



Using the Capability Approach to improve female teacher deployment to rural schools in Nigeria



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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the socio-cultural and institutional factors that affect female teacher deployment in rural primary schools in Nigeria. In Kwara State, there are extreme imbalances in teacher distribution between rural and urban areas due to female teachers' active avoidance and/or attrition from rural posts. Given these problems, this article discusses an innovative use of the Capability Approach that informed a rural teacher deployment policy that addressed a number of issues that were specifically identified through female teachers' values and lived experiences. This research not only had the positive analytical and political effects of prioritising the knowledge, participation and empowerment of female teachers; but it also provided a more fine-grained and holistic understanding of issues hindering effective deployment and retention of female Nigerian teachers, which informed the development of comprehensive and relevant strategies to address these.

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1. Introduction

As many African countries seek to improve educational opportunities for children in rural settings, particularly in the context of improving access and retention for girls, the deployment of female teachers to rural schools is considered imperative, yet remains problematic. In Kwara state, Nigeria, The Every Child Counts policy aims to improve the quality of primary education and learning outcomes especially with consideration for gender and geographic equity (Kwara State Education Charter, 2008); however, amongst the challenges that confront the successful implementation of this policy, is the ineffective deployment of teachers, particularly women, to rural schools. A report by the Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All (2013: 1) illustrates the severely unbalanced distribution of teachers between rural and urban areas through the pupil teacher ratios (PTR) of urban centres like Ilorin South (13:1), as compared to the PTRs in rural areas such as Ekiti (133:1), Kaiama (195:1) and Patigi (200:1). Within this pool of teachers, women account for 57% of the primary level teaching force (8181 out of 14,442); however, there is also a severe imbalance in their distribution across rural and urban areas. For example, in the Ilorin East local government education authority (LGEA), there is an average of 6 teachers per rural school as opposed to 27 teachers per urban; and when disaggregated by

gender, this number drops to only 2 female teachers per rural school and 19 female teachers per urban (Kwara State School Census Report, 2011: 17).

This situation necessitated an investigation into the problems and challenges that hinder effective female teacher deployment to rural schools.¹ The unequal teacher distributions not only created severe pupil-teacher ratios in rural areas, but there was also a need to improve the ratio of female teachers in these schools as their presence is associated with many positive effects, such as greater enrolment rates of female students (Herz and Sperling, 2004); increased exposure to female role models (Rugh, 2000; Mulkeen, 2006); more girl-friendly school environments (Rihani, 2006); girls' increased ability to articulate obstacles to their education (Unterhalter and Heslop, 2011); and lower rates of girls dropping out of school (UNESCO, 2011). Although such effects do not come about because women alone produce them, Stromquist et al. (2013: 521) note that in contexts with unequal gender relations and where schools are staffed predominantly by male teachers, "the presence of female teachers fosters spaces, attitudes, and aspirations that are more sensitive to parental and female student needs."

Thus, this research aimed not only to understand the problems that hinder the deployment of female teachers to rural schools in

Kwara State, but to also provide potential interventions grounded in teachers' values, in order to improve the situation. Traditionally, most work on rural teacher deployment is not explicitly underpinned by a theoretical framework; however it often implicitly reflects an economic rational choice approach through the common use of hardship bonuses and allowances (McEwan, 1999). Such an approach assumes that teachers' actions are guided by a desire to maximise personal income and utility, however, this econometric view of behaviour has been critiqued for its assumption of consistency of action, lack of acknowledgement of social structures, and occlusion of motivations beyond utility fulfilment (Sen 1997, 2002). In addition to this, many teacher deployment policies are designed to be 'gender neutral' (Elson 1995) in that they aim to provide equal treatment of both women and men, however, their lack of consideration for broader gender roles and norms means that male biases can often occur in practice. Given these critiques, the Capability Approach was utilised as a conceptual framework for this research in order to provide a fine-grained understanding of why female teachers were avoiding rural posts, which would help to inform a more nuanced, gender sensitive policy to address identified issues. The rationale for using the Capability Approach lay in its ability to offer a new analytical space in which to understand teacher's well-being, as it elucidates how environmental, social and personal conditions may constrain the 'beings and doings' that people value (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2009). Such an analysis has been used to illustrate constraints on female teachers' well-being in contexts such as Tanzania (Tao, 2013a), Ghana and Sudan (Buckler and Gafar, 2013); as well as female students' well-being in contexts such as South Africa (Unterhalter, 2003), Bangladesh (Raynor, 2007) and India (Peppin-Vaughan, 2007). This form of constrained well-being has also been linked to certain 'criticised' teacher behaviours by locating it within a Critical Realist theory of causation (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979); and such analyses have informed policy recommendations to address constraints in order to reduce causally-linked behaviours, such as absenteeism, lack of preparation and corporal punishment, amongst others (Tao, 2013b, 2014). In a similar vein, the underlying hypothesis in this Nigerian context was that rural settings were significantly constraining female teachers' well-being (which could be causally linked to their avoidance of rural posts), and thus, strategies to reduce identified constraints could form the basis of an innovative rural deployment policy. Thus, the following sections will provide a brief sketch of constraints often found in rural school settings and how the Capability Approach was used to interpret these (and those found in Kwara State) with regard to teachers' well-being.

2. The challenges of rural schools

Rural schools are often located in geographical regions traditionally characterised by harsh topography, low population density and limited infrastructure and services like roads, water, sanitation, electricity, health care and recreation (Mukeredzi and Mandrona, 2013). Such characteristics contribute to a broader discourse of deficiency that conceptualises teaching in rural schools as both inferior and undesirable (Pennefeather, 2011), and this discourse has often been associated with increased teacher absenteeism in contexts such as Ghana (Hedges, 2002), Malawi (Kadzamira, 2006), Sudan (Howard, 1993) and a variety of East and Southern African countries (Mulkeen and Chen, 2008).

In an attempt to unpack the undesirable characteristics associated with rural schools, McEwan (1999: 854) delineates two groups of factors that are commonly associated with rural posts: *alterable factors*, which are those that may be under the control of education policy-makers, such as training opportunities, teaching materials or class sizes; and *inalterable factors*, which are

elements of rural areas that present challenges beyond the reach of education officials, such as climate, public infrastructure or physical isolation. Within various African contexts, both types of factors are often cited. Inalterable factors include a lack of health services (Shibeshi, 2009), poor communication and transportation infrastructure (McEwan, 1999), the presence of differing ethnic, socio-economic and linguistic groups (Brodie et al., 2002), crime and safety issues (Mulkeen, 2006) and concerns about the lack of and/or threat to marriage prospects (Hedges, 2002). Generally speaking, inalterable factors encompass broad systemic environmental and social factors that require long-term strategies and a myriad of actors to 'alter', which as discussed previously, is often beyond the ability or remit of education officials.

With regard to alterable factors that education officials may have the power to control (but not necessarily the requisite material or human resources to affect), poor classroom facilities and lack of school resources are often reported (Towse, 2002), as well as a lack of water and toilet facilities (Bennell, 2004), poor quality accommodation (Akyeampong and Lewin, 2002), and limited opportunities for professional advancement, further education and interaction with peers (Cobbold, 2006). Although many of these factors are also systemic, they are often located within a generally functioning education system, and can thus, be addressed in shorter time frames through improvements in policy and implementation.

An important rationale for delineating alterable factors is so that "policy-makers can choose to alter these characteristics in an attempt to make rural teaching a more attractive option, rather than simply applying monetary incentives" (McEwan, 1999: 854). There are examples of countries that have attempted to do this: in Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe, teachers were given housing allowances or loans to purchase homes (ILO, 1991); in Bangladesh, special training was given for rural service (McEwan, 1999); and in Malawi, education officials distributed a bulletin for rural teachers in order to mitigate professional and personal isolation (Thomas and Shaw, 1992). Although, such initiatives have been laudable in their aims, they have also suffered a similar problem of addressing only one alterable factor in isolation, leaving the list of remaining alterable and inalterable factors long and challenging. And as mentioned previously, such initiatives also appear to be 'gender neutral' in that they may not have been specifically designed to favour men, however, their lack of an explicit consideration for gender relations means that male biases could have occurred in practice (for example, if bulletins were limited they may have been primarily distributed to and kept by men). This is most likely because policies were not designed with a specific consideration for female teachers. As Mitchell and Yang (2012: 4) note, research and policy "has paid little attention to the experiences of women teachers both as *teachers* and as *women*, and when a *rural* component is also factored in, there is even less that is known about women's experiences."

Given these problems, this research aimed to inform a rural deployment policy that holistically addressed a number of issues that were specifically identified through female teachers' voice, values and lived experiences. Such a policy would not only have the positive analytical and political effects of prioritising the knowledge, participation and empowerment of female teachers; but it would also provide a more fine-grained and comprehensive understanding of rural constraints, which would inform more relevant, sustainable strategies to address these. Given these aims, this research utilised the Capability Approach as it provides a very precise conceptualisation of well-being, as well as analytical tools to identify possible gendered constraints on this. And when combined with Critical Realism, the Capability Approach can also provide causal links between constrained well-being and certain types of teacher practice and behaviour. Thus, the next section will

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