

Primary school teacher deployment: a comparative study

FATIMAH KELLEHER (Ed.), 2008

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Commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat, this book is a report on a comparative study of primary school teacher deployment policies and practices in four countries: Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Tanzania. It provides an overview of the different country contexts, a situational analysis of each country and the policies and practices regarding primary school deployment in the selected countries. Kelleher points out that the criteria for selecting the countries used in this study were informed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) campaign of the United Nations. She states:

With teachers playing a central role in the achievement of both the education MDGs and EFA, the impact of teacher numbers, their supply and pupil teacher ratios both on educational outcomes and quality is a crucial area of concern (2008: 3).

Kelleher also says:

Two of the countries Nigeria and Pakistan account for a significant number of children who are out of school in the Commonwealth. One of the countries in particular Tanzania has had its teaching population quite severely affected by the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. In contrast to the other cases, Papua New Guinea was actually displaying regressive indicators in terms of enrolment at the time of the study (2008:71).

In this sense this book is an important and timely contribution to the attempts to broaden and deepen the understanding of the experiences, challenges and requirements of the education MDGs and EFA and to go beyond mere access to schooling, as has been the primary emphasis of EFA. Kelleher looks at the factors that constrain the achievement of EFA and the education MDGs and those that compel a focus on issues beyond only ensuring that children have access to schooling. The centrality of teachers to schools is a moot point, but the importance of focusing on them in terms of the MDGs and the EFA cannot be stressed enough, because the responsibility for making the education goals of the MDGs and EFA work falls squarely on the shoulders of teachers. Teacher availability, numbers, adequate training with requisite levels of competency, where and how teachers are deployed or posted and who they are, are all significant contributing factors to ensuring the success of the education MDGs and EFA. As such, this book is a welcome and valuable contribution to debates about EFA and the factors that are at work in, and which at times constrain, the achievement of EFA and the education MDGs. Kelleher brings into focus a significant and central factor in the overall challenges facing the education MDGs and EFA, viz. the deployment of teachers in primary schools.

The book is admirable, particularly in the way in which it renders rather complex statistical data in an accessible and comprehensible form, which makes the book 'user friendly', even for those who may not be involved with schooling or the EFA. It is concisely written and very informative. A definite 'must read' for those immersed in the field of education and EFA and MDGs.

Methodologically, the study used:

Four in country document perusals, using both primary and secondary sources and interviews with officials and stakeholders (Kelleher, 2008:8).

The major findings of the comparative study on which this book reports are briefly described below.

1. Teacher deployment policies and practices privilege urban areas and provide inadequately for the schooling needs of those in rural areas. Teachers do not want to go to the rural areas as there are very few incentives to attract them to teach in rural areas. There are insufficient, if any, facilities, infrastructure and support for schools and people in rural areas.
2. Teacher deployment policies and practices favour men more than women. Women are not 'allowed' to go to places that will take them away from their spouses, children or homes. They cannot be sent to rural areas if they are not accompanied by 'their men' and they are therefore generally not deployed to rural areas. This seems to be the case both in terms of existing policies and in terms of actual practice.
3. Processes of decentralization regarding teacher deployment are fraught with many problems including varying levels of competency to be able to deploy teachers effectively on decentralized levels; serious problems with regard to nepotistic practices which Kelleher identifies as 'wantokism' in the case of Papua New Guinea, which refers to 'preference along family, clan or tribal lines'; lack of clear policies and/or lack of understanding of what is contained in existing policies; and complex differences across different locales, including levels of resources available and cultural beliefs and practices in the different areas.
4. Lack of a sufficiently qualified base of teachers across the system.
5. Inadequate or lacking school infrastructure which impacts directly on teacher: pupil ratios and the necessity for teaching in multi grade classes, particularly in rural areas.

The recommendations Kelleher proposes in the last chapter of the book are:

1. Clear, well informed and inclusive policies.
2. A focused approach to the education and recruitment of female teachers.
3. Addressing major country specific deployment barriers.
4. Effective decentralization.
5. Implementing transparent and objective deployment criteria/quota and reservation systems.
6. Raising standard in pre service and in service teacher training.
7. Targeted training and recruitment.
8. Teacher incentives.
9. Teacher utilization.

This book raises two crucial issues. The first is linked to specificity, and the second is the inextricable link between schools and the societies in which they are located.

In regard to specificity, Kelleher points out the need for policies and practices (linked to points 1, 2, 3, and 7 above) to be more explicit and specific in relation to what they are meant to be targeting. The need to be more specific is one of the constraints that has been noted repeatedly in various and varying ways regarding the problems of an uncritical assumption that matters can be generalized and universalized in the same way in differing country contexts, different regions and in regard to different types of people. In this regard, Kelleher emphatically points out the need for policies and by implication the MDGs and EFA as well, to be more explicit and specific about the positionality, experiences and conditions facing women qua women. Kelleher also notes, equally emphatically, the need to be more specific in dealing with the experiences and struggles of people in rural areas. An uncritical assumption that the same intervention can lead to the same results in different conditions and contexts is shown in this study to be limited. This leads to the second point, the inextricable link between schools and the societies in which they are located.

Education, more precisely schooling, does not happen in a vacuum. Schools are located in communities, in particular regions with conditions and practices that are germane and specific to them. The success of implementation of policies, whatever they may be, is influenced significantly by what is possible in specific geo-political, cultural and economic situations. One cannot ignore the fact that for schools in rural areas to be able to perform as expected, depends on the overall development of conditions in such rural areas. One cannot ignore the patriarchal system, values and practices in the subordination of women if one needs to empower and develop women as active and participant

citizens. More topographically, one cannot expect developing countries in particular, to achieve the MDGs and EFA if the material conditions of underdevelopment and legacies of colonialism are not addressed. Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are inextricably linked to the societies in which they are situated. Developments in schooling have to be accompanied by the development of societies. To ignore the social location of schools would render efforts such as the MDGs and EFA largely titular and symbolic. This, in fact, defeats the very aims for which the MDGs and EFA were set up in the first instance. Thus, whilst Kelleher is able to show the commonalities across different country contexts and is able to provide a comparative analysis of these contexts, the importance of recognizing the very distinct ways in which these are experienced in the different countries is what stands out and needs to be engaged with specifically if EFA is to become a reality for all in their actual lives in specific contexts. The need for being and becoming more specific should not be confused with lapsing into relativism. The EFA and MDGs remain globally important and laudable 'for all', but what they mean and what is required for them to succeed needs to be 'in touch' with what pertains on the 'ground' in the lives of people. Kelleher's book is an important empirically based document about the need to recognize people's actual experiences and what needs to be done in order to ensure quality education and a quality life for all as a reality. Kelleher's contribution to this endeavour is an important one and the significance of teacher deployment and its impact on the achievement of the MDGs and EFA is clearly and strongly argued for in this book.

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