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Promoting gender inclusion in a distance learning course to increase female recruitment to teaching

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MALAWI CONTEXT

Primary school enrolment in Malawi for both boys and girls has increased dramatically over the last twenty years since the abolition of primary school tuition fees (51% increase, World Bank – UNICEF, 2009). There is now parity between the number of boys and girls who start school (UNESCO, 2012) but this is not reflected in a sustained transformation in female educational achievement. Huge challenges remain; in each school grade fewer girls remain in school and they make less progress than their male peers (UNESCO, 2011; Brookings, 2012). In common with many other Africa countries gender disparities are greatest in rural areas (UNESCO, 2012). Several factors have been suggested as contributing to this perpetuation of female under achievement including gendered school experiences and the absence of women teachers (Chisamya et al, 2012; Kamwendo, 2010). Schemes for increasing the number of women teachers have been implemented across the region, principally focussing on encouraging qualified females to migrate to rural areas and integrate into community life, but with little sustained success (Casely-Hayford, 2008).

The MATSS programme described here (Malawi Access to Teaching Scholarship Scheme) tries a different approach, working with women in rural communities to support development of their capabilities to become teachers in their own communities. It utilises distance learning to offer high levels of support and situated learning experiences to empower rural women to gain qualifications, experience and confidence to apply for formal teacher training. The programme aspires to position rural women as successful academic learners and hence disrupt the cycle of low academic success for females. The programme fits with global aims and is congruent with local policies to increase female enrolment in teacher training (MOEST, 2008).

MATSS PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

Combining distance learning study of academic subjects with practical experience in a primary school, MATSS offers a structured pathway into teaching for women who may have become marginalised from formal learning, not only by being female and rural but also by their age and life circumstances. The first cohort (500 women) started in April 2011 in 4 districts –Dedza and Ntichisi (Central Malawi) and Mwanza and Chikhwawa (Southern Malawi). The programme was designed by the Open University, UK (OU) in partnership with the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi (FAWEMA) with funding from the Scottish Government.

During their year on the programme participants, called 'scholars', spend four days each week in a local primary school working alongside the teacher in a Standard 1/ 2 class guided by a School Experience handbook (available as OER – Open Educational Resources). They are positioned both to support pupil learning and as role models for girl pupils whilst gaining valuable experience to equip them for the realities of classroom life when they commence formal teacher training (Akyeampong & Stevens, 2002). A qualified teacher in the primary school provides mentor support, meeting with them regularly to discuss progress and issues including completion of School Experience handbook activities and importantly, mediates with the class teacher to ensure that the scholar is undertaking appropriate activities (Safford et al, 2012).

Alongside the school experience scholars study for their MSCE (Malawi School Certificate of Education) in the core subjects (English, Physical Science, Biology and Maths) through open distance learning. Study is supported by highly structured OER - developed with teacher educators and teachers in Malawi, and through regular face –to –face tutorials. Tutors are local secondary school teachers experience of teaching for the MSCE in English or Maths / Science. Tutorial groups meet each week at the local Teachers Development Centre or secondary school and tutors work alternative weeks. There are few female teachers in rural secondary schools in Malawi consequently in the first year of the programme only 2 (from 40) tutors were female. The distance learning OER adopt a highly participatory approach, developing skills and knowledge through frequent practical activities complemented with reflective writing tasks and prompts for interactions with peers, relations and friends. They aspire to position scholars as mature learners with extensive funds of knowledge to draw on (Bruner, 1996).

Each term scholars attend a district induction meeting to feedback on programme working and to receive materials and a bursary designed to cover expenses relating to personal hygiene, travel and communication.

ENQUIRY FOCUS

Much work on gender equality in education has focussed on the quantitative dimensions of girls' school enrolment, with material responses or incentives such as conditional cash transfers and female only spaces (Cameron, 2013). Recent work extends this agenda to identify classroom approaches to gender equality (UNESCO, 2004) and develop models of 'gender sensitive' classrooms (FAWE, 2005). But there has been little in-depth consideration of what schools, or other institutions concerned with formal learning, offer to female students in practice – how constructs of gender mediate the detail of classroom / tutorial interactions to support or hinder participation in the social practices of learning (Arnot & Fennell, 2008).

MATSS designers adopted a socio-cultural stance drawing on the work of Wenger and using the notion of learning as 'becoming' and 'belonging' (Murphy, 2008), involving transformation of identity. Identity for the scholar is seen as emerging through interactions with her teachers / tutors and her peers within a particular setting and influenced by her previous history of participation in learning and the practices, social structures and relations in the wider society. These include cultural scripts about how people relate and operate and gender associations of particular subjects. Gender is understood as a social construct that is dynamic and emergent, open to the possibility of change rather than being a fixed attribute of an individual.

Our interest here is the MSCE study; the practices tutors bring to the programme, their views and preconceptions of the scholars and the possibilities made available to scholars for academic learning, a problematizing of the practices of the tutors in relation to gender equity. Tutor practices are central to programme success; for the scholars their participation in activities and the meanings they negotiate will be highly influenced by interactions with their tutor and their tutor's views of learning, pedagogy and knowledge. Ensuring alignment of programme design and enactment demands we pay attention to tutor practices to ensure these do not sustain conditions which limit female empowerment but are consistent with the learning approach of the OER. Our aim is to understand how the tutors link identity, schooling and knowledge and to work with them to think critically about pedagogic to guide recommendations for moving forward, supporting emerging discourses which empower and develop the capabilities of the scholars.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

MATSS design included generating data at regular points to support iterative improvements in the programme delivery and funder reporting. Data drawn on here is from the early stages of the programme (April 2011 – April 2012) and includes the perspectives of tutors and scholars.

A multi-stage process was used to select cohort 1 scholars; all applicants who met the criteria for age, residency and prior educational experience were invited to a local recruitment centre to undertake an extended written task and a short interview with a female interview panel (FAWEMA and local NGOs) to verify their identity and assess their fluency in English. Applications for all 500 scholars were analysed, in a few cases analysis was hindered by difficulties in interpreting handwriting, weak use of English grammar and the lack of opportunity to clarify applicant responses.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out with scholars by the UK project team at induction events, focussing on previous life experiences, aspirations and the kind of student teacher they hoped to become. Interviewees were selected to cover a range of ages and prior educational experiences. Interviewer's 'outsider' status and use of English may have conditioned responses. All interviews were recorded and full transcripts produced.

Further analysis derives from a data set for 14 tutors; applications, scholar feedback - scholars complete a termly self-report on experiences and progress and from two workshops facilitated by the UK project team during this period. Scholar feedback in term 1 revealed tremendous variation in tutorial experiences; some tutors were described as offering encouragement, supporting study skills activities, focussing on difficult topics and 'not biased'; other tutors were said to be insufficiently interested and 'mocking' scholars. Subsequent workshops for tutors explored and challenged their expectations of and approaches with scholars.

The Scholars

Scholars ranged in age from 18 to 42 years with 75% in their twenties. Prior to programme start few scholars (less than 5%) were in formal employment, most were engaged in farm, domestic or market activities. Entry to Teacher Training College in Malawi requires 6 recent passes at MSCE including English, Maths and a Science (Biology, Physical or Agricultural Science). All scholars had previously achieved some MSCE passes but achievement was uneven across subjects; 152 passes in Maths, 77 in Physical Science but 449 in English. School attendance for many scholars had been interrupted or abruptly curtailed due to insufficient family funds for school fees or caring responsibilities. Scholars reside in economically poor rural areas, usually without electricity and many walk several kilometres to their placement school.

The tutors

The 14 tutors in our data set are all male, aged between 19 and 46 years and qualified with a Diploma in Education, four also hold a Bachelor's degree in Education. All teach in secondary schools with MSCE teaching experience from 2 to 22 years. Many tutors have involvement in leading or facilitating learning outside formal schooling through church or night classes although only one tutor had any prior experience of distance learning.

DISCUSSION

Experiences of learning and teaching

Scholar interviews and applications reveal multiple tensions within their gendered identity. Aspirations to be a primary teacher are congruent with a contextualised ideology which positions women in the domestic domain as care givers. The social construction of primary teachers, particularly working with younger children, is synonymous with constructs of female as caring, nurturing and containing: 'I will be able to handle them [primary school children] as I do with my children so it will be easy for me' (scholar M); 'A good teacher must have a hard working spirit and she has to have motherly love for the young ones.' (scholar F).

But this is not uncontested; emerging identity as a primary school teacher can threaten traditional patterns of female family and community participation. Several scholars describe family pressure to

abandon the programme to get married or earn money in the market and the project team receive a number of requests to talk to scholars' families to support them in their desire to remain on the programme.

And whilst the role of primary teacher can be encompassed within the female reproductive sphere, achieving the qualifications necessary to **become** a teacher requires academic success across a range of subjects. This challenges traditional community discourse - females as homemakers, and scholars' own previous positioning as learners, particularly in subjects such as maths and science where they have experienced little success, over 80% of the cohort identify maths as their weakest school subject; these identities of incompetence have implications for future participation in these subjects.

Scholars' accounts of their schooling include accounts of under qualified, absent or drunk teachers and lack of encouragement or impatience from their teacher particularly in maths and science, contributing to their position as 'outsiders' in these subjects as they progressed into secondary education in contrast to their experiences at primary school. The small number of scholars whose previous participation in science and maths had been more positive recollected teachers who recognised the validity of their voice and offered them space to explore their thinking.

For many scholars the lived experience of being female at secondary school acted against developing identity as a successful independent learner. Being female was associated with cultural signs of femininity - paying attention to fashion and grooming to impress others, and to relationships with boys -often resulting in pregnancy forcing them to leave school. Being female also involved either undertaking domestic chores or tolerating difficult conditions 'most students sleeping on the floor' (scholar P). The discourse of poverty is interwoven with that of being female, 'sometimes my friends they have come with new clothes.... so when we look at ourselves we just feel that we are poor so sometimes we always think about that. Even think about that in class so you can't hear what your teachers are saying' (scholar Ph).

But scholars suggest MATSS offers an opportunity to be a different kind of student, motivated by the practical realities of supporting dependents as these scholars explain, 'I don't want to waste any minute in doing something useless. My model is to study.' (scholar M) and 'I have faced the problems I can see in the past, but now I can see... my future. I can play the game to succeed.' (scholar Ph). These scholars are resisting constructions female learners, 'when I finish this scholarship I'll have my own money to buy anything I want to help myself and my family too' (scholar C).

Tutors' descriptions of effective teaching include mentions of various techniques associated with a more participatory pedagogy - 'guided discovery learning', use of physical examples to help explain abstract concepts and student collaboration. But for most these are lonely examples in a discourse focussed on learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills independent of context and intention with the teacher / tutor responsible for good time management to ensure syllabus coverage and for accurate transmission of knowledge. Certified subject knowledge is seen as critical for appointment, one tutor expressed this as to 'come in fast to correct them and direct them'. This view is not unexpected given the narrow definition of achievement and emphasis on knowledge recall in Malawi examinations.

When discussing the scholars' lives and achievements tutors acknowledged the influence of social positioning on their female learners' experiences of school. Older tutors in particular foregrounded issues of pregnancy, parental expectations - early marriage and caring for relatives, shortage of time to study and lack of role models as explanations for prior lack of success. Scholars were usually referred to as a homogenous group with little recognition of individual life experiences and funds of knowledge - one tutor commented 'over staying out of school has caused them to be low in receiving information'. In moving forward tutors focussed on exploring, or even challenging, family and community expectations of female achievement but always alongside implementing improvements

in scholars' management of academic and domestic tasks. Whilst many younger tutors recognised that poor conditions in schools might impact on the quality of learning, this was not felt to contribute specifically to lower female achievement. Only two tutors made any reference to teacher' practices possibly inhibiting female learning.

Disturbing pedagogy

The project workshop approach impressed tutors; they were surprised that project facilitators acknowledged imperfections in the programme and created space for constructive criticism. This 'greater openness to other ways of doing things' and the emphasis on learning from each other was evidently new to many tutors and offered them valued insights into the approach embedded within the OER. In follow-up many tutors expressed the intention to develop their tutorials to be 'less one-sided', to acknowledge and listen to scholars' points of view through planning tutorial activities which allowed for greater scholar participation, 'I am ready to act differently – involving scholars much'. They reported having learnt about the purpose and organisation of techniques such as group discussion and mindmapping.

Tutorial discussions feature more prominently in subsequent scholar feedback on both maths / science and English sessions, some tutors are valuing scholars' contributions and surprising themselves with the success of this sharing of thinking, 'I enjoyed most the way the scholars were interacting with one another and with me as' and from another tutor 'the participation of the scholars in the tutorials was marvellous'. Tutors take great pride in planning tutorials carefully and are now observed building in time for scholar questions and requests for clarification, rather than always perceiving these as evidence of insufficient scholar effort. Tutors and scholars are beginning to recognise the value for learning of multiple interactions including peer interactions through small group discussions. With some tutors there is a shift to participation being more evenly distributed across tutor and scholars, one tutor describes this as 'giving a much greater focus on the scholars doing the work rather than the tutor'. Others talk of giving scholars opportunities to explore problems and 'come up with results on their own' and listening to locate problems and assist scholars to achieve their individual goals, '...someone who didn't know little to realise that she can know more by doing things themselves'. Tutor discourse begins to recognise the diversity of learners within their groups.

These shifts in pedagogy are modest, there is still much discussion of 'methods of imparting knowledge' but tutors are beginning to position the scholars as knowledgeable and to allow them space for taking ownership of their own learning, reflected in some scholar's expressions of greater confidence across all subjects.

TAKING PRACTICE FORWARD

The approach of this programme has perhaps more in common with adult literacy programmes than formal school education (Cameron, 2013). But to be successful it needs to bridge these two dichotomies; tutors work across both environments and scholars are on a trajectory to be a school professional. The programme provides space for female learners but without disrupting and reshaping tutorial practices, scholars may struggle to become successful confident learners. Through the materials and work with tutors we are beginning to see shifts in practices which are opening up opportunities for participation by all scholars and the possibility of negotiating change in their identity of competence. Analysis of further data will explore the extent to which the programme practices are allowing scholars to find their own legitimate peripheral positions (Lave & Wenger 1991, in Murphy 2008). This is critical to both success of this programme and a similar programme now being implemented in Sierra Leone as part of DfID's Girls Education Challenge.

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