
THE FEASIBILITY OF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES FOR RURAL SCHOOLS IN LIMPOPO

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ABSTRACT

Multiple factors have an impact on schools in rural areas. Most of these factors relate back to either the conditions of the environment; behaviour of children, structural challenges in schools and working conditions of teachers. In combination these factors not only contribute to poor school performance but also to high incidence of teacher social problems. This article critically examines the potential of introducing an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) at rural schools as a resource in support of developing rural school capacity. Utilising focus group methodology to gather data from teaching personnel post an introductory workshop, the feasibility of such programme is examined. Findings confirmed that although the concept is feasible, its implementation would require skillful modeling to accommodate the multi-factor nature of the system in which it is supposed to function. Guidelines are provided to facilitate the introduction of such a comprehensive EAP model.

Key words: Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), education, teachers, rural schools, developing country

INTRODUCTION

The democratisation of South Africa has led to dramatic changes in the education and school system. Transformed into an inclusive system with a new curriculum and new schools the current educational system is not without problems and challenges. An area where these problems are more acutely felt is in the rural schools of the country. Harber and Davies (1997) regard schools in developing countries as largely different to those in developed countries. Teachers in rural schools were often far more vulnerable to emotional and social problems than their colleagues in developed schools. The question may be asked: How does the school environment specifically that of rural South Africa, affect school management and teachers at schools? What kind of working conditions prevails for teachers in the current rural school environment? Is there a role for an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in the educational system, specifically at rural schools in South Africa? If an EAP is indeed viable, which kinds of services would be provided to teachers by such a service? How would an EAP be structured to facilitate development of our rural school system? These are the main questions to be addressed by this article.

The rural educational environment as workplace

According to Harber and Davies (1997) working conditions of teachers in rural schools can be described as more complex and stressful than in developed countries. The demographic composition of school populations in developing schools differs significantly from urban schools. Children in rural schools more often come from poor families and are more likely exposed to detrimental economic, health and social factors. Teenage pregnancy is more prevalent in rural contexts, resulting in interrupted schooling and poor class attendance, in turn resulting in older school attenders, sometimes past school age. Multiple factors influence the way schools are structured; the way teaching is conducted; schools are attended, how teachers perform and how schools are managed. The educational environment is frequently influenced by macro conditions such as the economic context; amount of resources available at the school and political factors such as actions directed against political structures. At mezzo level factors such as school violence; the constant presence of health issues of either children or their parents and cultural factors such as beliefs regarding what should be learned traditionally and what not. Beliefs such as that female children should not attend school, or children being absent from school during periods when they have to assist their parents in earning an income, were some of the realities that were found to impact on school attendance and performance. A comparative study involving strong and poor performing

schools by UNESCO (2002) confirmed that teachers who had the support of the school principal performed better. This study also found a correlation between Grade 12 performance and the frequency of teacher-parent meetings. Other work-related factors are from a teacher's perspective: Strong emphasis on exam performance, adequate payment, sound working relationships in the school, receiving positive teaching support (in the form of teaching materials and advice), strong collegiality and impartiality and low levels of corruption from school management all contribute to positive experiences in the school as work environment (Modipane, 2009; Riley, Craig, Poston, Saunders and Flynn, 2000). Added to these are the influence of teacher re-deployment processes, lack of parental support and community involvement.

Micro factors such as behavioural problems in children; unemployment and lack of education of the parents, child-headed family constellations and unpredictable home circumstances with emotional problems further contribute to unstable working conditions. Weak discipline structures and lack of skill in dealing effectively with child behavioural problems, often contribute to increased occurrence of stress in teachers (Harber and Davies, 1997; Travers and Cooper, 1996). Modipane (2009) examined poor Grade 12 performance in two rural schools and concluded that a combination of home and school environment were the main contributors thereby indicating the direct consequences of micro level factors on academic performance.

As a result of the above constraints classes are large and with about 80 learners per educator easily become unmanageable (Baruth, 2009). The instruction is often outdoors, under a tree, with no desks, stationery, electricity sanitation, or running water available. Rural parents usually cannot make any financial contribution to the education of their children (Terblanche, 2009).

A preliminary study by the one author of this article concluded that certain working conditions in the school system contributed to stress in teachers:

- Inadequate numbers of teachers or educators;
- Educators insufficiently trained or not appointed according to the training they have received;
- Insufficient resources for proper schooling;
- Lack of discipline among teachers and children and
- High prevalence of HIV and AIDS among teachers.

Against this socio-economic multi-level systemic backdrop the assumption underpinning the study was that teachers are faced with many personal and work-related challenges that influence their performance in the school

environment (Kirst-Ashman and Hull, 2006). Likewise, problems generated at work are often taken home. Moreover, problems that are not addressed usually get worse and adversely affect job performance.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) as workplace-based resource

Although the establishment of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) in government departments has become fairly common in South Africa in recent years, this model had not been tried in the Education Department, Malamulele district, Limpopo at the time when the study was conducted in 2003. Cunningham (1994) and Hall and Fletcher (1984, in EAPASA, 1999) define an EAP as a programme that has the explicit aim of improving the quality of life of all its employees and their families by providing greater support and helping to alleviate the impact of everyday work and personal problems. EAP's are regarded as support services available to all employees and are aimed at assisting in the identification and resolution of personal problems that have an impact on job performance and productivity. In 2003, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) alluded to the fact that examples of such problems include health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, emotional, stress or other personal issues (GDE, 2003). EAPs are more than reactive social problem focused programmes. They often play a role in addressing work related conflicts and act as a forum to represent workplace needs of employees to management (Becker and Hall, 2000). Moreover, Employee Assistance Programmes are regarded as a vital component of work-life in the contemporary organisation (Fisher, 2002).

Mkhize (1999) suggested that EAP's narrow clinical focus needs to move beyond towards involvement in work-related problems as an expression of the work environment itself. Programmes need to be proactive rather than a traditional reactive approach to employee assistance. EAPs are even well placed to move into broader organisational development, transformation, and change management issues (Du Plessis, 1999).

Gerber in Bell (2003) explains that EAPs have gradually moved by degrees into the field of organisational development and that in practice EAPs and organisational development belong together by a natural force of gravity. The transition from a clinical focus to a more holistic approach happened gradually since EAP practitioners have in-depth knowledge of the organisation and multilevel exposure to individuals and groups within the organisation.

Modern views of the progressive employer regards human capital as most valuable investment a company can make (Bell, 2003). Gathercole (1992 cited

in Bell, 2003) states that people must become the primary source of value for flexible, responsive and adaptive organisation. Langley (1999 cited in Bell, 2003) adopts the analogy of EAPs as representing the maintenance division for human machinery that it is more cost effective to repair than to discard.

Accordingly small numbers of employees require maintenance whilst constructive confrontation, reality checks and modification through corrective action, frequently is sufficient to enhance productivity and organisational efficiency. The workplace has become an increasingly attractive and effective location for delivery of programmes that offer clinical and practical forms of assistance to employees.

Several authors describe the EAP as a progression from a clinical model to a more comprehensive macro level model that is focused more on prevention and organisational development (Bell, 2003; Du Plessis, 1999).

Terblanche (2009) argues that issues such as critical incident stress debriefing, HIV and AIDS services, work/ life management, organisational consultancy, health and wellness programmes and prevention, characterise South African comprehensive EAP models. Such models reflect the country's unique cultural, political, social and economic values such as change management, affirmative action, capacity building and cultural diversity (Maiden, 1992).

Bell (2003) asserts that the social and economic profile of South Africa is quite different to the profiles of well-developed western democracies. This is a direct result of the colonial and apartheid history of unequal development in this country.

METHODOLOGY

Aim of the research

The primary aim of the study was to explore the perceptions of teachers in rural schools regarding the establishment of an Employee Assistance Programme in their work environment.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To explore teachers' perceptions regarding social conditions and circumstances in the school as work environment;

- To obtain views from teachers and management regarding the feasibility for establishing an Employee Assistance Programme in the Department of Education;
- To formulate suitable recommendations regarding the suitability and nature of an EAP in the rural school context.

Research strategy

The study was located within a qualitative research paradigm as it elicited participants' accounts of the meaning, experience and perceptions regarding issues and concerns characteristic of the school as work environment (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpont, 2011). The research was also exploratory descriptive as it sought to gain insight into the potential of developing EAP's in rural school settings, but also to ask "how" and "why" questions (De Vos et al., 2011).

Setting for the study

The study was conducted at the Department of Education in Malamulele District. Malamulele comprises semi-urban and deep rural areas and falls within the jurisdiction of Vhembe district in the province of Limpopo, which is one of South Africa's nine provinces. The Department in this area consists of 950 teachers and five circuits that are made up of 174 schools – 120 primary and 54 secondary.

Study sample

Sampling was purposive in that 19 members were recruited for participation in focus group interviews. Inclusion was based on availability and willingness to participate and respondents came from two rural secondary schools. Prospective participants were subjected to an orientation workshop on the structure and nature of an EAP to prepare them to think about feasibility issues (De Vos et al., 2011). Participants were informed of the study's implications and consent forms were completed. Since the study was not aimed at generalisation of findings but rather at developing a better understanding of the rural context of the study, the eventual number of participants was not of paramount importance. The main inclusion criterion was that teachers and principals in the sample taught at rural schools.

Data collection

Data were collected through three focus group interviews.

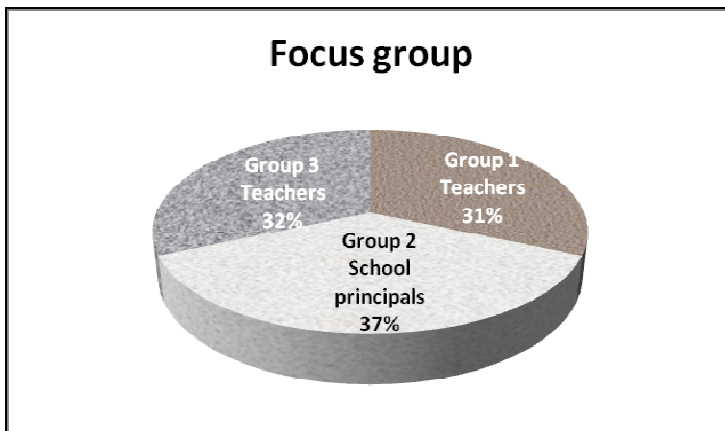


Figure 1: Groups that participated in the focus group interviews (N=19)

The figure above indicates the distribution of sample participants amongst different focus groups. Numbers of participants warranted distribution amongst two groups as prescribed by focus group standards, and principals were placed in a separate group to reduce inhibition as a result of power relations. In total, three focus groups were conducted.

Research tool

Two interview guides were prepared and piloted on four teachers and four principals prior to the study. Minor adjustments were made based on feedback before application in the research context.

Interview guide for management: Questions covered a range of social problems frequently experienced by teachers

Interview guide for teachers: Questions focused on the traumatic experiences of teachers and how they dealt with these experiences. Opinions were sought regarding workplace support, natural support networks such as their families and the school system. Their understanding regarding the role of an Employee Assistance Programme and its feasibility in the Department and rural context was also explored in the questions.

Data analysis

Marlow's (1993) two-phase approach and eight steps of Creswell (1994) were adopted in data analysis process. Marlow's approach involved (1) Organising the data; making field notes, using audio and video- taping, transcribing the data and organising files and (2) Constructing categories from the data, whilst Creswell's (1994) eight steps involved: (1) Getting a sense of the whole; (2) Data cleaning; (3) Developing a classification system and categories; (4) Coding data material; (5) Formulating of themes; (6) Cutting and pasting; (7) Recording the data; and (8) Data verification. Based on the categorisation process as a first phase of analysis, themes were derived by formulating linkages between topics and sub-topics. Findings were confirmed by utilising an external coder to analyse the data and verify themes. This concluded the second phase of analysis. As a third strategy the findings were compared with literature to achieve triangulation (De Vos et al., 2011; Grinnell, Williams and Unrau, 2010).

Ethical considerations

Since the topic required more creative thinking and less personal issue exploration, it contained low risk for respondent exposure. As a result ethical issues were considered as follows:

Avoidance of harm: Participants were not harmed emotionally or physically in the study and they were allowed to withdraw if they wished.

Informed consent: Participants were given accurate and complete information about the goal of the investigation and the procedures and they were asked to sign the recruitment plan form.

Deception of subjects: Participants were not deceived or manipulated into participating in the study.

Voluntary participation: Participation was voluntary as indicated.

Confidentiality: Participants' real names were not utilised and confidentiality was respected by composing focus groups as either consisting of teachers or principals and not as mixed groups.

FINDINGS

There was little knowledge about Employee Assistance Programmes in Malamulele district, and respondents had to think carefully about the potential role of an EAP in this setting. The pre-research workshop provided sufficient information and understanding of the concept to facilitate the production of

ideas on how this model could be adapted for use in the rural context. Focus group discussions provided the following findings:

Perceptions regarding social conditions and circumstances in rural schools

Conditions such as overcrowded class rooms, low salaries, job insecurity and lack of promotion opportunities, and the abolition of corporal punishment have a significant impact on teacher performance. Teachers have less control over children than before and their own socio-economic conditions contribute to this perceived lack of control. Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) as a system resulted in a major change in a teaching approach for which they were largely not well prepared. Training in this system was inadequate and the resulting resistance to this programme a reality. Early retirement appeared a realistic way out of the problem.

The following quotes captured these themes:

“The problem is overcrowding in classrooms. Teachers feel frustrated; they do not have a space to stand and also they could not give individual attention to learners”.

“There is no source of motivation. For seven years people have been working with no promotion. The other problem is the economic issues where teachers are earning insufficient salaries and as result they go to money lenders”.

“There is a problem of understaffing. The Department has ceased to employ teachers. The Department employs temporary workers who are uncertain of their future”.

“Corporal punishment has been abolished. Most teachers cannot cope with conflict management; they feel frustrated on how to punish learners. There is chaos in schools”.

Scalon (1996) and Ramatsea (2002) identified curriculum issues, job stress, lack of opportunities for promotions and unrealistic demands by school principals as key problems. Although the Revised National Curriculum Statement Policy (Department of Education, 2002) still supports OBE research, findings indicate that OBE has not been without problems. A report on the review of the implementation of the Curriculum statement (Department of Education, 2009) acknowledged the influence of workload issues, specific challenges within the education context such as amongst others, inconsistent assessment methods and lack in teaching support.

Personal problems in the school as work environment

School principals viewed personal financial issues as a core problem encountered by employees in the Department. They perceived this as a cause for coming to school late or even absenteeism in the workplace. Teachers had entangled themselves with loans and as a result money lenders sometimes came to the school to collect debts, causing teachers to come to school late in order to avoid the embarrassment of encountering money lenders. Other noted problems were a lack of motivation, low morale and coming to work with no objective as to what they wanted to achieve. Demoralisation was the result of a lack of interest taken by the Department of Education in providing suitable equipment and teaching aids, books and stationary and in some cases a lack of electricity in the school. Depression and stress were cited as other problems. Teachers felt demoralised by inconsistent school attendance of learners, who would easily not attend school due to transportation problems and community mass action events that disrupted school routine. Management had to deal with suicide threats not knowing how to deal with such issues. Participants complained about learner disciplinary problems and that they now felt unable to effectively deal with these issues. This was perceived to be the result of changes in disciplinary practices and specifically the abolishment of corporal punishment in the school system.

These issues were highlighted in the following responses:

“Most of my subordinates have financial problems; they have debts and debt-collectors come to work to collect their monies”.

“The problems that I have encountered in my life are financially related. You make uninformed decisions, and these will affect you in whatever you are doing”.

“I think the main cause for absenteeism is the lack of motivation. Teachers just come to school with no objective of what they want to achieve”.

“The previous speaker ascribes absenteeism and late-coming to lack of motivation. That is true: I want to believe that a happy person will be motivated and effective, let alone being productive. This means that if the person is unhappy, he or she gets disinterested in work itself and tries to escape”. “Most teachers cannot cope with conflict management; feel frustrated on the cases to punish students. This is stressful to teachers”.

“As long as teachers are depressed at the end of the day they are not focused”.

“The very problems we have been citing in my opinion definitely they affect job performance and subsequently result to depression and stress”.

The main categories of personal problems are described as financial, stress and depression due to job dissatisfaction and family or marital problems (Joja, 2004; Mamasela, 2000 cited in Bell, 2003; McPartland, 1991).

Perceptions of Employee Assistance Programmes

Mostly personal problems were cited, working conditions and organisational issues. These were perceived to be affecting job performance.

Teachers saw the use of coping strategies – whether positive or negative as indicative of help-seeking behaviour. For example, teaching personnel often requested permission to leave early from work in order to sort out their financial problems, while others demonstrated excessive drinking or smoking during working hours.

Teachers and principals mostly shared similar sentiments about EAP.

“I was not aware of this programme, I only heard about it last week in the workshop organised by you”.

“I think EAP is a system that helps employees to solve their problems”.

“I think this programme can assist teachers on financial management.

“EAP will come with a strategy to assist the educators rather than to dismiss them”.

These findings were consistent with those obtained by Ramatsea (2002), showing that teachers had not come across information regarding services provided by EAPs.

EAP was regarded as relevant and feasible for the rural context. EAPs should provide counseling to troubled employees and principals should be trained in how to identify troubled employees and also how to refer employees to such programmes. Unions should be involved more especially in referrals of employees. The following responses encapsulated these viewpoints:

“The way I view this programme, I feel it should have been established in our department”.

“In my opinion, EAP is relevant for rural areas due to the stressful situations encountered by employees. I feel it should be established in our district”.

“EAP is very feasible; it should be established in our department”.

“This programme is beneficial, is going to assist employees with personal problems”.

"I think this programme will provide assistance to teachers who are in a traumatic situation by giving the counseling".

"Principals should identify troubled employees".

"There should be referrals by principals".

"Unions need to be involved – especially for referrals".

Litchfield (1995) states that maintenance of staff health and stress is likely to improve work relations, reduce errors, increase creativity, improve decision making and enhance job satisfaction. EAPA SA (1999) maintains that such benefits can only be achieved if staff is well trained in EAP principles and referral procedures. Maiden (1992) maintains an EAP can also provide an opportunity to get help before dismissal.

Carrol (1996) emphasises the important role of employers to deal with the issues of stress, as well as mental and physical illness in the workplace. Facilities and programmes should be created to assist employees alleviate these problems. In the teaching context such EAP infrastructure may incorporate a wellness programme, counseling, legal, financial services, information and advice and specifically teaching issues such as disciplinary cases, low resourced school environments, unstable school attendance and lack of continuity in teaching the curriculum.

Implementation

It is generally regarded that the Department of Education should be a key role player in institutionalising an EAP.

Principals emphasised that union and management should get together and draw up a policy for the programme in consultation with employees. Participants from all three groups recommended an in-house model guided by a holistic approach as preferred model. Some were reluctant about paying for the EAP service themselves, whilst others were willing to pay a minimal fee if they only they had access.

These themes were encapsulated in the following verbatim responses:

"The Department should employ an EAP coordinator. It should be decentralised each circuit should have EAP practitioner".

"I have mentioned substance abuse, stress management, health programmes, parental skills, family enrichment and financial management".

"It should start with self- management to financial management".

“Within the period of overstay in the Department. I am convinced the Department is compelled to provide pre-service EAP, in this regard can be budgeted for”.

“I also think union should contribute to the establishment of EAP

“I think union and management should be involved in formulation of policy”.

“It needs a long chain of consultation between employees and employers”.

“I think the appropriate is the in-house”.

“I go for holistic approach; we should not rely on one component. All these models should be engaged upon except consortium”.

Although these comments confirm the need for an EAP they also indicate almost desperation with teachers regarding implementation of an EAP. An education-based EAP should be more than the basic structure and is more likely to be a comprehensive model that could work in rural schools.

EAP staff should have education and mental health experience as indicated by Ramatsea (2000). Masi (1992) distinguishes between two service options: An in-house model with all functions contracted out on a per capita basis. Secondly, the fee for services model is based on the total number of employees in the company regardless of how many people use the programme and the frequency with which they use it.

CONCLUSIONS

The school environment in a rural and developing context appears to be complicated by day-to-day social conditions in the environment, school setting, management system and behavioural aspects. Rural teachers appear to be equally subjected to these conditions of the rural context. The developing nature of local communities requires a highly adaptive educational system; one that promotes governance that is guided by day to day demands rather than fixed cognitive models as in developed school environments. Harber and Davies (1997) regard urban schools as more stable than rural schools because a different learning culture exists in the urban environment.

It is likely that a blended EAP model focused on both personal and workplace issues are more feasible. It should also focus on learner management issues by intervening at the interface between teachers and learners; school management issues and teacher support. It should either directly or indirectly contribute to the development of a learning culture in the community. In our assessment, boundaries between the school in the rural context and the child’s social

environment tend to be rather vague. Issues such as early female pregnancy, political riots and violence, agricultural cycles and its demands and cultural beliefs and assumptions are some of the environmental constraints preventing effective education. These aspects seem to add to an unstable teaching culture in the school. At worst these factors, although related to children in the school setting, contributes to disruption in teaching, which eventually results in a problem to be solved by the teacher.

Harber and Davies (1997) attribute much of the inefficiency of school management to authoritarianism stemming from traditional power relations, whilst administrative management remained a latent function often neglected or sporadically engaged with. In our view, the chosen EAP model should address both issues of workplace organisation and management, develop more effective and transformed school systems and not only respond to teacher personal problems.

On-site counselors would have to familiarise themselves with the realities of the rural school context, and get into a far better position to adjust interventions to address both personal and school environment issues. A customised EAP model could assist the school environment in effectively transforming a tradition driven authoritarian school management culture into a modernised democratic and empowering system.

The rural school environment appears to be affected by a complex array of social conditions, such as the (1) rural environmental context and its lack of development, (2) conditions of the general school system and the way these are managed and the role of (3) personal circumstances and problems of teachers in rural contexts. A comprehensive multi-intervention on-site EAP model would be far more effective in addressing the complexities of the rural school environment than a limited information-referral system traditionally found in work environments. The following taxonomy presents needs and levels of services provided by a comprehensive multi-intervention on-site EAP model.

Table 1: Areas to be addressed by rural school environment EAP services

Areas of rural school environment problems		
<p>Teacher-learner interface</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor school attendance by learners • Weak discipline of rural learners • Lack of parental belief in value of education • Interference of environmental conditions such as transportation problems, parental work demands, agricultural cycles and community events such as protest action 	<p>Teacher-personal interface</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal financial problems • Personal psychosocial problems such as depression and family problems • Managing stress related to working in complex school environments. 	<p>Teacher-work environment conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of teaching resources such as laboratory equipment • Inexperienced principals • Inadequate school management • Low salaries and payment problems • Weak communication structures from dept of education • Unfamiliar curriculum
Levels of EAP intervention		
<p>Teacher-learner interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EAP counselor acts as interface between teachers and learners in school environment • EAP assists in structuring the school environment by creating communication and feedback channels and arrange disciplinary structures and procedures • EAP acts as communication channel between school and community. 	<p>Teacher-personal interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional role of EAP as on site counseling mechanism for teaching staff to address their personal problems. • May include counseling services to learners as well. • Combined EAP and school social work role • Financial planning, stress management and other counseling methods 	<p>Teacher-work environment interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EAP counselor acts as interface and communication channel between school and education department. • Facilitates training and orientation of teachers regarding curriculum issues and assessment strategies • Personnel motivation by means of team building sessions, • Motivational interventions and problem solving sessions. Peer group supervision • Development of school management structures and activities

The taxonomy on page 224 indicates at least three areas of intervention over and above staff counselling, namely, the community, the teacher-learner interface, personal level and the teacher-school environment. EAP counsellors in this model should do more than counselling by fulfilling roles of advocate, communicator, consultant, trainer and facilitator.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the many problems that exist in rural schools we offer more long term guidelines for improving conditions in rural schools.

- Management and unions should work hand in hand for the establishment of this programme and should also budget for its sustainability.
- An educational EAP model in the rural context should consist of a blend of focus on counseling teachers; improving the school social environment by means of training and community-based interventions in the school as community; improving school management systems and developing a culture of learning in the environment surrounding the school. Such model could be termed a comprehensive or blended EAP model.
- An on-site EAP model is recommended where schools are visited by staff to implement comprehensive strategies reactive to social conditions and social developmental needs in the school environment. An off-site model that is only counseling orientated would not be feasible. Implementation would further depend on effective marketing since many school employees have little knowledge about the EAP concept. However, an EAP could be introduced by offering school social work services first of all and allows the EAP to grow into a comprehensive model over time.
- The proposed Educational EAP model should clearly indicate areas of intervention and should be based on a thorough understanding of the complexities of the rural school environment. Such model requires appropriately skilled staff to work in that environment.
- The development of teachers and school environments is a multi-disciplinary field in which the educational system through teaching support should take a prominent position (Malada, 2004). An educational EAP system should act as facilitators and share responsibility in development efforts for teachers at rural schools.

The study confirmed the need for a comprehensive EAP model. Whether the will and the budgetary requirements exist to turn the idea of an Educational EAP into reality are an open question.

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