

Supporting vulnerable learners in Lesotho Education System: The case of Lekhalong Combined School

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Abstract

This article explores a dissonance between the way reports published by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), explain how schools are supported and empowered to be inclusive of learners with barriers to learning and development, and perception that teachers, in one school, have of the support to vulnerable learners. A qualitative approach was used to gather and analyse data, and results indicate that the MOET documents learners' registration annually, including learners with disability and orphans, and spends huge sums of money on bursaries and book subsidies. The Ministry's records also show training of teachers on counselling as it plans to establish support structures from schools to the Ministry headquarters. However, teachers deny receiving any training on counselling and yearn for any form of support from MOET: schools lack systematic methods of assessing learners' needs, and psycho-social support to learners is not only minimal but also lacks continuity. Teachers mostly focus on their teaching load in overcrowded classes while mostly oblivious of learners' individual psycho-social needs. It is recommended that the MOET develop clear policy guidelines on psychosocial support to vulnerable learners, provide requisite resources for such support and devise mechanisms to assess efficiency of such support.

Keywords: *assessment, empowerment, inclusion, psycho-social support, resources, vulnerable learners*

Introduction

The 21st century school has a mandate to respond to learner diversity within the community it serves. It is this attempt to accommodate all learners that is termed inclusive education. UNESCO (2004 as quoted in Westwood, 2007:3) defines inclusive education as "a developmental approach seeking to address the learning needs of all children, youth and adults with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion". Inclusive schools are to support all aspects of a learner's development and address the contribution, whether positive or negative, of various contexts in which learners find themselves (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). Research indicates that, "social background remains one of the major sources of educational inequality" (Graetz, 1995 cited in Considine & Zappala, 2002:91), and many countries consider vulnerable children as Learners with Special Education Needs (LSEN). In the prelude to developing the national policy on special needs education in South Africa, the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) & National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS) (1997) recommended that effects of negative socio-economic factors be addressed within education as they formed some of the multiple barriers to learning and development. This study recognizes vulnerable children as "those whose rights to survival, development, protection and participation are not met because of certain conditions or circumstances beyond their individual control", (Ministry of Social Development, 2012:6). Three concepts in this study have a related meaning namely, learners with "special education needs" or "barriers to learning and development" and "vulnerable" learners. Barriers to learning are any contextual disadvantages which hinder a learner from accessing educational provision fully and lead to learning breakdown (Weeks & Erradu, 2013).

The following are previous policy initiatives in Lesotho: 1989 policy statement on special needs education (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1989) and the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2005-2015

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(Ministry of Education and Training [MOET], 2005). These policies focused on overcoming effects of disability in learners' education in exclusion of other barriers to learning and development such as teachers' attitudes, socio-economic status, inflexible curriculum, etc. For instance, the third goal of the policy statement reads:

MOE will ensure that each disabled Mosotho child completes a 7-year primary course, trains for an occupation and/or participates in the technical vocational education according to his/her needs and interests... (MOE, 1989:13).

Similarly, the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) outlines learners who need support in mainstream schools as:

those who have physical and sensory impairments as well as those with learning difficulties, the gifted and talented, intellectually disabled/mental retardation and those with behavioural disorders (MOET, 2005:106).

These policy initiatives have tried to address the fact that previous education provision was discriminatory and excluded people with disability from pursuing formal education even if they had cognitive abilities to do so. Therefore, the MOET has made attempts to redress the situation.

The new Curriculum and Assessment Policy – CAP (MOET, 2009) is an indication of the Ministry of Education and Training's commitment to include all learners as it shifts from the examination-oriented curriculum that seemed to select society's elites by 'separating grain from chaff'. It advocates for support to all learners through mechanisms such as the use of continuous assessment and assessment for learning; inclusion of life skills as a core subject to enhance learners' personal and social development. The policy also encourages promotion of learners' "psycho-social skills to deal with personal and social developmental challenges" (MOET, 2009:12). This curriculum policy was later enforced by the Education Act (MOET, 2010:164) which expected the education system to ensure a healthy environment in which learners can 'develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially'. However, it could be argued that implementation of the CAP may face similar challenges which research on other policies of the Ministry highlight below.

The implementation of the 1989 special education policy was hampered by deficient teacher training, under-resourced Special Education Unit – SEU leading to poor monitoring of progress in schools (Chataika, Mckenzie, Swart & Lyner-Cleophas, 2012). Johnstone and Chapman (2009) concur and indicate that teachers are overwhelmed by the support needs of LSEN causes by poor support and surveillance from SEU. Shelile and Hlalele (2014) comment on the following problems of inclusive education in Lesotho: they lament how shortage of staff in the SEU negatively affects continuing professional teacher training; focus, in the policy, on disability as the only form of barrier and high learner: teacher ratios all impede inclusive initiatives. Other studies indicate that support to LSEN in Lesotho is also inhibited by, among others, lack of engagement of paraprofessional such as psychologists, social workers etc. in education support by MOET, inadequate resources dedicated to special needs support at secondary school level and therefore inadequately prepared staff for psychosocial support to vulnerable learners at this level (Lehohla & Hlalele, 2014; Mosia, 2014). The current study seeks to examine how inclusive education for learners facing barriers to learning and development other than disability is implemented.

A bio-ecological perspective of human development

Human development is influenced by continuous interactions between individuals' innate characteristics and unique environmental influences (Johnson, 2008). The interactions produce effective results if they are constant and on a one-to-one basis among parent-child, child-child and teacher-learner relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner refers to these continuous interactions as proximal processes. Different role players in a child's life act independently in various contexts called microsystems (school, family, peer group, etc.) but they have a possibility of balancing each other's effects (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For instance, a child who is emotionally abused at home may find comfort in the support provided

by teachers and develop 'normally'. For the fruition of proximal processes in teacher-learner relations there is need to have low learner-teacher ratios. Research has established that, "Genetic endowment and ecological experiences interact to determine human functioning and developmental outcomes such as learning" (Smith, 2011:3). It can, therefore, be argued that the developmental needs of all learners and LSEN, in particular, cannot be sufficiently met in "overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms" (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002:206).

Vulnerable learners are already disadvantaged by their socio-economic environments and therefore schools, if they identify them, can and should alleviate such effects. Aviles, Anderson and Davila (2006) argue that schools have great potential to nurture learners' emotional development, and affect academic achievement positively. However, the goal can only be realized if teachers are aware that their duties extend beyond subject content delivery (Aviles et al., 2006). Teachers' awareness of their responsibility to vulnerable learners can be inspired by clear school policy and committed school management. Walton (2010) argues that inclusive schools are characterized by strong leadership, teacher commitment and parental involvement. Walton's (2010) study cites an example of a school which established a feeding scheme to address needs of underprivileged learners. The school acknowledged that learners were more than their cognitive abilities and that their unmet physical needs could hamper their academic progress. Many learners do cope without such support from teachers because they are resilient as proximal processes within peer groups may also act as a shield against these negative family experiences (Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge & Lapp, 2002).

The number of learners negatively affected by psycho-social challenges is said to be high in Lesotho. Children assume parental responsibilities as a result of high HIV/AIDS-related mortality rates in adults (Makatjane, Lebuso, Maseribane & Mokhorro, 2009), and schools can protect them from resultant undesirable effects of orphanhood and poverty. According to Urwick and Elliott (2010) orphans and poor children in Lesotho are likely to be the biggest category of learners with special education needs, as the group is vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems. Considine and Zappala (2002:92) concur that learners from underprivileged environments have: 1) lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension; 2) lower retention rates (leave school early); 3) lower secondary education participation rates; 4) higher levels of problematic school behaviour (truancy); less likely to study specialized Mathematics and Science subjects and more likely to have difficulties in their studies and display negative attitudes to school.

Support initiatives by MOET

Data from the Ministry of Education and Training's annual Education Statistics Bulletins show that the number of orphans at primary level remained at about 30 percent of the total enrolment for three years while the percentage is slightly higher at 39 percent at secondary school level (MOET's Education Statistics Bulletins 2009, 2010 & 2011). To address the challenges, the MOET spends huge sums of money on bursaries for students at secondary level. In 2009 and 2010 MOET spent M65,926,065.87 and M65,294,250.00, respectively, on bursaries (MOET, 2013). The Medium Term Education Sector Plan 2009-2012 concurs and records the following achievements: 1) the introduction of a bursary scheme for Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). Thirty-two percent receive free basic support; 2) subsidized textbook provision for all students at primary and secondary levels; 3) a school feeding scheme which aims at ensuring that all children have at least one meal a day; 4) provision of First Aid Kits to schools; 5) integration of HIV and AIDS issues as part of life skills education curriculum at both primary and secondary school levels; 6) training of teachers, with particular focus on lay-counselling and provision of psycho-social support to learners, etc. (MOET, 2009:77). The MOET acknowledged the negative effects of high learner-teacher ratios on the quality of education and committed reducing it to 25:1 by 2009 (MOET, 2005). The MOET's (2011) bulletin stated that on average there were about 30 learners to one teacher at primary level and 24.9 learners to one teacher at secondary level. Although this denotes some achievement of the Ministry's targets, reality may not be similar in every school. In fact, the Ministry of Social Development (2012) perceives psychosocial support for vulnerable children to be generally unplanned and haphazard

across all service providers and teachers are specifically cited as inadequately equipped to provide psychosocial support to learners.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to explore key experiences of teachers in their attempts to identify and support vulnerable learners. Case studies are mostly qualitative and less concerned with generalizability of study results (Schensul, 2012). As a case study, researchers identified 'units of analyses' in the school so as to highlight nuances in each of the units (Gray, 2009:170). As the study was conducted in a combined school teachers were selected as a major unit from which to collect data, but the unit was further divided according to levels of study, primary and secondary, in order to find out if there was any distinction in experiences between teachers at either level.

Sample and sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select Lekhalong combined school. Lekhalong combined school is one of the many recently established government schools in Lesotho which were built in response to overcrowding caused by introduction of Free Primary Education in 2000. It caters for students from pre-school through to Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education (LGCSE). The school is situated about 8 km South-East of Maseru town Centre. Researchers used convenience sampling to select teachers, both at primary and secondary, for participation in the study. Sampling for participating teachers at the two levels continued until a point of 'saturation' where researchers found no new information revealed by addition of new participants (Kelly, 2006:372). Five teachers were interviewed at primary level, including the principal, making 25 percent of the primary school teaching staff. At secondary school level seven teachers, including the deputy principal, were interviewed making 28 percent of the total teaching staff.

Data collection

Data for the study was collected through analysis of school records about learners' enrolment and welfare as well as in-depth interviews with teachers. The interviews were all audio-recorded. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes to 35 minutes depending on individual participants' amount of information on the subject. The first interviews revealed ideas that researchers explored further with subsequent participants.

Data analysis

An interpretive approach was used to analyse the data. Data from interviews was transcribed verbatim, the researchers familiarised themselves with data and scrutinized it for emerging themes. Data from interviews was compared with the one from document analysis, and qualitative content analysis was used to summarise emerging themes under different subheadings formulated from data interpretation and analysis. An effort was made in the content analysis to interpret underlying messages hence the breaking down of data into different themes (Sandelowski, 2000).

Ethical considerations

Authors sought permissions to conduct this study from the relevant authorities in the Ministry of Education and Training and in the school. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality; in writing this paper a pseudo name was used instead of the school's real name. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily.

Findings

Learner-teacher ratios

With the exception of the principal and the deputy principal at primary and secondary school levels respectively, all research participants indicated that high learner-teacher ratios in the school negatively affected the quality of their work with learners. In 2013 there were twenty teachers deployed for 921 learners at the primary level. A superficial look at learner (921) and staff (20) enrolments paints a positive

picture of 46:1 learner-teacher ratio. However, the distribution of learners within the school presents a challenge: grade one had 142 learners divided into two streams and each stream had one teacher. If the teacher has to follow an individual learners' development path in a class of 71 learners, the task is near impossible given the time for various learning areas and attention span of six-year-olds. Grades 2 and 4 had almost the same number of learners, 129 and 128 respectively that were divided into two streams; 64 learners per teacher is too high for effective teaching. Grade three had the highest ratio of 80:1 as one hundred and sixty-one learners were divided into two streams each manned by one teacher. In subsequent classes the situation was relatively better but still unfavourable for effective for one-to-one interaction between and the learners.

Similarly, learner-teacher ratios were high at high school level. In 2013 there were 1408 students taught by 25 teachers. Unlike their primary counterparts, secondary school teachers appear to be overloaded; when learner enrolment is divided evenly among teachers, there are more than 50 learners per teacher. Once again, this shallow look at learner-teacher ratios is deceptive and renders the situation more hopeful than it is. Although it may be possible but it would be difficult for teachers to effectively identify learners who encounter barriers to learning and development in their classrooms when class sizes are too big. Out of 1408, four hundred and seventy-two learners separated into three streams of Form A class. There were 157 learners in each of the three Form A classes. The classrooms were congested, and there was no aisle for teachers to move and observe learner behaviour closely. The desks could not be rearranged for group work because there was little space to alter class sitting arrangement. In subsequent classes the situation was the same. Three hundred and eighty-one form B learners were allocated into three streams, and there were 127 learners in each class. Form C had 254 learners and 85 learners per class. One hundred and forty-one learners in Form Ds were distributed into two streams to make 71 learners in each class and finally, 160 learners in Form E were apportioned into two streams to make about 80 learners per stream. One wonders as to who is to blame for this overcrowding, the school management for admitting beyond their resources or MOET for not increasing the school resources? The school's learner population has not increased magically in a single year; there is a clear growth pattern of learner population at both levels recorded over five years.

Teachers' perception of vulnerable learners

Teachers at both primary and secondary school levels understand that learners can be made vulnerable by their psycho-social challenges or unmet physical needs. In response to the question, 'who is a vulnerable child in your school?', some teachers stated: "Double orphans or some have both parents but [are] so poor or sick that they are useless in supporting them"; According to some teachers MOET and Ministry of Social Development (MOSED) determine eligibility for grants that pay for learners' book and school fees but parents' illness and poverty are not plausible reasons for grants. Another participant indicated: "...Children can still have parents but be vulnerable because parents abused them"; this indicated acknowledgement by teachers that learners suffer emotionally as a result of negative family environment. Without exception teachers indicated that extreme poverty leads majority of learners to be vulnerable. They stated that social disadvantage results in learners not being able to meet schools needs such as uniform, books or school fees at secondary level and these economic challenges might lead to poor self-concept. The poor self-perception could result in low achievement in academic skills as explained below.

Identification and assessment of learners

Participants at both levels were asked as to how vulnerable learners are identified. Some participants at primary level stated: "At the beginning of the year, each teacher can see that this one is sick, lonely, destitute.... Even older ones in class 7, one [can] see that the student is not similar to last year"; "There is a register that teachers fill which indicates when the learner arrived in the school and whether they have both parents..."; "You find a child [who is] intelligent but their school performance is not constant". Teachers at primary school level, as the preceding responses state, were all confident that they can identified vulnerable learners. They also believed that their approach was a unified, whole-school approach.

Conversely, responses from secondary school teachers were mixed: “We don’t have a system of assessment, it’s teachers who do it in classrooms according to how they perceive children”; “Some of them are identified through absenteeism, then we ask learners who are neighbours to inquire”; “some approach you, ‘sir I’ve not eaten, may I have M2.00 to buy fat cakes?’”. It was found that individual teachers identify learners not as a matter of policy and/or systematic practice, but in a personal, ad hoc manner.

One teacher, at secondary school level, recounts how a colleague identified a girl who lived alone in her home and a female neighbour would entice her to prostitute herself with the neighbours’ male friends. The shortfall is that the teachers who identified this case of child abuse did not make any effort to stop it. Given participants’ responses above, identification is easy and doable but it is not systematic and may not be accurate to inform individual learners support needs. While the school leadership at both levels acknowledged submission of annual statistical return to MOET, the information itself is not used for learner support in the school. There is no formal assessment of learners’ needs with intention to provide support. Results do not show major distinctions in how vulnerable learners are identified at both levels because assessment at both levels is not mandatory. Further probe into how assessment is done revealed more challenges as stated below.

As noted that learner-teacher ratios at both school levels were high, teachers were asked how easy it was to identify vulnerable learners. The following responses ensued: “Such a child looks different”; “They are not able to stick to a task and frequently lose focus”; “If you realize the kind of clothes they wear and the way they eat, they eat more food than their age-mates”. There is confidence displayed in the foregoing responses by primary school teachers. However, responses from secondary school counterparts were mixed: “There are some [who], while in the school assembly, just fall down”; “The reason we don’t have a record [of vulnerable children] is that most of them are like that, it would be keeping the record of the whole school”; “It becomes obvious when [learners are] expelled for school fees, majority of them stay at home”; “Looking at teachers themselves, some of them used to have difficult childhood like their learners so they would know signs”; “It is not easy, if they were 30 or 40 in class I would. One student in school choir missed practice...I went to her home... when I arrived I got the answer right at the door without asking...I would not have identified her problem in class if I didn’t know her closely in school choir”. These responses corroborate each other in that teachers at secondary level manage to identify severe incidents because the occurrences unavoidably presented themselves publicly. However, some learners’ psycho-social problems could be ignored due to lack of a school policy mandating teacher to do so and/ or overcrowding in classrooms.

Teachers admitted there were vulnerable learners in their school, and they also acknowledged how the effects could negatively affect learners’ emotional and physical development. They dressed unsuitably, ate more than was appropriate for their age level, fainted at the school assembly, etc. teachers were further asked how such learners’ vulnerable status affected their academic progress. Participants responded thus: “Vulnerable children are intelligent...But gradually underperform, it depends on the severity of the problem”; “They normally lose focus of their task...”; “You find a child intelligent but their school performance is not constant”; “They are different you know, there are some who are vulnerable but do not concentrate on their situation...good performers are boys, girls mostly cry and fail to accept comfort from peers”; “I’ve seen that their performance goes down especially in external examinations”. Despite learners being able to cope, their challenges ultimately affected their academic work negatively. Resilience was perceived to be more characteristic of boys than girls, and this was interpreted as a result of boys’ acceptance of peer support. It could also be deduced from participants’ responses that vulnerable learners were hard workers so much that in many cases they outperformed their ‘normal’ peers. If teachers understood that vulnerable learners had problems and some fainted in assemblies if their problems were not identified in time, what kind support did teachers give these learners?

Support for learners

Results of the study reveal that teachers made efforts to give food and provide material support to learners identified as vulnerable. There were school-initiated campaigns at both school levels to implore other learners and organizations outside the school to donate clothes and uniform for vulnerable learners. At primary level, as MOET ensures that learners have at least one meal per school day, teachers filled identified learners' lunch-boxes with food from surplus of their daily meals to eat in the evening. The secondary school also started that a 'soup kitchen' in 2010 which MOET supported with subvention but the initiative stopped when MOET cut such fund in 2011. These initiatives are laudable and can indeed alleviate much suffering for identified learners but as indicated, there was no formal mechanism of assessment at both levels and there were no formal records kept of all identified learners. While some go unidentified, identified learners were 'lost' in the school masses. Teachers' support was mainly material and less or hardly psycho-social. So, what did the sole focus on learners' material needs mean for their emotional development and health?

Teachers responded to the question, 'How does the school or you support vulnerable learners?', and the responses read: "When there is a needy child, one would bring old shoes from their own child or buy them shoes or uniform"; "There is no programme of support at all"; "I don't know anything ... I have not realized any support"; "You find that in social clubs like Scouts she becomes free..."; "Life skills, after teaching them the course they were more self-accepting"; "Because of overload... you tend to overlook so much [of their problems]"; "When you give support to one learner, it is as if you love them more than others... learners tell each other and you receive client after client". At the centre of teachers' support, at both levels of education, was provision for material needs. There were only two teachers who gave alternative responses: one indicated importance of social clubs in learners' psycho-social health while another stated that life skills subject was critical. The rest of the participants had to be asked a direct question about social clubs, counselling initiatives or life skills as a means of support. It was not surprising therefore that learners felt teachers were bias because help came in the form of teachers buying clothes, sharing their lunch, or giving money to identified learners. When asked if MOET provided any support, through training in counselling or referral to its offices for identified learners, all teachers said NO. It was also found that support on academic skills was likely to be ineffective given learners' numbers in individual classes; teachers stated that even group work was not as effective because groups become either too big or too many.

Discussion

This study revealed that the education system in Lesotho is yet to set minimum standards on how mainstream schools should restructure to accommodate and support LSEN. The lack of policy guidelines for teachers to assess and support vulnerable learners leaves teachers with a choice to either support them or focus on academic performance alone. Lack of a whole-school approach to assessment and support meant that not all learners were identified because some dressed, looked and behaved normal while they shouldered great psycho-social stress.

Development of learners as perceived from the bio-ecological perspective generally results from transactions learners make with people around them on a one-to-one basis or the proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, this study unearthed several challenges that led to teachers' failure to make such social contact with vulnerable learners: 1) teachers' ignorance of the new policy expectation to identify, assess and support learners in their individual progress including addressing their psycho-social challenges rendered them ineffective; 2) attempts at psycho-social and academic support failed as high learner-teacher ratios made one-to-one interaction between a teacher and learners improbable, and the effects of proximal processes doubtful; 3) the few identified learners were not documented and there was no follow-up for support but Bronfenbrenner (1994) talks of sustained one-to-one interaction as likely to have effect; and 4) teachers focused mainly on learners' material needs despite admission that learners were affected emotionally. They failed to nurture learners' emotional development (Aviles et al., 2006). Teachers also denied having had training in lay counselling despite MOET having records that state otherwise.

The findings on the negative effects of high learner-teacher ratios and inadequate training of teachers support results from other studies which found that inadequate human and financial resources impede inclusive education initiatives (Lehohla & Hlalele, 2014; Mosia, 2014; Shelile & Hlalele, 2014). As Johnstone and Chapman (2009) observe, teachers get overwhelmed because they lack training, classroom environments are not conducive and they lack clear mandate to support learners' psychosocial needs. In this case, the school fails to be a functional microsystem that can buffer negative effects of learners' deficient home environments. The results also refute MOET's data that there were low learner-teacher ratios in the schools, and rather indicated the need for MOET to develop policy guidelines that will control uneven distribution of learners in schools.

Inclusive education is an organized effort that involves commitment from school authorities, teachers and parents (Walton, 2010). School leaders at both levels of education were enthusiastic and teachers showed commitment but the lack of a school policy left room for negligence. Lekhalong secondary school abandoned the feeding scheme once MOET withdrew the social grant but if there was true commitment to inclusive education values the school could have found alternative ways of funding their noble initiative. As studies indicate that Lesotho is grievously affected by HIV/AIDS (Makatjane et al., 2009; Urwick & Elliott, 2010) there should be clear guidelines as to how learners orphaned and made vulnerable by the scourge of HIV/AIDS should be supported. While MOET provided support for some vulnerable learners' school needs at secondary level, the initiative, laudable as it is, is insufficient because learners daily go home to terrible psychological and socio-economic conditions. This calls for cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Social Welfare to enable support for learners both at school and at home.

The Ministry of Education and Training asserts that teachers have been trained in lay counselling (MOET, 2009) but the participants refute this claim and show dire need for such training. Teachers' reluctance to counsel learners may be the result of inadequate skills in offering the service, among other factors. This further shows the need for MOET to declare its intention with regard to support for learners' psycho-social needs. Although it is evident that learners need counselling, teachers focused on what they thought was their core business, teaching, but they ironically admitted that vulnerable learners' performance would ultimately be affected negatively. This finding supports previous studies by Lehohla and Hlalele (2014) and Mosia (2014) which argue for the need to involve support from other professionals in education support of learners with special education needs. Supporting vulnerable learners is not the responsibility of class teachers alone.

Teachers thought vulnerable learners were as intelligent as 'normal' learners but resilience as an attribute may not endure forever as negative social background makes education inaccessible for vulnerable learners (Graetz, in Considine & Zappala, 2002). As participants also observed, resilience was not a given for all learners, boys coped better than girls. However, this interpretation may not be accurate because besides gender the severity of a learner's problems, personality attributes, support from others such as friends may affect how learners cope etc. It is therefore necessary for all teachers to be aware of all social clubs in the school and form other clubs where learners could engage on social issues in a non-threatening environment with peers.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study concludes that though the Ministry's reports indicate that schools have support and teachers are trained in counselling, the training is either limited as teachers feel the need for more training or teachers in some schools have not been trained. The high learner-teacher ratio in the school negatively affects both assessment of and support to individual learners' emotional needs. There is apparent failure by teachers to recognize the role of the life skills education as a buffer for psychosocial problems, and this undermines one of the objectives of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy, promotion of learners' psychosocial skills. There is also a strong need for collaboration between teachers and other professionals for identification of the social problems affecting vulnerable learners and support to such learners as this can result in transfer

of the necessary skills. In short, an overview of the school as an alternative environment, in which teachers' organized curricula and extra-curricular activities could cushion negative home environment, found that the school environment was mostly detached. Although there was effort to support learners encountering barriers to learning and development, the effort lacked focus and was not efficient.

It is recommended that: 1) a. MOET should develop a policy on inclusive education, additional to available policies, in order to clarify what constitutes special education needs and how they have to be addressed; b. subsequently, schools should develop their own policies outlining commitment to developing internal support mechanism for individual learners; 2) Other options for MOET include, a. creation of positions for school counsellors based within schools or b. the workload for teachers could be reduced substantially to allow teachers enough time to do counselling and follow individual learners' progress as mandated by the new curriculum; 3) a national study should be carried out to identify skills teachers need to sufficiently support learners academically and psycho-socially; 4) the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Social Development need to formulate a shared mandate on how vulnerable learners could be supported.

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