EMPOWERING RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS THROUGH PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOPS IN CENTRAL KENYA: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Mary W. Gatua,
Assistant Professor of Social Work,
Clarke University, Dubuque, Iowa
mary.gatua@clarke.edu

Carolyn Wiezorek,
Assistant Professor of Education
Clarke University, Dubuque, Iowa
carolyn.wiezorek@clarke.edu

Abstract

In Kenya, education in primary schools has a mandated curriculum and examinations that are universal throughout the country. The system comprises of comprehensive national examination which has raised concerns on the rising disparity in quality between rural public schools, urban schools, and private schools. The continued poor performance in the national examination by students in many rural public schools has made access to secondary and higher education a literal uphill task for students from those communities. The national examinations are aligned with the content as set by the government, but the pedagogy often varies depending on teachers' training and professional preparedness. By empowering teachers through professional development, teaching pedagogies can be enhanced, which can then produce students who are academically, socially, emotionally ready for work and life. In an attempt to address the achievement gaps in public rural primary schools, teachers teaching the English language in rural primary schools in Nyeri County had the opportunity of participating in a two-day professional workshop in June 2016. The workshops focused on strategies that build and develop language skills while enhancing critical thinking skills. Topics included: using Bloom's Taxonomy; writing across the curriculum; strengthening soft skills; using readers' theatre, and using graphic organizers. Other areas addressed included identifying and implementing timely interventions with students and embracing learner-centered approach in teaching.

Keywords: primary education curriculum, empowering teachers, rural primary schools

Introduction

Kenya government has since independence from British colonial rule in 1963 expressed great faith in education and has promoted it as a key to social and economic development (Buchanan,1999). In addition, individual citizens have looked at schooling as a means to social mobility and improved quality of life. Many African governments face the predicament of educational expansion that corresponds with economic development and has not been able to supply ample school resources and equip the teachers in order to keep up with this demand, resulting in compromised quality of education. Despite these challenges, access to education is a strong focus of most governments (Buchanan, 1999). With the introduction of free primary school education in Kenya in 2002, the primary school net enrollment rate rose to 82% with a primary completion rate of 91% indicating the progress made toward universal primary education, a key UN Millennium Development goal (Education Policy & Data Center, 2014). However, there have been several challenges beyond government anticipation which have perpetuated educational inequality with some schools constantly producing high performing students while others remain failing schools (Gatua, Yu & Gitau, 2016). Most schools were not equipped to handle the large numbers of students in terms of the number of teachers, physical classroom space, and learning resources. In some schools, classes may have as many as 80-100 students and this has led to a dramatic increase in the number of privately owned and operated schools that target families who can afford to pay school fees (Mukudi, 2004). Even with the great expansion of secondary schooling since independence, the majority of Kenyan children do not have the chance to pursue education beyond primary school. The most important determinant of a student's academic progress is passing the highly competitive exam at the end of the primary or secondary school. Many students repeat grades in an attempt to improve their exam scores.

Parents who hope to see their children excel educationally must make substantial investment in their children's schooling (Buchanan, 1999). As discussed by Robinson (2015), there are many attributes that affect students' performance in schools. These include: "student motivation, poverty, social disadvantage, home and family circumstances, poor facilities and funding in schools, the pressures of testing and assessment and myriad others" (p. 24).

Achieving student success requires broad but intentional collaboration among multiple stakeholders. As key stakeholders, teachers' involvement is a key ingredient especially in empowering students who struggle academically. "Provision of support for the ongoing professional development of primary school teachers is perhaps the single most important way to promote student learning and to broaden the teachers' capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners" (Gatua, Lu, & Gitau, 2016, p. 26).There is a firm belief that making strategic investments in educational access at the primary level positions the children and their families to bargain their way out of the chronic poverty so characteristic of many rural communities in Africa.

By drawing from educational expertise and teaching pedagogies from the U.S. education system, two facilitators shared through a workshop some of the teaching strategies that have worked well in the U.S. and which are transferrable to the Kenyan educational context. Further, the workshops provided an opportunity for intercultural dialogue on the subject of educational excellence and the establishment of partnership between teachers and community stakeholders in enhancing students' learning. In Kenya as elsewhere, provision of professional training can play a significant role in equalizing opportunities for teachers. But the paradox is that for those teachers teaching in rural and marginalized communities, inaccessibility to professional

development is yet another means to further marginalize them. Reaching out to these marginalized communities has a major role in resolving this paradox.

Professional Development of Teachers

Bloom's Taxonomy

Teachers with few to no resources can employ the theoretical frameworks introduced by Dr. Benjamin Bloom in 1956 and later revised by Anderson et al (2001). According to Anderson and et al (2001) six forms of cognition from most simple to most complex are remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Many teaching practices, such as telling students' information or reading information to students, rely heavily on the first two levels of cognition, remembering and understanding. Applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating require active, rather than passive, learning from students. The more students wrestle with information, the more deeply that information is learned. When students formulate the questions, make connections, compare and contrast items, and apply information, they attain a deeper understanding of the material, making the information more memorable and retrievable.

If students are only expected to recall the formula for determining the area of a circle for a multiple choice exam, it is unlikely that the information will be accessible to them years later. However, if students seek out all of the circles they can find in the classroom and finds the area of each, they will likely retain the ability to find the area of a circle far into the future. Kenyan schools lack resources, but many higher-level activities could be done with paper and pencil, or even a stick and dirt. For example, students could use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast content or concepts from any discipline: bodies of water, countries, presidents, economies, sports and so forth. The act of explaining and justifying placement of items in the given sections of the Venn diagram offers students another opportunity to learn material more deeply. Students could

create stories with characters who react to historical events in a given time period or drawings that demonstrate how the position of a fulcrum changes the amount of force required to lift a load. In the process of creating products, students remember, demonstrate understanding, apply their knowledge, and analyze and evaluate information. By creating activities and assignments that require students to employ upper-level thinking skills, teachers can ensure student engagement, as well as deeper and more enduring understanding of skills and concepts.

While applying the theoretical framework of Bloom (1957) and Anderson et al (2001) requires no additional physical resources. Professional development for teachers may be necessary. The observation (Goodlad, 1982) that teachers teach as they were taught, not as they were taught to teach, suggests that changing one's practices may take purposeful restructuring of lessons until the new way of teaching becomes routine.

Student-Centered Versus Teacher Centered

Whoever does the work learns the most. In typical classrooms around the world, teachers do most of the work preparing lessons, organizing information, and figuring out the best way to present the given content while, students passively receive the fruits of their teacher's labor. Unfortunately for many students, this passive approach does little to ensure learning. According to Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde (2012), "Across all content areas, state-of-the-art instruction requires much less teacher presentation and controlling, and far more active student learning, taking the place in flexibly shifting, decentralized groupings" (p. 57). This is good news for rural Kenyan teachers because cost-free changes to classroom practices could reap bountiful benefits for students.

The teacher remains a necessary element of student-centered classrooms, shifting her role from dispenser of information to coach or guide, creating an environment that welcomes student questions and encourages discovery, collaboration, and perspective taking. The ambiguity that accompanies this teaching approach can be disconcerting to teachers, making administrative and peer support crucial. Professional development sessions could enable teachers to plan meaningful learning opportunities for students, share ideas with colleagues, and reflect upon successes and challenges.

Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration & Creativity

The National Education Association (NEA), in collaboration with other U.S. professional organizations, developed a guide to help educators integrate policies and practices for building the "Four C's": critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity into their own instruction. NEA (2016) argues that all educators want to help their students succeed in life. In using the 'Four Cs,' teachers teaching core course content such as math, science, social studies, and the arts need to incorporate critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. However, teachers ought to be provided with tools and teaching strategies mostly through continued professional development opportunities. Further, this provision allows teachers to build on their teaching styles and be able to evaluate their lessons to ensure that all 4 C's are being used and taught. It is clear that teachers especially in the Kenyan educational system are mandated to follow a set curriculum. Nevertheless, if given opportunities in professional development, teachers can learn more pedagogical strategies that would be useful as they build their lessons around these four concepts and ensure these skills are being met. Based on "Four

Cs" guide, NEA noted that educators have an obligation to help all students reach their full potential and to prepare them to undertake unique demands of a 21st century world.

Educators do a good job of teaching reading, writing, and other hard skills that are essential for success as a student. However, students who possess communication skills often regarded as "soft skills" have an added advantage of performing well in school and in their future careers. As discussed by LaFrance (undated), the most sought after and popular soft skills include problem solving, critical thinking, the ability to communicate, and public speaking. While some individuals exhibit these skills naturally, they can also be acquired and nurtured over time. It is important for teachers to help students acquire these skills early through modeling, use of puzzles, books, and other available resources.

Further, Lange (2014) indicated that there are four main approaches that have made significant impact on children's ability to think critically. These approaches include: inquiry; questioning; problem solving, and collaboration. In discussion of some of these approaches, Lange noted that inquiry involves allowing students to be creative and to inquire about topics that are of interest to them. Students are able to wonder, build background knowledge, develop questions, and demonstrate an understanding by sharing their new learning with others. In questioning, students are compelled to dig deeper in their learning by asking guiding questions and providing a variety of resources for students to independently find answers.

Conclusion

As the discussion above suggests, rural primary schools in Kenya face challenges with regards to continued poor student performance in national examinations. Teachers have an obligation and mandate to teach course content as set by the government curriculum, but the

pedagogy often varies depending on teachers' training and professional preparedness. Further, teachers teaching in these rural areas tend to experience professional isolation. This study found that provision of a two-day professional development workshop for rural teachers can have a ripple effect and produce students who are academically, socially, emotionally ready for work and life. At the same time, strategies incorporated in the professional development workshops included embracing learner-centered approaches in teaching and identifying and implementing timely interventions with students.

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