' curriculum takes the MSCE syllabus (specified by the Malawi National Examination Board) as its starting point (McCormick & Murphy, 2008). However all the Scholars have previously studied this curriculum (or an earlier version of it) and there is insufficient time within a year -long programme to revisit every detail of the syllabus. It was therefore necessary, in the distance learning materials, to focus on key topics and ideas within each subject; teachers, teacher trainers and examiners participated in a workshop to select the sequence of topics for inclusion. The rationale was highly instrumental; a focus on areas which were featured frequently in MSCE assessment and where candidates, in the experience of participants, commonly achieved less well.

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. The distance learning materials set a framework for the teaching of the curriculum through their pedagogic strategy and detailed learning activities and self and peer assessment but we recognise that this will be mediated by tutors who may change what is judged to be important (McCormick & Murphy, 2008). Scholars' participation in activities and the meanings they construct will be highly influenced by their relationship with the tutor and the tutors' views of learning - the affordances that are made available to the Scholars. For the project team this mediation of the approach to learning by tutors (and mentors) poses critical challenges in achieving project aspirations. The project is attempting to convey its

understandings of pedagogy and approach within the writing of the materials and through induction sessions but various constraints (time, distance, finance) mean that achievement of this is problematic; to date it has not been possible to spend extensive time with the tutors understanding (and perhaps disturbing) their view of the Scholars and their own histories of participation and identifications brought to the programme.

Programme enactment

The project design is informed by ideas of learning as social, distributed and situated (Bruner, 1996). For the project team this perspective foregrounded issues of opportunities for participation for the Scholars as they combine academic study and work as para-professionals within the school. These women have multiple responsibilities in their own communities which are not diminished through participation in the programme and we needed to acknowledge potential difficulties. Diminishing motivation, difficulties in relearning, finding time to study and personal circumstances including severe hardship – several Scholars are themselves orphans or caring for orphans, for example, could all impede engagement.

In developing the support framework we draw on experience with distance learning programmes (Moon, Leach & Stevens, 2005) and similar projects with learners in the Malawi context (Chakwera, 2009; Pridmore & Jere, 2011 and the complementary basic education (CBE) programmeⁱⁱⁱ). The resulting design aims to include formal mentor and tutor guidance, peer support and collaboration, and informal encouragement and care from family, friends and neighbours. Scholars are thus 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). Each Scholar is encouraged to attend regular timetabled tutorial group meetings for MSCE study and meetings with their mentor. A representation is shown in Figure 1.

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 at least one woman teacher. This potentially facilitates peer support for the sharing of experiences and learning for both strands of activity – MSCE study and School Experience, The School Experience activities in particular often require the Scholar to discuss an activity or experience with a peer. On recent visits the project team noted schools where the Scholars were meeting each day for collaborative study of the MSCE workbook in addition to their 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 Scholars lack the authority of teachers and could be open to prejudice and abuse from male teachers or older male learners.

Each school was asked to nominate a mentor to work with the Scholars. Mentoring promoted here draws on the practice of experienced teachers supporting a teacher learner for their period in the school (McIntyre, Hagger & Wilkin, 1993) but is extended beyond classroom practices to include discussion of whole school and community concerns. The mentors support Scholars in negotiating the initial stages of a intricate process of becoming a para-professional in the institution (Mtika & Gates, 2011). Wenger (1998) suggests that the experiences of these experienced teachers, 'old-timers', can serve as 'paradigmatic trajectories'; they provide details of how the school and teaching actually works and set possibilities for newcomers –the Scholars. Mentors are encouraged to guide Scholars in developing organisational skills, appropriate behaviour and negotiating the boundary between learner and para-professional. The process is intended to be nurturing and supportive however it can be deeply challenging, not least because the materials for the programme suggest new perspectives and ideas on learning which mentors find unfamiliar and possibly threatening. 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.^{iv} Guidelines for the selection of the mentor strongly suggested that she should be a qualified female teacher, to provide a socially secure relationship where the participant 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 in the school are potentially additional sources of professional support for the Scholar. One practical form of support that has been insufficiently factored into the programme design, is the care of participant's children to enable them to undertake the School Experience dimension of the programme but in several cases we have observed teachers' families looking after Scholars' children and in a few schools the headteacher has allowed very young babies into the school.

For their MSCE study Scholars are allocated to two tutors; local secondary school teacher 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; on alternate weeks the tutor is present to structure and lead the session. The project aimed to recruit female tutors, however the reality is a marked imbalance of gender among teachers in secondary schools in Malawi and this is even more acute in rural areas. As a consequence in the first year of the programme only two out of forty MSCE tutors are female.

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 can make achievement 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 participants. 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 tutors are here engaged with adult women with previously unsuccessful experiences of this MSCE curriculum; the project team are keen that the Scholars are not perceived as 'failures' or deficient in their knowledge but rather mature learners with extensive funds of knowledge to draw on which need to be recognised if they are to experience the curriculum as authentic.

(We are currently engaged in detailed work with tutors to understand their approach to learning and their perceptions of the Scholars.)

Prior to launch of the programme 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. 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.

Recruitment to the programme

For the first year (April 2011 to March 2012) 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). Analysis of an array of data was drawn on to select the districts: the number of trained female teachers with MSCE; 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 into the selection – 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 was 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.

Recruitment of Scholars was 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) and commitment to entering the teaching profession. The selection process for the Scholars comprised a written application form, a written task and an oral interview. The application form required applicants to describe previous school experience, MSCE results, interest in the Scholarship and supply details of a referee (for example, a community leader or local teacher). The written task consisted of four questions to be answered 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?

The oral interview was conducted in English by two women, one from FAWEMA and one from a local NGO. Scholars were asked to speak with the interviewers for approximately ten minutes about one topic from a list linked to their educational experiences and aspirations.

The selection process posed several challenges; transport and other practical issues associated with verifying applicants residency and prior qualifications, and challenges as a result of the process form. Interviewers had little experience of note taking during interview and the resulting summaries (in a pre-supplied template) tended to be extremely positive and offer little differentiation between applicants. Eventually these were not used to inform selection. After much discussion 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. For the next cohort aspects of the application process is 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 discussion which follows is based on analysis of the applications (including the written tasks) of the 500 Scholars accepted on the programme combined with initial analysis of semi-structured interviews with a small sample (12) of the Scholars from two districts (Mwanza and Chikhwara). 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 may have

struggled to find appropriate language and responses are highly likely to have been conditioned by involvement of 'outsiders' with the project. The initial analysis of the qualitative data 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.

The Scholars

Age: No age limits were placed for this programme. It was hoped that older women with family ties would be more likely to stay in their own communities once qualified 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; the majority of Scholars are aged between 20 and 30 - detailed information is given in Table 2.

Although the average age differs little across the districts it is noticeable that Ntchisi has the youngest group of Scholars. There is little data for comparison; Coultas and Lewin (2002) found the average age of female trainees in Malawi to be similar, 25.9, but their cohort comprised mainly untrained teachers already working in schools who were subsequently undergoing upgrading. Our Scholars span a wider age range. It is perhaps worth noting that in Malawi women over 35 are not admitted to the IPTE programme, only to the ODL programme.

Educational qualifications: All Scholars were required to show evidence of previous MSCE study. Scholars had previously sat their MSCE examinations as long ago as 1984 and as recently as 2010 with the majority having attempted the examinations in the last 5 years, figure 2. As expected it is usually the older Scholars that have had several attempts at their MSCE; in total 54 Scholars from the cohort of 500 across all districts had sat MSCE examinations in more than one year.

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 application of the selection criteria for the programme - fluency in English was a key criteria for selection.

Analysis of areas of poor attainment (table 4) reveals that Maths is particularly problematic and this is reflected in the open-ended comments from Scholars, 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 lack of relevant teacher qualifications were all suggested as reasons for low attainment in Maths. More personal reasons included intrinsic difficulties with the subject including the use of formulae, unfamiliar language and the level of 'deep thinking' required.

In Malawi education in the first three years is in the language of the community – usually Chichewa. The first language spoken is not a criterion for admission to teacher training and until recently no consideration was given to the mother tongue of teachers during posting. It is not unknown for teachers to be posted to communities where they are unfamiliar with the community language and hence relations with learners and their families can be strained. Scholars were not asked about their mother tongue or religious affiliations in the application process; proof of residency in the area was required and it was assumed that applicants would speak the local language and be familiar with the locality. However subsequently it

emerged that a small number of Scholars have moved into these districts following their husband's jobs or for other family reasons; these Scholars may lack local knowledge.

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 (Coultras 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.

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 were frequent in the application responses. A minority drew directly on this experience to rationalise their interest in the programme and 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)

All applicants to the programme had left school at least a year previously so we felt it appropriate to look 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 the open-ended question and over half the cohort responded 'none' or did not answer this question. Follow up interviews with a small number lead us to suggest that many of these women will 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 replied described themselves as farmers or working in the home. But in Mwanza district there are 12 Scholars who 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 farm and / or domestic work.

Perceptions of teaching There are few studies of the factors which influence choice of teaching as a career in developing world economies; in Malawi a recent study of secondary school trainee teachers indicate that for many teaching is a profession of last resort for those who have failed to gain university places (Mtika & Gates, 2011) whilst an earlier study of primary teacher trainees reported similar findings (Coultras & Lewin 2002). For both groups 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; responses indicated that for these failed MSCE candidates there are scarce opportunities for further training or education and limited openings for formal employment in rural areas. For many Scholars the programme serves a purpose aligned more closely with adult basic learning needs identified in the 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)

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 Akyeampong 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)

This essentially pastoral view of teaching was complemented by the need to have good academic qualifications (MSCE) combined with competency in English. There was little reference to teaching or classroom learning and the only teaching skills mentioned were planning or writing lessons. 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 learners. (Akyeamong and Stevens, 2002; Coultas and Lewin 2002; Towse, Kent, Osaki & Kirua, 2002).

To find out more about the their personal experiences of learning applicants were asked about the barriers they had encountered in their own schooling. Emerging themes include illness, economic issues, parental expectations and conditions in school classrooms. Experiences of bereavement, usually of a parent, illness - again usually parental but occasionally of self including becoming HIV positive, 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 through insufficient family funds for school fees, clothing, study materials. For some 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; an absence of encouragement or interest from teachers, physical punishment and inappropriate behaviour from male teachers. 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 educational attainment.

Conclusion

Increasing the number of female teachers in rural areas in developing countries demands innovative measures to attract and retain teachers in the profession. Programmes need to be designed or tailored to meet the needs of ‘community teachers’, it is not sufficient to merely extend existing provision to these areas. The programme described here is one

response to these challenges, aiming to offer authentic situated learning experiences with high levels of support. Key to successful provision of such a programme is developing an understanding of the participants as knowledgeable.

On this programme applicants' writing revealed experiences of high levels of poverty and frequent interruptions to their learning. Experiences of schooling were often negative and insecure, with many experiencing low levels of support from teachers and their families. 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. Teaching is perceived predominantly as an essentially pastoral activity and appearance and personal behaviours are foregrounded as characteristics of a good teacher. We suggest these views are influenced by participants' own experiences of schooling and such views allow them to visualise themselves as teachers without overtly challenging many prevalent cultural expectations.

The programme is still in its early stages and we are only now collecting and analysing data on the Scholars' experiences to inform the development of the programme. Our research into different aspects of delivery anticipates that there will be non-alignment, consistency and coherence between the learning and assessment activities, the teacher-student roles and learning goals for individuals. Understanding the nature of this non-alignment between design and enactment and the factors that can be adjusted to enhance alignment, is our focus over the next two years. There are key challenges in delivery: for individuals, in combining their study with other commitments in an environment lacking many basic services; at a project level in developing the expertise and skills of mentors and tutors in working with distance learning materials and supporting Scholars whose fluency in English is often poor; and strategically in extending and deepening the support of key stakeholders in Ministries to ensure that the women who successfully complete the programme are offered places on teacher training courses. However it is possible that some features of the programme could be usefully appropriated by ministries in other countries looking to increase the number of adults supporting learning in primary classrooms and to recruit a more diverse teaching workforce

It will be some years before a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of this programme can be completed; one indicator will be the number of Scholars who progress to qualified teacher status and, once qualified, they remain in their local community but we would like to argue for a broader set of indicators. In conventional approaches to education of females success indicators can frequently centre on achievement of a narrow range of skills or outputs (Unterhalter, 2003). Our aspiration here is to embrace a more holistic approach taking account of the social and learning experiences of the Scholars including their future activity and the influence of their presence in the participating primary schools.

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Figure 1: Support for Scholars in the MATSS programme

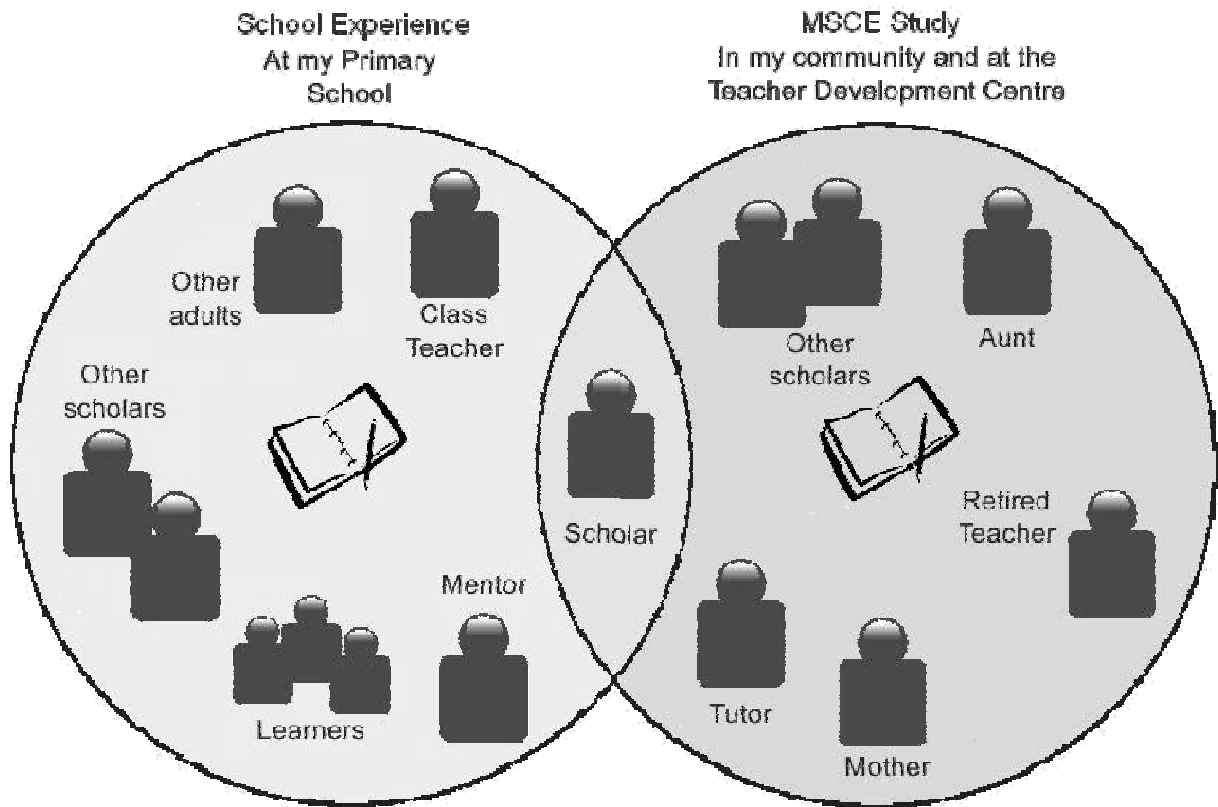


Figure 2: Date Scholars sat MSCE Exam

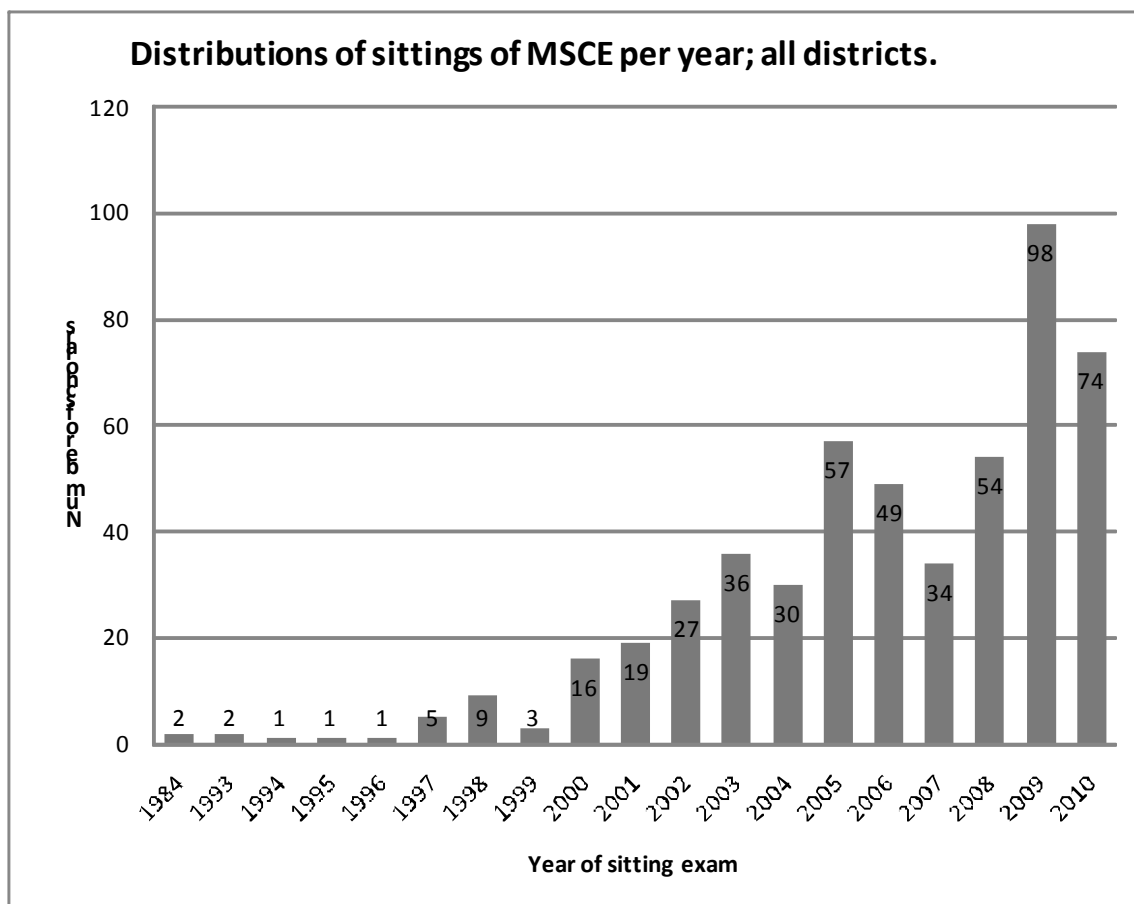


Table 1: Female teacher trainee recruitment

Cohort	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%
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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

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	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^v

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} Experiences of mentors on the programme are being explored in another strand of project investigation, to be reported in 2012.