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To cite this article

Mgomezulu, V.Y. (2016). Does Hardship Deter Potential Teachers from Joining the Teaching Profession? A Case Study of Primary School Volunteer Teachers in Mzuzu Diocese in Malawi. Turkish Journal of Teacher Education, 5(2), 74-83.

Published Online	November 21, 2018
Article Views	23 single - 31 cumulative
Article Download	363 single - 698 cumulative

Does Hardship Deter Potential Teachers from Joining the Teaching Profession? A Case Study of Primary School Volunteer Teachers in Mzuzu Diocese in Malawi

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Received: 28 Sept 2015; Revised: 22 Nov, 2016; Accepted: 25 Dec, 2016

Abstract

The study examined the extent to which hardship experienced by primary school volunteer teachers deterred them from joining the teaching profession. The study involved a cohort of 107 volunteer teachers who had assembled in Mzuzu for a six week teacher training programme. A questionnaire was used to collect data that was later analysed manually and presented in a tabular form. Prospect Theory guided the study in understanding the extent to which the volunteer teachers' experiences of hardship in the teaching profession influenced their decision to join the profession. The findings revealed that in spite of the majority of the volunteer teachers experiencing hardship, they enjoyed teaching and were not deterred from joining the teaching profession. Two possible explanations for such risk-seeking behaviour were that they either saw something greater of personal value to them or they truly saw the teaching profession as a vocation.

Key Words: *prospect theory, hardship, volunteer teacher, qualified teacher, primary school.*

Introduction

The shortage of qualified teachers has proved to be the greatest barrier to quality education in many African countries, including Malawi (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Ministry of Education and the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). To address the challenge, in 1994, Malawi recruited 20,000 school leavers to receive training and then to deploy them to teach the increased enrolment in primary schools resulting from the introduction of the Free Primary Education

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ISSN: 2147-5156

programme (Kruijer, 2010). To achieve this goal, the government introduced the Malawi Special Teacher Education Programme (MASTEP) and the Malawi Integrated Teacher Education Programme (MITEP) as vehicles for training school leavers. Although these programmes produced many trained teachers, the high teacher attrition rate (due to deaths worsened by AIDS, resignations and retirement) and failure to retain teachers in the profession has taken Malawi back to a point where many primary schools are still under-staffed or staffed with unqualified teachers (Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007). For example, as at the year 2000, the qualified teacher to pupil ratio was 1:118, and the ratio of qualified and unqualified teacher (combined) to pupil ratio was 1:66 (Ministry of Education and the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). In 2011 the teacher to pupil ratio increased to 1:78 (Ndala, 2015). A UNESCO (2014) study also reported a worsening situation of teacher to pupil ratio of 130 pupils to a teacher in grade one on average compared to 64 pupils to a teacher in grade eight. At the current rate of teacher training, Malawi is unlikely to achieve a ratio of 1:60 which the county aspires for any time soon (World Bank, 2010).

The ratio of 1:60 is considered still too high for any meaningful teaching and learning to take place. In the top twenty countries of the best primary education systems in the world, the ratio is 1:20 (World Bank, n.d.). This ratio is considered not realistic for Malawi because of its poor economic status. A more realistic ratio would be 1:24 which is the average for Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries like Chile and Mexico (United, n.d.). A benchmark of 1:24 is the ideal ratio that Malawi should aspire for because the economic status in some of the OECD countries is similar to that of Malawi.

As a step towards addressing the shortage of qualified teachers, the Mzuzu Diocese of the Catholic Church adopted a flexible policy for the entry qualifications of teachers in a special training programme (UNESCO, 2014). Using this approach, the Diocese invited a total of 107 volunteer teachers from a long list of interested volunteer teachers. The short list was provided by the Education Secretary of Mzuzu Diocese from the office records. The selected candidates were to undergo teacher training, for free, for a period of six weeks. Volunteer teachers are usually young school leavers who recently passed their MSCE examinations, the 'O' level Malawian equivalent. They usually come from the surrounding area of their various schools.

As one of the facilitators of the training programme, the author of this paper noticed that the volunteer teachers were very eager to learn. They were always punctual in class and showed high interest in the class activities. Given the fact that many teachers regret for ever having joined the teaching profession due to the poor conditions of service, heavy work loads, to mention only two (Buchanan, 2009; The Guardian, 2015), the author questioned what could account for their enthusiasm considering that they had probably already experienced similar hardship. It is for this reason that the study set out to examine the opinions of the volunteer teachers to find out to what extent their experiences had influenced them to join the teaching profession. The study therefore set out to address two objectives:

1. To examine the hardship the volunteer teachers went through in the schools they taught.
2. To determine the extent to which the hardship volunteer teachers had experienced influenced their thoughts on whether or not to join the teaching profession.

Dignity and hardship in the teaching profession

With the exception of a few countries where teachers are treated with dignity, in many countries they are treated in a demeaning manner (Connell, 2014). Center on International Education Benchmarking (n.d.) cites Finland as an example of a country that treats her teachers with dignity and, as a consequence, teaching is one of the most respected professions. Primary school teaching in particular is said to be one of the most sought after jobs; an indication that the teaching profession enjoys high prestige. Inevitably, teaching attracts the best and brightest students. Further, primary school teacher training is the responsibility of the universities so that those desiring to become teachers can attain a bachelor's degree as a minimum teaching requirement. Certification by universities gives teachers pride and respect. Unlike in Malawi where a primary school teacher teaches as many as six subjects per week, their counterparts in Finland teach only two subjects in

which they are trained. Given the high status the teaching profession enjoys in that country, it is not surprising that the teacher retention rate is 90%.

A certain school principal in the United Kingdom told a young teacher that teaching was a high pressure and stress filled profession (Stortz, 2013). Supporting this negative sentiment, Harding (2015) reports that more than 40% of new teachers in the United Kingdom leave the profession within the first twelve months on account of excessive work loads. Disproportionate workload is unhealthy for a teacher because it can lead to burnout which is usually manifested by progressive loss of idealism, energy, purpose and concern (Buchanan, 2009).

A poor teacher retention rate is one of the major characteristics in countries where the dignity of the teaching profession has eroded (World Bank, 2016). Such a situation exists in Malawi where in 2014 alone 476 out of 51,529 teachers resigned (Ndala, 2015) representing 0.92%. This percentage might appear small but in a country where the need for education is high, it is still unacceptably high. The situation of poor teacher retention and therefore high teacher to pupil ratio is worst in rural Malawian schools. To incentivise teachers to go to rural schools, the Malawi government introduced a hardship allowance to cushion teachers from a wide range of hardship situations including lack of social services and poor facilities in schools (World Bank, 2016). In 2010 the hardship allowance was at 5000 Malawi Kwacha (MK) (about 30 US\$). In 2014 the government doubled the allowance to MK 10,000 which is now about 13US\$ at the rate of 740 Kwacha to a Dollar as at 9th December 2016. Thus the hardship allowance is no longer attractive enough for teachers to go or remain in rural schools. Even in 2010, the MK 5000 monthly hardship allowance was not particularly attractive, an indication perhaps that policy makers do not take the matter very seriously.

The scenarios in Britain and Malawi depict a profession that has lost its dignity in society. Further, it shows that some teachers have lost an element of vocation in their reasons for joining the teaching profession. It seems more emphasis is placed on what they stand to benefit from the profession as opposed to what value they can add to the development of the learners or the profession.

A look at some reports regarding sentiments about the teaching profession reveals why many teachers join the profession. They include reasons like; there is constant laughter, the children teach them lots of things, it keeps one young at heart, and it allows one to work with a variety of people, to mention a few (Lindsay, 2015). These statements show little sense that the teachers consciously want to add value to the development of the learners. Such sentiments are quite different from what the president of Kansas Academy of Science, Dr McWharf, said in 1912. He represented the teaching profession as a dignified one that was in many cases more honourable than other professions. He teased other professions in the following words; “You may combine and arrange the particles of matter into striking and beautiful forms, but you cannot inspire them with reason, you cannot make them think or act” (McWharf, 1912, p.3). He added; “He that makes an impression on a human mind is achieving results that will survive for ever” (McWharf, 1912, p.3). McWharf takes the view that emphasises vocational motives for joining the teaching profession which seem to lack in modern reasoning as demonstrated in the statements from Lindsay (2015).

Agreeing with the high status the teaching profession once enjoyed, the president of the Stout Institute, Burton Nelson (1931) observed that the teaching profession was each year becoming more highly respected and that young people then wanted to remain in teaching. He added that a teacher was then recognised just as a lawyer, doctor or engineer.

From the above accounts one gets the sense that the teaching profession was highly regarded in the earlier times but that dignity seems to have waned in recent times, with the exception of a few countries like Finland. Hardship, including uncompetitive work conditions in the profession seems to have played a role in making the profession less dignified and therefore less attractive.

Significance of the study

There is need to understand why volunteer teachers would want to join a profession that is less dignified in Malawi. The study will shed light on whether or not hardship in the teaching profession in Malawi is a negative factor for potential teachers wishing to join the profession. If hardship is not a hindrance, what is in the teaching profession that overrides the hardship? Knowledge of things that make the profession tick would help policy makers to make the teaching profession more attractive, not just to many people, but to the best and brightest minds.

Assumption

The study assumes that when volunteer teachers decided to accept the training that Mzuzu Diocese organised, they were well aware of the risk of joining a profession that was characterised by excessive hardship and that they did not have ulterior motive for leaving the teaching profession once they were trained.

Prospect theory as a theoretical lens

Prospect theory concerns decision making under conditions of risk. The theory tries to explain how people deal with situations of risk and uncertainty. The proponents of this theory, Kahneman and Tversky investigated human behaviour in the way they make decisions when faced with situations of risk. On the one hand, they found that people tend to display risk-aversion when they perceive a prospect of loss. On the other, they tend to exhibit risk-seeking behaviour when they see a prospect of gain. The main determining factor in their decision making mechanism is their perception of whether they will gain or lose (McDermott, 2001; Watkins, n.d.).

Although this theory was developed with the monetary field in mind, McDermott (2001) argues that there is no technical or theoretical reason why the theory cannot be applied beyond the monetary discipline. Indeed this theory fits well with the discussion in this article. Volunteer teachers are in a state of crisis because they were not selected to the national universities, technical or teacher training colleges and they are not engaged in any meaningful and gainful employment. Now that Mzuzu Diocese has offered them an opportunity, they have to decide whether to accept or decline it. For them to make up their minds they need to consider whether they stand to benefit or lose if they accept the offer. Considering the hardship many of the teachers go through (Buchanan, 2009; The Guardian, 2015), one would expect that the volunteer teachers would turn down the offer because there are clear indications of hardship which signify a type of loss. For instance, teaching in a government-owned school with limited resources and opportunities can be viewed as a loss considering what one would have enjoyed if one had joined a corporate organisation.

Methodology

The whole cohort of 107 volunteer teachers was involved in the study. For purposes of this study, the gender distribution of the volunteer teachers was not considered because it was outside the interest of the study. The participants were given a questionnaire which included closed and open questions that generated quantitative and qualitative data. The closed question section asked participants to indicate the class they have been teaching, the number of pupils in their class, and the number of periods they were teaching per week, to mention only a few. In the open question section the respondents were asked the following:

- i. Indicate to what extent you enjoyed teaching.
- ii. Indicate if you intended to remain in teaching or not after you are trained.
- iii. Give reasons for your response to Question ii above.

The Education Secretary of the Mzuzu Diocese granted the researcher permission verbally to administer the questionnaire. The researcher further sought permission from the volunteer teachers to engage them in the study. He explained that the questionnaire intended to collect information that would help policy makers and other stakeholders in developing policies that might attract and retain teachers in the profession. He assured them of confidentiality. In the research, the participants were identified by numbers instead of names to ensure confidentiality. The participants were also told that they were at liberty to pull out of the exercise at any point, if they so wished.

The researcher administered the questionnaire at a time when he had a class with the participants. His involvement in administering the questionnaire was important because he was able to clarify points where the participants were not sure. In order to counteract a feeling of pleasing the researcher by the volunteer teachers as a result of what Ramrathan, le Grange and Shawa (2016) call 'power differential', the researcher emphasised the importance to the research for the volunteer

teachers to give their honest opinions. He assured them that he would be the only person handling the data and that he would store it in a locker in his office where no one else would have access to it. The respondents took about ten minutes to respond to the questionnaire.

The statistical data was analysed manually and presented in a tabular form. The responses to the open questions were coded according to two themes: i. the hardship volunteer teachers experienced, and ii. how hardship influenced volunteer teachers to join the teaching profession. The data was then turned into statistical data with the aim of establishing most shared views.

Data presentation

Tables 1 to 3 present data that shows the degree of hardship the volunteer teachers experienced.

Table 1.
Mean volunteer teacher to learner ratio per grade

Grade	Teachers per grade	Learners per grade	Teacher to pupil ratio
1	1	30	1:30
2	7	297	1:42
3	17	778	1:46
4	25	1137	1:45
5	21	997	1:47
6	28	1121	1:40
7	5	226	1:45
8	3	121	1:40
Total	107	4707	
Mean Ratio			1:44

Table 1 shows that the highest teacher to pupil ratio (1:47) was in Grade 5 and the lowest (1:30) was in Grade 1.

Table 2.
Mean volunteer teacher to pupil ratio per cluster of grades

Cluster	Number of pupils per teacher	%
Grades 1-4	5 teachers teaching classes of less than 24 pupils	5
	45 teachers teaching classes with a minimum of 24 pupils	42
Grades 5-7	8 teachers teaching classes of less than 24 pupils	7
	46 teachers teaching classes with a minimum of 24 pupils	43
Grade 8	3 teachers teaching classes with a minimum of 24 pupils	3
Total	107 teachers	100

Table 2 shows the mean volunteer teacher to pupil ratio in each cluster of the grades. The table reveals that 42% of the volunteer teachers in grades 1 to 4 teach classes with a population of a minimum of 24 pupils. Further, 43% of the teachers in grades 5 to 7 teach oversubscribed classes of 24 pupils and above per class. Grade 8 teachers (3%) also teach classes with a minimum of 24 pupils.

Table 3.

Number of periods per volunteer teacher per week

Cluster	Average Periods per teacher per week	%
Grades 1-4	24 teachers taught less than 15 periods	22
	26 teachers taught more than 30 periods	24
Grades 5-7	36 teachers taught less than 35 periods	34
	18 teachers taught more than 40 periods	17
Grades 8	3 teachers taught less than 40 periods	3
Total	107 teachers	100

Table 3 shows the average number of periods that each teacher taught in each category of a cluster. The education system in Malawi has stipulated that lower primary school (Grades 1-4) must have 15 learning periods per week and middle primary classes (Grades 5-7) must have 35 learning periods per week. Grade 8 must have 40 learning periods per week (By word of mouth from Primary Education Advisor, on 24th January 2015). The table indicates that 22% of the volunteer teachers taught less than 15 periods per week in Grades 1-4 while 24% taught more than 30 periods per week. In the cluster of Grades 5-7, 34% of the volunteer teachers taught more than 35 periods per week, and 17% taught more than 40 periods per week. In Grade 8, 3% taught 40 periods per week.

How hardship influenced volunteer teachers to join the teaching profession

Tables 4 to 6 present data on how experiences of hardship may have influenced volunteer teachers to join the teaching profession.

Table 4.

Degree of enjoying teaching

Responses	f	%
I do not enjoy teaching	4	4
I enjoy teaching a little bit	3	3
I enjoy teaching very much	99	92
I am not sure if I enjoy teaching	1	1
Total	107	100

Table 4 shows responses to questions that sought honest opinions from the volunteer teachers about how much they enjoyed teaching. The table indicates that the majority (92%) of the volunteer teachers enjoyed teaching very much, 7% did not enjoy teaching and 1% of the them. Were not sure whether they enjoyed teaching or not.

Table 5.

Commitment to remaining in the teaching profession after completing training

Response	f	%
Yes	104	97
No	3	3
Total	107	100

Table 5 presents responses to questions that looked for volunteer teachers' commitment to the teaching profession. The table shows that 97% of the volunteer teachers were committed to remaining in the teaching profession but 3% were not.

Table 6.

Reasons for wanting to join the teaching profession

Response	f	%
Altruistic responses:		
I want to assist Malawi; I want to assist children; I want to end illiteracy; I want to develop Malawi; I want to end shortage of teachers.	62	58
Self-benefit responses:		
I enjoy it; I want to educate myself.	37	35
Uncommitted response:		
I have nothing else to do	8	7
Total	107	100

Table 6 contains opinions of the volunteer teachers regarding their reasons for wanting to join the teaching profession. The table indicates that the majority of them (58%) wanted to join the teaching profession for altruistic reasons while 35% wanted to benefit from the system and the remaining 7% wanted to join teaching because there was nothing else for them to do.

Discussion

The discussion is guided by the objectives of examining the hardship the volunteer teachers experienced, and the extent to which the hardship the volunteer teachers experienced influenced their thoughts about joining the teaching profession.

The hardship volunteer teachers experienced

Table 1 showed that the average teacher to pupil ratio (1:44) in all the grades was reasonable because it is below 60 pupils per teacher which Malawi aspires to achieve by 2018 (World Bank, 2010). However, the ratio is unacceptable because it is very high compared with the ideal benchmark of 1: 24 (see United, n.d.). This is true for all the grades. Table 2 also revealed that 88% of the volunteer teachers taught oversubscribed classes of 24 pupils and above per class while only 12% of the teachers had less than 24 pupils. Now that a new outcomes-based curriculum has been introduced in Malawi (Masperi & Hollow, 2008), there is increased need that every teacher should give greater attention to each pupil. This objective will be compromised because large classes make it very difficult for the teachers to provide adequate support to each pupil. Further, it is quite challenging to provide adequate teaching and learning resources to large classes. Under such difficult conditions, some pupils will definitely feel neglected and will resort to indiscipline acts that, in turn, will frustrate the teacher (Kewaza & Welch, 2013). In other words, teaching 44 pupils is a challenge for a volunteer teacher. Bearing in mind that these teachers are young, untrained and inexperienced, the impact the challenges will have on their perception of the teaching profession is likely to be negative. The net effect on many of the volunteer teachers is likely to be a range of pessimistic feelings about the profession.

The findings in Table 3 show that a total of 41% (24 +17) of the teachers had higher teaching loads than the Ministry of Education stipulates (35 periods per week). The teaching loads are high probably because many primary school teachers are usually expected to teach across clusters. The teachers that teach less than 35 periods per week may be the lucky ones who do not have to teach across clusters or have to teach multiple subjects. For instance, in lower primary school (standard 1 to 4) some teachers are expected to teach eight subjects: Chichewa, English, Maths, Agriculture, Life skills, Expressive Arts, Bible knowledge and Social and Environmental science. In the middle and upper primary classes, a teacher would be expected to teach the eight subjects offered in lower primary plus Science and Technology. The overall picture is that a significant number of the volunteer teachers (41%) experienced hardship in terms of high teaching loads. Considering that these teachers have a limited knowledge base and are inexperienced, one can appreciate the extent of the challenges

they had to deal with. It defies logic that such experiences would motivate one to join the teaching profession.

It is common practice that school communities pay volunteer teachers a monthly salary ranging from US\$ 11 to 22, depending on the capacity of the community. With such little remuneration a volunteer teacher cannot afford to pay for many of his/her basic needs.

It is reasonable to argue that when a profession is beset with so much hardship, it is also robbed of its dignity. If Malawi had supported its education system to a level where the teaching profession were provided with competitive conditions of service and opportunities for upward mobility, the dignity of the profession would be enhanced. The evidence discussed here suggests that the dignity of the teaching profession in Malawi is undermined very considerably.

How hardship influenced volunteer teachers to join the teaching profession

The above discussion has shown that volunteer teachers experienced a great deal of hardship. In spite of the hardship, the majority of them (92%) (see Table 4) said that they enjoyed teaching. It is rather puzzling that the people who are experiencing so much hardship associated with teaching would also enjoy the process of teaching. One can only conclude that volunteer teachers have so much passion for the profession that it overrides things that constitute the hardship such as poor remuneration and adverse work conditions (Krecie & Grimek, 2005). It is even more incomprehensible that close to 97% (see Table 5) said they would remain in the profession once they had acquired a teaching qualification.

Given the fact that they have tasted the hardship associated with primary school teaching in Malawi, it would appear that they see something quite attractive beyond the current hardship that makes them to engage in risk-seeking behaviour of joining the teaching profession (McDermott, 2001; Watkins, n.d.). One might also speculate that they are viewing the teaching qualification as a spring board to better rewarding professions as is the case in the United Kingdom and other countries (Buchanan, 2009; World Bank, 2016). This view is partly supported by the responses they gave to a question that asked why they wanted to join the profession. Fifty eight per cent gave answers such as; I want to end shortage of teachers, I want to assist children, I want to end illiteracy in Malawi, or I want to develop Malawi (see Table 6). Considering the fact that most humans are self-interest seekers (Heywood, 2014), it is surprising that so many of the volunteer teachers would want to join the profession for altruistic reasons.

If it is indeed true that so many volunteer teachers truly want to join the profession as a vocation, it would be in line with what McWharf emphasised (1912) that the main reasons for joining the teaching profession should be to make an impression on the minds of the young people, not primarily for self benefit. What is not clear is whether the respondents were sincere in their responses or not. One can speculate that they may have felt obliged to give such responses as a way of returning a favour for the free training that the Mzuzu Diocese offered them.

With so many negative stories that have appeared in the media in recent years, such as “Government owes teachers K140 million in arrears for 2003-2010” (Singini, 2014) and “Teachers not promoted for many years” (Nyondo, 2013), “Malawi teachers cry foul over delayed salaries” (Nyasatimes, 2012), it is surprising that these volunteer teachers appear to be oblivious to the high probability that they could face similar hardship if they joined the profession. If they had taken cognisance of such scary news headlines, in addition to their own experiences of hardship, not many of them would have expressed positive sentiments to join the teaching profession. The fact that so many showed interest in the profession may be an indication of their understanding that the teaching profession is a vocation (McWharf, 2012) or it may simply be self interest seeking (Heywood, 2014).

Implications of the study and Conclusion

It appears that teacher training institutions will always be able to enrol full capacity of intakes. The graduands from these institutions will join schools to teach but it is doubtful that many will remain in the profession. The education system in Malawi needs to address the hardship teachers face if teacher retention and therefore the quality of education are to improve.

The study showed that the hardship the volunteer teachers experienced were immense. In spite of the hardship, they still wanted to engage in risk-seeking behaviour of joining the teaching

profession. Further investigation would be useful to understand why they would want to join the profession when they are well aware of the hardship they will face.

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