



# Reconsidering the evidence base, considering the rural: Aiming for a better understanding of the education and training needs of Sub-Saharan African teachers

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Teachers' narratives  
Rural schools  
In-service teacher education  
Sub-Saharan Africa  
TESSA

## ABSTRACT

Providing basic education for all children by 2015 is one of the world's major educational objectives and teachers are crucial to achieving this. This article argues that not enough attention has been paid to the specific training needs of teachers in rural areas. Focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa it argues (i) that large-scale statistical data should highlight rather than mask urban–rural disparities and (ii) that ethnographic studies of teachers can provide rich descriptions of specific training needs. Drawing on a study of rural teachers' lives it suggests that a reconsideration of the evidence base for teacher education is necessary.

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## 1. Introduction

The provision of basic education for all children by 2015 is one of the world's major educational objectives. Ministries of Education are designing, revising and implementing policies to ensure universal access to primary schools. Crucial, but belatedly recognised, aspects of this international objective are training, recruiting and retaining good quality teachers. This represents a major challenge across the world but particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is widely reported that Sub-Saharan Africa requires an additional 4 million primary school teachers to achieve Education For All (EFA) (UNESCO, 2007, 2008a). Lewin and Stuart (2003) have shown how Ghana has only a quarter of the qualified teachers it needs and Lesotho only a fifth. These figures do not include the professional development needs of existing teachers; the reports have also pointed to the large numbers of unqualified teachers in schools, and in rural primary schools in particular.

Teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, is increasingly recognised as the key to achieving good quality education for all children. Appropriate, meaningful teacher education policies are key to developing good quality teacher education programmes that are relevant and accessible and that can be delivered at scale to ensure adequate teacher supply (Moon, 2007). However, teacher education has been a neglected area of education policy development and as recently as 2007 several Sub-Saharan African countries did not have a national teacher education policy or

strategy (TTISSA, 2007). Where teacher education policies exist in Sub-Saharan Africa they largely draw on statistical analyses (Bonnet and Pontefract, 2008) or on analyses of European, American or Australasian contexts (Harley et al., 2000; Jansen, 2003).

National governments in Sub-Saharan Africa and international organisations are working to strengthen the policy base for teacher education, as well as strengthen the data around which these policies are built (TTISSA, 2007). This article supports these initiatives but suggests that relying on statistical data alone is problematic, particularly in the development of flexible policies that aim to meet the education and training needs of in-service teachers across a range of environments.

This article summarises some limitations of existing statistical data before moving on to present some findings from the TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) Teachers' Lives Project. Teachers' lives was an ethnographic case study project carried out during 2007–2009 that shadowed five female, rural primary school teachers in five countries across Africa. This article presents two of the teachers' experiences of in-service education and training and argues that a better understanding of context is essential if teacher education policies are to be meaningful. It suggests that teachers' voices can enrich existing knowledge about what it is like to teach and learn in different environments and could play a key role in informing teacher education policy.

## 2. The existing evidence base for teacher education policy

The quality and reliability of national data on education systems has improved considerably since the mid-1900s when

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only 40–50 countries reported information internationally (Puryear, 1995). In the 1970s UNESCO expressed concern with the irregularity of reporting and the difficulties of comparing this data and proposed a standardised framework of data collection. This framework, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), was designed to be “suitable for assembling, compiling and presenting statistics of education both within individual countries and internationally” (UNESCO, 1997). It is a multi-purpose system with a twice-yearly questionnaire distributed to around 200 countries. A key feature of the framework is the standardised definition and classification of education and training at different levels of an education system, including teacher education.

Yet this data has fed into only very few teacher education training systems, policies or strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, education ministries and development agencies in Sub-Saharan Africa have few locally based research findings to build policies around and ministries of education often lack the resources and capacity to collect and analyse new data around teacher education (Jansen, 2003; Lewin and Stuart, 2003; Nakabo-Ssewanyana, 1995; Wako, 2005).

In response to this gap between data and policy UNESCO have launched TTISSA (Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa), a 10-year (2006–2015) initiative to increase the quantity and improve the quality of the teaching force in Sub-Saharan Africa. TTISSA facilitates policy development, data collection, knowledge-sharing and quality assurance within and between African ministries of education. TTISSA draws on ISCED findings as well as more specific data on teachers and pupils drawn from regional surveys of teacher and pupil competence (for example SACMEQ and PASEC<sup>1</sup>). More specific country-level data is provided by RESEN reports (country status reports on national education systems) coordinated by BREDA, UNESCO's regional office for Africa. TTISSA draws on this existing data, identifies gaps in the available information and commissions new studies to inform its activities (TTISSA, 2009; TTISSA, 2007; UNESCO, 2008b).

### 2.1. Some limitations of large-scale statistical data

UNESCO's commitment to developing a comprehensive, current, international database on teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as increasing capacity for data collection and analysis at the national level is a timely and necessary project that will lead to an indispensable resource for policy makers. Comprehensive and standardised data allows for rapid comparisons and data-sharing within and across Ministries and between countries. However, there are concerns that statistical data often struggles to capture a sense of education quality. This “head-counting” mentality (Puryear, 1995, p. 85) requests information about how many teachers a country has, and what qualification these teachers have acquired, but not about how these qualifications impact on teachers' skills in the classroom, or about what encourages or hinders them from achieving these qualifications.

In addition such analyses do not reflect differences between urban and rural areas. Not only is information from rural areas sometimes excluded from data collection due to the complications of collecting data from remote, hard to reach field offices but rural-urban disparities are masked in national level databases. Closer examination of the ISCED questionnaires, for example, reveals that

governments are asked to distinguish between public and private education systems, but not between rural and urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Failing to distinguish between rural and urban education systems can lead to disparities in representation and provision. This represents what Mulkeen (2005) calls the “hidden problem”, and contributes towards a hidden inequality between urban and rural teacher education.

Evidence of these disparities can be found between the policy data and other literature. In 2005 the UNESCO statistics database reported the overall percentage of trained teachers in Lesotho as being 64% (UIS, 2008). A study conducted by Lesotho's Chief Education Officer, meanwhile found that 24% of teachers in the lowlands were unqualified but the percentage of unqualified teachers in the rural mountainous regions was over 51%. More specifically, in several schools less than one third of the teachers had the minimum required qualification, and in some rural schools none of the teachers held this qualification (Phamotse et al., 2005). More strikingly, the UIS database recorded the percentage of trained teachers in Mozambique as 65% in 2006 (UIS, 2008). Case-studies of schools in Mozambique carried out in the same year found that 92% of teachers in the capital (Maputo) were trained, compared to 42% of teachers in the rural area of Manica (Mulkeen, 2006).

These discrepancies suggest two things. First there is a clear need for more geographically specific statistical data on rural teachers' qualifications and skills and this data needs to be made available to policy makers. Secondly there is a need for policy makers in teacher education to know more about these rural teachers' lives and have a better understanding of personal, environmental and social contexts that impact on their ability to acquire new qualifications and skills. While there is much to be found in the literature about rural teaching environments, there is very little written about teachers' perceptions of how these environments impact on their teaching and learning. The rest of this article will show how a study of rural teachers' lives can provide a rich complement both to statistical data and existing literature.

### 3. The Teachers' Lives Project: a TESSA research initiative

The Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) research and development programme represents Africa's largest teacher education community. It extends across 13 teacher education institutions in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia and the Open University in the UK.<sup>3</sup> TESSA grew out of a collective understanding about the importance of teachers in achieving the EFA goals and is concerned with the huge challenges of supplying, training and retaining effective teachers to meet the needs of expanding primary education sectors across the Sub-Saharan African region. TESSA partner institutions have created a bank of open educational materials for teacher education and are engaged in the delivery of these materials through pre-service and in-service Certificate, Diploma and B.Ed programmes as well as non-accredited, short, professional development courses.

TESSA is underpinned by a strong conceptual framework which enables the materials to be delivered at scale but with local flexibility; from TESSA's conception, the individual teacher who would be accessing and using the materials was at the heart of the

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) supports the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) which collects country-level and regional data to increase the capacity of Southern African Governments in education planning. TTISSA also draws on the data produced by the Programme on the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC). PASEC carries out country evaluations of student achievement in Francophone Sub-Saharan African countries.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that a major limiting factor is that across Sub-Saharan Africa there is no internationally accepted and universally relevant classification of “rural”. A Zambian settlement with 2000 inhabitants is classified as rural, for example, while the same size settlement would be classified as urban in Ethiopia (Wako, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> For the full list of institutions in the TESSA consortium please see [www.tessafrica.net](http://www.tessafrica.net).

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