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Living Conditions of Student Teachers at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College and Possible Implications to Their Academic Performance

Molyn Mpofo

Lecturer, Department of Home Economics, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College, Gwanda, Zimbabwe

Henry Matienga

Lecturer, Department of Technology and Design, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

Abstract:

This study presents the findings of a study carried out to establish the living conditions of student teachers at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College. The research question which guided this research was, what are the conditions under which student teachers at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College are living? A qualitative approach was employed. Interviews and observations were the main tools that were used. The study population comprised of two hundred and seventy-five students and a sample of five students purposively selected from it. The research established that the students were living under unbearable conditions not conducive for a learning environment. These findings may not be generalised but may be related to other colleges.

Keywords: Student teachers, living conditions, academic performance, teachers' college, residential accommodation

1. Introduction

The dawn of independence in African countries and Zimbabwe in particular ushered in an era of massive expansion of all levels of education in an effort to redress the colonial imbalances that favoured the minority (Mpofo, 2009). The expansion at primary and secondary school levels consequently resulted in high demand for teachers. In response to this demand, the government expanded opportunities for teacher training. The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education (1999) states that teachers' colleges enrolled 2829 in 1980 which rose to 19000 in 1998.

The government introduced the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC), a distant teacher education course that was engineered to address the critical shortage of teachers. Among the pioneers to implement this programme was Gwanda ZINTEC College, now Joshua Mqabuko Polytechnic College. The expansion and transformation of this college into a polytechnic college necessitated expansion of infrastructure in the form of lecture rooms and halls of residence. To date, the expansion rate is so slow that it has not yet included the construction of halls of residence to cater for most of the 1000 plus students attending fulltime studies from the two faculties of (Teacher and Technical Education). This implies that not all students are accommodated in the few halls of residence that are available. This has seen the college housing technical students only while student teachers have to find alternative accommodation. Dove (1989), in his study on college environments identifies accommodation, good food, transport service and good health among others as being fundamental for students in their quest for an academic or professional qualification.

It is against this background that the researchers investigated how these students live, the type of accommodation they use and how the living conditions they are subjected to, may possibly affect their studies.

2. Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted because the study was to reveal the living conditions of students through a dip inquest into these conditions which may not have been possible through a quantitative approach, (Hopeful, 1997). Qualitative approach was found more appropriate as it enabled the researchers to meddle with the students' environment and experience everything that had the potential of being a clue to unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what was being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This approach was also chosen because the study sought to investigate phenomena in their natural setting and to understand the students' living conditions from their own perspective (Patton, 2001). The researchers were interested in establishing how the different students made sense of their lives while on college and the effects thereof on their academic performance.

Most of the qualitative data were generated using face to face interviews, participant observations and document analysis. Observations were done at each house and suburb where students under study lived. College documents on the performance and disciplinary problems of the students were analysed. It is therefore, that kind of study which produced findings arrived at from real

world settings where the phenomenon of interest unfolded naturally. Engaging the three methods in data generation led to more trustworthy and diverse construction of realities.

3. Data Presentation and Interpretation

Interpretation of data in this research was undertaken simultaneously with data generation. This began in the field, continued soon after the data generation and was completed during the presentation stage.

4. The Findings

4.1. Students Rented Rooms in Local Suburbs

It emerged that students were renting rooms in high density suburbs of Phakama, Spitzskop, Jahunda and Senondo. Most of these students could not afford the high rentals demanded by landlords single-handedly and so they stayed in large numbers of as many as five or more in a single room. According to Longden (2001), in most developing countries large portions of urban population cannot afford adequate housing, having to make do with squeezing their household into smaller and smaller housing units. It has been established in this study that the students were part of an urban population and were equally affected. One student revealed that her landlord was charging R550 per tenant per month and preferred student tenants because they would fetch more from a single room. Mohamedbhai (2008), confirms that lack of accommodation makes the few available houses very expensive.

Bauris (2001) expresses that overcrowding puts pressure on the social amenities which could be meant for fewer people causing serious health problems. Helwig (2009) concedes that people living under crowded environments are at high risk of contaminating diseases such as tuberculosis, skin diseases and other air borne diseases hence these students were not spared. However, sharing cannot be totally condemned as it is also found in single family households and in college halls of residence but in smaller numbers of usually two people per room.

The interviews and observations revealed that, not everyone who stayed within the same residence were students, some were prostitutes, working class and others identified as well-known thieves. This scenario exposed students to all kinds of physical danger let alone disturbance to their academic work.

Data from interviews also revealed that one student who stayed with his parents had access to suitable furniture convenient for studies. Documents were further analysed showed that this student performed better than the rest of the students under study, probably because he had a comfortable reading room conducive to proper concentration and production of neat work. On the contrary, observations by the researchers showed that in most of the rooms where the students stayed there was no space for any form of furniture. Students could neither sleep well nor move freely in their rooms. Such conditions had negative implications on students' academic performance. Most students under study confessed that they often submitted assignments late due to lack of working space in these rooms.

4.2. Sources of Energy at the Students' Disposal

Generally, it was observed that students used electricity both for cooking and lighting purposes. When there was load shading they all used candles for lighting and firewood for cooking. This was found to compromise on students' reading times. This of cause was found to be a national problem beyond the college and students' control.

4.3. Sources of Water and Availability

Water was also a major problem in suburbs where students stayed. Some students complained of waking up as early as 4 am to go and queue for water at a nearby borehole as there was hardly any water running in tapes. This impacted negatively on the performance of the students as it took most of their reading time and energy. There was also the danger that the students ended up using unclean water for domestic purposes, hence putting their lives at risk. Reliable and clean sources of water are very necessary for the health of the students. Students on ZINTEC programme go through a very hectic programme, hence they need to make optimum use of their little time on academic work and not on worrying of where they would get their next bucket of water. According to Cross (2004), rest is an important ingredient to the physical and mental well-being of a student. So getting enough rest is very important for the students hence this was not the case with the students at this college.

4.4. General Environment

Gwanda, like every other town in Zimbabwe, had serious environmental problems ranging from burst sewage to uncollected garbage. Running sewer and hips of uncollected garbage were a common sight in all suburbs. These are known to be a health hazard which did not spare the students either, especially that they sometimes had to fetch water from unreliable sources. Nelson and Cox (2000) acknowledge that a safe physical environment is important in helping students feel safe, secure and well nurtured. A dirty environment cannot be consistent with positive learning outcomes. This is in agreement with arguments raised by Chinapah, (1997) that quality improvement in education cannot be achieved solely through improvement at the school or in the classroom, but the home environment plays an equally important role.

4.5. Students' diets

Interviews revealed that very few of the students had three (3) meals per day. Most were on what they called one-zero-one eating pattern. This means that they had a meal in the morning, nothing at lunch and then had their last meal of the day in the evening. When finances were too low (as revealed by one of the participants) one meal per day would be sufficient to keep them going. Those who claimed to have three meals, the lunch time meal was nothing more than a drink with maputi, a slice of bread or a bun. Rarely did they have a proper meal. The reasons given for these poor meals ranged from high cost or unavailability of funds to purchase food items to lack of time to prepare decent meals. The food guide pyramid highlights that for every human being to perform well all their meals must supply essential amounts of energy, protein, fatty acids, vitamins and minerals. Data collected showed that students' diets did not meet daily nutrient requirements for effective growth and performance in their academic work.

4.6. Indecorous Behaviour

Male students claimed that female students were much better because they had relationships with well-to-do working class males who then took care of their financial needs. One female student boasted that *mablango yikho sibili because they give us mula*, meaning working class male lovers were good because they gave them money. This was observed to be very rife around the college where the students were picked up by these male lovers. One male student acknowledged that he benefited from these relationships by doing assignments for the female students who then paid him from what they got from their lovers. This clearly has adverse effects on the students' performance in academic work.

4.7. Mode of Transport used by the Students

It emerged that all students walked to college as there was no affordable mode of transport that plied between college and where the students stayed. There was no public transport that operated between college and the locations. The distances walked by students ranged from about a kilometer to six kilometers to and from college every day. Such distances were too long and tiresome given that students had to catch up with lectures that started at eight in the morning. Weather conditions were also not always favourable and students walked such distances in cold or hot weather. This was worse during the rainy season when they got soaked and had to carry spare clothes to change into. It was observed that it was during this season that most students arrived late for lectures. This had obvious negative implications to their academic work.

4.8. Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be concluded that student teachers at this college are hard-hit by pressure for accommodation, accommodation cost, prohibitive transport costs, inappropriate diets, inadequate time for resting and studying. It is our recommendation that the college should have avoided making a "false start" by not making sure halls of residence were in place for students before enrolling. Perhaps new up-coming colleges need to learn from this.

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