

The Role and Challenges of Volunteer Teachers in Solving Teacher Shortages in Rural Area – Case Study of Community Schools in the Masaiti District, the Republic of Zambia

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Contract teachers are seen by some as a low-cost solution to the teacher shortages in developing countries, which are striving to achieve UPE by 2015. Furthermore, some researchers recently argue that contract teachers who are directly hired and fired by the community are likely to attend schools regularly despite their low remuneration (for example, World Bank 2003; DeStefano et al. 2007; Patrinos and Kagia 2007; Bruns et al. 2011).

This paper investigates the extent to which contract teachers called ‘volunteer teachers’ in community schools contribute to solving teacher shortages and teacher absenteeism in rural Zambia, through an exploration of the perspectives of the people under study. In the community schools in Zambia, parents and their representatives of Parents Community School Committees (PCSCs) are in charge of hiring and remunerating volunteer teachers. PCSCs are also expected to monitor the work of volunteer teachers and fire them if their performance and attendance are not satisfactory.

The study reveals that PCSCs were incapable of locating sufficient numbers of educated volunteer teachers from the locality in practice. This was due in part to the general low level of education among the population of the catchment area and a huge challenge in remunerating him or her highly enough to adequately meet livelihood requirements. Furthermore, teacher turnover was high due to their lower remuneration and social status compared to the teachers in the government schools on government payroll, as well as insufficient material and professional support given by the District office and the near-by government schools called ‘mother schools’

In a context of inadequate compensation, the absenteeism of volunteer teachers was also high in all schools. However, PCSCs typically hesitated to take any disciplinary action against teachers, as they judged that they would be unable to find an alternative teacher willing to work for little or no remuneration. Moreover, PCSCs rarely dismissed volunteer teachers because they would rather avoid causing any trouble with teachers who often come from their own neighborhood. Consequently, the right of the PCSCs to fire volunteer teachers did not necessarily result in the greater incentive for the latter to attend schools regularly.

Thus, this article argues that volunteer teachers in community schools do not sufficiently contribute to solving teacher shortages and teacher absenteeism in rural Zambia. Community schools in rural Zambia were mostly established by parents who were unable to send their children to government schools due to distance and costs, thus their socio-economic and education endowment is extremely low. In this context, the policy expectation that they are capable of hiring, remunerating and managing teachers effectively may have been unrealistic.