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Attracting and retaining rural teachers in Ghana: the premise and promise of a district sponsorship scheme

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Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers for schools in rural communities is both an issue and a problem in many countries. The very nature of rural communities and perceptions of teaching in such environments tend to discourage qualified experienced and new teachers from taking appointments there. Education jurisdictions, therefore, use various strategies either to compel or entice candidates to accept rural teaching appointments. This paper describes a district sponsorship scheme to attract candidates for teacher training and subsequent appointment in rural schools in Ghana. The paper describes how the scheme operates and assesses its potential to attract and retain teachers, using data obtained through analysis of documents, interviews with key education officers and focus group with teachers. Though the district sponsorship scheme is not new in many education jurisdictions, it is the first of its kind in Ghana. Suggestions for improving the scheme's effectiveness are offered, drawing attention to the need to complement financial incentives with non-monetary measures in rural teacher recruitment and retention policies.

Introduction

In Ghana recruiting and retaining qualified teachers for schools in rural communities is perennially both an issue and a problem. A recent national study of teacher demand and supply (Quansah, 2003) reports a shortage of 40,000 trained teachers in basic schools (i.e. the first nine years of schooling for ages six to 15, comprising six years primary and three years junior secondary), with untrained teachers filling 24,000 of the vacancies. The study also notes that 'schools in the urban areas in the main have their full complement of teachers' but 'it is in the rural areas, especially in the deprived rural areas that teacher shortages are most severe' (Quansah, 2003, p. 2). Over the years the Ministry of Education (MOE) and its implementing body for pre-tertiary education, the Ghana Education Service (GES), have had to employ people with no teaching qualification (some with only 10 years of schooling) to staff schools in rural communities. Such 'Pupil Teachers', as they are commonly called in

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Ghana, constitute the 24,000 untrained teachers referred to above. Without doubt, they have provided, and continue to provide, invaluable services to basic education in Ghana. However, if we are committed to ensuring quality and equity of educational experience for rural Ghanaian children, and if we accept the idea that quality teachers are the key to educational excellence in any community or cultural context, then the lack of qualified teachers with its attendant presence of untrained teachers in basic school classrooms raises serious concerns.

The concern about access to and quality of education becomes even more crucial in view of Ghana's commitment to the objectives of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), and its constitutional mandate to provide free basic education to its citizens (Government of Ghana, 1992). In pursuance of these goals, Ghana has launched the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme, which aims at improving access to and participation in basic education; and enhancing teaching quality and learning outcomes (MOE, 1994). The realization of these objectives depends largely on the availability of qualified teachers who would deliver effectively the revised curricula and manage the increasing diversity in pupil characteristics and learning styles that accompany increased pupil enrolment. One of the challenges that currently face the MOE and the GES is, therefore, how to ensure that schools are staffed with an adequate number of qualified teachers. The initial teacher training colleges (ITTC) which prepare teachers for basic schools are being resourced to increase the number of candidates admitted into teacher education courses, but many teacher education graduates are reluctant to accept posting to rural areas (Akyeampong & Lewin, 2002; Hedges, 2002).

This paper describes an initiative to improve the recruitment and retention of rural teachers—a scheme by which districts sponsor teacher candidates for training in the ITTCs and contract them to teach in the districts for at least three years. Specifically, the paper describes how the scheme operates and attempts to assess its prospects in attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools, using the case of one district. It begins with a brief review of the literature on the nature of rural communities and the common strategies used by education policy makers to get teachers to staff schools in such communities. This is followed by a description of the methods adopted for the research. The district sponsorship scheme is then analysed using qualitative data. Finally, some implications of the study are provided.

Defining and characterizing rurality

The literature on rural education reveals an apparent difficulty in defining the term *rural* (and sometimes *remote*), even among institutions and researchers in the same country. In the USA, the census definition of 'rural' covers settlements of up to 2500 people, or outside incorporated areas, albeit the preferred census binary is metropolitan/non-metropolitan (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The Australian rural education literature contains various regional categorizations, among which are: remote Australia, and very remote Australia (remoteness is defined in terms of

access along road networks to services centres), rural localities (200–999 people), and rural balance areas ('the rural remainder') (Moriarty *et al.*, 2003, p. 134). In some studies where participants were asked to describe any rural background they had (e.g. Storey, 1993), distance from main centres, population, occupation and availability of social and cultural facilities were stated as the defining variables of rurality.

In this atmosphere of conceptual chaos, 'educational researchers are faced with a plethora of definitional possibilities' (Moriarty *et al.*, 2003, p. 134) in their use of terms such as *regional*, *rural* and *remote*, with definitions based on demographic, occupational and socio-cultural factors or a combination of these. The extent of relatedness between the variables employed is sometimes difficult to establish. As d'Plesse (1993, p. 13), for instance, contends, 'the correlation between distance and the evidence of remoteness in populations is not necessarily linear'; and the presumed rural/urban dialectic is actually diffuse (Cameron-Jackson, 1995). It could be argued that the diversities in definitions reflect corresponding diversities and complexities in the characteristics of rural communities across different countries. We may, therefore, see reason with Moriarty *et al.* (2003), who advise that we emphasize flexibility and fluidity in conceptualization rather than preoccupation with fixed and unchanging definitions because any such definitions are framed by the contexts to which they refer and by the ideological assumptions and priorities of the researchers who use them (p. 134).

Notwithstanding the varied contexts which may also depend on the level of political and socio-economic development of individual countries, common characteristics of rural communities have been identified. Generally, rural residents have limited access to social, cultural and economic facilities (e.g. health centres, housing, schools, recreational facilities, shops and employment opportunities). Blainey's (1966) phrase, 'tyranny of distance', conveys the notion that people sometimes have to travel long distances to access such facilities, which are considered basic necessities in modern civilization. People have lower levels of formal education, and are generally poor. Rural dwellers, especially those who are not natives of the area, also experience various forms of isolation—physical, interpersonal, cultural, intellectual, personal and informational (Inverarity, 1984; d'Plesse, 1993).

Rural schools generally lack the range of requisite facilities; have high teacher turnover, resulting in a teaching force composed largely of young, relatively inexperienced teachers who often have less professional preparation and seldom have access to a wider social group of professional colleagues with whom concern might be shared; and suffer from discontinuity in the curriculum (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Rural teachers seldom have the privacy and anonymity of living far away from the schools in which they work, and their behaviour is scrutinized more closely, making them vulnerable to community pressure (Goddard & Habermann, 2001), though in centralized systems, communities may have little authority to monitor and sanction teacher behaviour (McEwan, 1999). In view of these difficulties, often cited as reasons for teachers' reluctance to

accept posting to rural schools, Richmond (1953, pp. 116–118) described a teaching appointment in a rural school as ‘a dead end job’ requiring ‘a stout heart’ and likely ‘to break him’. And for Turney *et al.* (1980) teachers were ‘dragooned’ into remote areas.

Relatively recent research suggests that teacher attitudes to appointment in rural schools have changed, and that many rural teachers see a brighter side of rural life: safer and more connected to nature; plenty of clean, open spaces and absence of incidence of crime and other vices prevalent in cities provide a good place to raise children; a smaller more caring community; and absence of bureaucratic layers allows for direct, verbal communication (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Stanford, 2001). Boylan and McSwan’s (1998) long-staying rural teachers in the Australian context had taught continuously in their current school for at least six years and were not seeking a move during the next year despite an offer of the option of a paid relocation to another school; the majority reported moderate to high levels of satisfaction with teaching at their present schools; they regarded themselves as part of the community; and found the rural lifestyle personally satisfying.

Ghana shares virtually all the features of rural communities and schools described above, but the positive developments in teacher attitude to assignment to rural schools reported in Western countries is yet to be seen. A typical rural community in Ghana has a mixture of the following characteristics: a lack of paved roads, electricity facility, good drinking water, decent accommodation, health care facilities, educational and recreational facilities, and food to purchase. Most basic schools in the country are located in such communities. When final year students from the ITTCs select regions and districts for posting they rarely choose those with large number of rural schools (Akyeampong & Lewin, 2002), and many teachers who are posted to rural schools manage to get transferred to urban public or private schools using health as a reason (Hedges, 2002). This is particularly the case for teachers who come from relatively better socio-economic backgrounds and/or have lived most of their lives in urban areas. Unfortunately for teacher deployment, the majority of candidates who enter teacher training come from such backgrounds (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002), and even those with rural upbringing may be unwilling to return to teach in their own communities. In addition to the generally poor quality of life in the rural areas, social, informational and professional isolation are cited by teachers as discouraging them from choosing to teach in basic schools or in rural communities (Cobbold, 2006). Other demotivating factors are the lack of basic instructional resources such as textbooks, and a perceived uncooperative attitude of rural communities toward the education of their children and schooling generally.

Approaches to staffing rural schools

Linda Ankrah-Dove (1982) describes approaches to the problems involved in attracting and retaining teachers in rural areas in terms of two models. The ‘rural

deficit model' perceives life in rural areas as lacking in all the qualities which would attract teachers. Therefore, to staff rural schools, compulsory posting (usually of newly qualified teachers) and transfer procedures are used to get teachers to serve for a specified number of years in rural schools. Alternatively, every teacher may be required to serve in a rural school at some point in their career, which may then count towards promotion. Another strategy which may be used instead of (or alongside) compulsion is providing incentives to compensate the teachers for the hardships they must go through in remote schools. Common incentives include a salary bonus, favourable opportunities for study leave, subsidized accommodation and accelerated promotion. Attitudes of teachers towards such strategies vary, depending on the characteristics of individual teachers, their perceptions of the strength of the incentives offered and the general implementation of the strategies.

The second approach, which is the 'rural challenge model', takes the view that rural life is worth living and that '*for the teacher who is able to cope*, the special qualities of the job in rural schools provides [sic] an intrinsic professional challenge and interest' (Ankrah-Dove, 1982, p.15; emphasis in original). Implied in this perspective is the assumption that if teachers had the orientation for rural teaching, and were provided with the skills and resources to enrich their classroom teaching and overcome their fear of 'professional impoverishment and the lack of job satisfaction', they would not only accept postings and transfers to rural schools but also stay for a relatively long period (Ankrah-Dove, 1982, pp.14–15). This view emphasizes appropriate education and training for rural teachers, which should target the specific environments and situations in which teachers would work: equipping teachers with the pedagogical skills suited to rural pupils; with ways of establishing positive relationships with the communities; and with strategies for attaining 'the personal maturity and self-reliance necessary for accepting the challenge of living in remote rural areas' (Ankrah-Dove, 1982, p.15). Such a training focus would involve collaboration among teacher education institutions, rural schools and community members at both the pre-service and in-service levels. It would also entail improvement in school infrastructure and facilities, and provision of other 'incentives' for teachers' professional development. In the long term a rural challenge strategy focuses on improving, concurrently, the conditions of teaching and the conditions of learning for rural children.

Details of the study

One strategy being implemented in Ghana to attract and retain teachers in rural schools is that districts sponsor the training of teachers for their schools. In order to understand the rationale for the district sponsorship scheme and the guidelines for its implementation, the policy document was analysed and interviews held with officers of the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the GES, which has oversight responsibility for the implementation of the scheme. The Ahokyer (a pseudonym) District, one of the 12 administrative/educational districts in the Central Region of the country, was purposively selected as a typical case. According to Patton (2002,

pp. 230–246), purposeful sampling strategies are used to select ‘information-rich cases ... from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry’ (p. 230). He further describes typical cases as cases which possess characteristics of the average situation, rather than being atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual (Patton, 2002, p. 236). Typical cases can be identified through recommendations of knowledgeable individuals or through review of existing socio-demographic data that signify their typicality (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 2005). The selection of Ahokyer was based on the recommendation of the Regional Director of Education and the analysis of key documents (e.g. Hedges, 2000; MOE/UNICEF, 2004).

Ahokyer District has 74 pre-schools, 76 primary schools and 55 junior secondary schools (JSS). With the exception of pre-schools, the majority of which are owned by private individuals and faith-based organizations, a greater number of the schools are government-owned. Like the Central Region of which it is part, the District has a rural–urban population ratio of 29.7% and 70.3% respectively, and has a problem retaining teachers. Table 1 presents the student and teacher strength for the 2002/2003 academic year. The current student/teacher ratios (STRs) are higher than the recommended national figures of 24:1, 32:1 and 18:1 for pre-school, primary and JSS, respectively (MOE/UNICEF, 2004).

Ahokyer District is unable to attract and retain qualified teachers. Trained teachers are unwilling to accept posting to the rural areas and those who accept do not normally stay for more than two years. This reluctance is due to the lack of accommodation and social services (e.g. health centre, electricity and good drinking water); prevalence of black flies which cause river blindness; and the general sense among teachers to pursue various courses to upgrade their qualifications at the two teacher education universities in the country—University of Cape Coast (UCC) and University of Education, Winneba (UEW). As a result of these factors, among others, the district recorded 108 teacher vacancies in 2003 (MOE/UNICEF, 2004). The problem of insufficient qualified teachers impacts negatively on pupils’ achievement as measured by their performance in the Performance Monitoring Test (PMT) and the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). In the 2000 and 2001 PMT, the district’s mean score in literacy (English) was 29.2% whilst that of numeracy (mathematics) was 37.8%. For three years, 2000 to 2003, an average of

Table 1. Student and teacher enrolment of Ahokyer District, 2002/2003

Level	Student enrolment	Total no. of teachers	Student–teacher ratio (STR)	Student-trained teacher ratio (STTR)	Gross enrolment ratio (GER)	Net enrolment ratio (NER)
Preschool	6310	159	40:1	191:1	29	21
Primary	17,400	423	41:1	61:1	84	89
Junior secondary	6173	322	19:1	23:1	74	43

Source: MOE/UNESCO (2004).

51% of candidates passed the BECE, with only 20% qualifying to enter senior secondary school (MOE/UNICEF, 2004). Not surprisingly, the District was among the first to start the sponsorship scheme.

In order better to understand how the district sponsorship scheme was implemented and how it worked as an incentive, I interviewed the District Director of Education with three of her officers as a group, in accordance with her suggestion. I also worked with a focus group of 12 out of 18 teachers who were the first to benefit from the scheme in the District (the other six could not be reached after several attempts to contact them) to discuss their perceptions of, and responses to whatever incentives were embedded in, the scheme. All of them were natives of the district, and in their first year of teaching at the time of this study (May–October 2004).

Rationale and implementation of the scheme

The District Sponsorship of Teacher Trainees was introduced by the MOE/GES in the 2000/2001 academic year to:

- address the problem of the teacher shortage, particularly in the rural and other disadvantaged communities;
- ensure equitable distribution of teachers across the country;
- enable districts to respond quickly to teacher demand in their schools (TED, 2000).

The scheme encourages districts to sponsor candidates, especially those from rural areas in the district, for training in the ITTCs so that on completion of their courses, the newly qualified teachers are posted to the sponsoring districts to teach for at least three years. It is believed that candidates sponsored by, and from, the district would not only accept posting to ‘their’ districts but also stay longer since as natives they were already used to conditions there. This premise is grounded in the rural education research literature. According to Storey (1993), teachers with a rural background constitute a promising source of candidates for positions in rural districts because they understand the realities of rural life and are likely to stay for a reasonable period of time. He urges that rural districts target a large part of their recruitment effort towards such teachers, explaining that the teachers’ ‘rural perspective may be helpful in accepting and enjoying constraints of rural life’ (p. 166). Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) add that locals in many cases understand the community ethos and are more inclined to preserve the status quo. The policy document provides the districts broad guidelines with regard to eligibility, application process and incentive package to enable them administer the scheme (see Appendix).

The scheme is tied to the process of admission to teacher training colleges. In other words, candidates applying for admission to teacher training colleges must first seek sponsorship from a district with which they enter into a contract to return and work for the agreed number of years. As evidence that such a contract has been

entered into, the GES requires the District Director of Education to endorse the candidate's application to indicate the district's acceptance to sponsor them. Regardless of the incentive package a particular district offers its candidates, the Central Government through MOE/GES still pays a maintenance allowance for teacher trainees to cover boarding and lodging as well as basic textbooks (TED, 2000). Students in all public educational institutions in Ghana do not pay for tuition.

The scheme's effectiveness

Often the effectiveness of a scheme such as the one being examined is measured in quantitative terms, namely, the number of applicants it attracts every year. However, effectiveness can also be assessed using other criteria. For example, is the scheme able to attract the most able candidates? Is it sustainable over the long term? Does it enhance the status of teaching? Does it encourage a long-term commitment from teachers? It is the last question which is addressed in this section. The analysis adapts the framework provided by Sher (1983), who argued that attracting and keeping qualified teachers in rural areas is mainly a function of 'conditions', 'characteristics' and 'compensation'.

Conditions

In Sher's (1983) original framework, 'conditions' refers to the environmental surroundings, including recreational facilities, housing and culture. In this study, the focus is on conditions for the sponsorship in respect of application and duration of stay in the district after training. The district sponsorship scheme is intended to work, first and foremost, as an inducement policy, which would in the long run achieve a capacity-building objective. According to McDonnell and Elmore (1987), inducements transfer money, services or in-kind materials to individuals or agencies in return for certain actions. Though inducements may be used to influence behaviour, their specific purpose is to keep people loyal to the giver of the incentives (Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994), and it could be argued that such loyalty is best solicited through the persuasive power of the inducement rather than through control of the targeted person's behaviour. From this premise, by tying the scheme to general admission requirements and requesting all candidates to seek sponsorship from a district, the scheme violates the principle of voluntary response implied in inducements, and thus begins to lose its persuasive power. That is, a candidate who wants to train as a teacher but does not want to be sponsored and be tied down to a particular district is still compelled to seek sponsorship. Arguably, such candidates would only work as reluctant teachers in the district after their training and rarely stay even a few days beyond the mandatory period.

Second, Ahokyer District did not go beyond the three-year minimum period of service in the district suggested in the national policy. It is important to note that this is the same timeframe within which many basic school teachers take advantage of

study leave with pay to pursue further studies and subsequently abandon basic school teaching or the profession. Thus, if there was understandable fear that extending the duration of stay beyond three years would discourage candidates from seeking sponsorship in the district, there could have been mechanisms, such as further sponsorship and staff development opportunities, that would enable sponsored teachers to upgrade their qualifications and skills later in their career while at the same time maintaining their loyalty to the district beyond the mandatory period. Harris and Collay (1990, p. 46) suggest that such opportunities are 'more likely to create the kind of learning and working communities that retain new teachers'. If such provisions were made part of the conditions, the district would be more likely to retain those sponsored beyond the three-year minimum period of service and gradually build the needed teaching capacity for its schools. Otherwise, the district sponsorship scheme would remain basically a recruitment tool with no guarantee of building up a corps of qualified teachers for the schools. Again, in Ahokyer District the scheme did not have any such provisions.

Characteristics

According to Sher (1983), 'characteristics' describes the quality of the personnel produced by the pre-service preparation programme, and whether they are adequately equipped for dealing with the rural context, through either background or training. This implies that if the scheme were not to attract teachers to the districts for only the short term but also to retain them for the long term, then the teachers' orientation to rural teaching was crucial. The scheme indeed requires that applicants seeking sponsorship from a district should be inhabitants of that district but not necessarily from a rural area; so there could be applicants from urban areas of the district. Again, in the light of the research evidence that most candidates for initial teacher training use teaching as a springboard for other professions (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002), it could not be guaranteed that every teacher training applicant had a genuine interest in teaching. It is, therefore, important to investigate an applicant's orientation to teaching, first through the process of selection. This should include mechanisms to identify characteristics of candidates, which suggest their interest in and commitment to teaching and their commitment to a long-term stay in a rural area in the district. In Ahokyer focus group and interview data revealed that applicants were interviewed but this only turned out to be an inspection of their certificates and verification of personal information provided on the application form.

Research also indicates that rural teacher incentive policies are effective in retaining beneficiaries if trainees spend more of their training time in the environments in which they would work (Murnane, 1993). Direct personal experience, prior to accepting a teaching appointment, of the school environment as well as that of the community in which a school is located is an important factor in teacher job satisfaction and retention, as is systemic study and understanding of the range of potential experiences in such environments. This ensures a reasonable fit

between the teacher and the community (Storey, 1993). Thus, current initiatives in rural teacher education programmes include placement of teachers in a practicum in rural schools; rural field trips; and partnerships between training institutions and schools (Yarrow *et al.*, 1999; Sharplin, 2002).

In Ghana the ITT programme has no rural education component; it is a 'one size fits all' programme. Under it, trainees spend the whole of their third (and final) year teaching in schools, but mostly in the districts and schools within the catchment area of their training colleges rather than the districts which sponsor them, so the colleges can minimize travel expenses on supervision. With the majority of the colleges located in urban centres, it is possible that many teacher trainees would not have the opportunity of experiencing life in the schools and communities to which they would be posted after their training. Such was the case of eight of the sponsored teachers involved in this study. The other four who had their one-year practicum in the district also had their training college located in the district. It would benefit the districts and sponsored teachers if the incentive package included support that enabled the teachers to do their one-year practicum in what will become their new (rural) communities and schools. It cannot be taken for granted that because trainees came from a particular district they are used to conditions in every community and every school in that district; indeed, some rarely travel beyond their immediate localities. Besides, school environments may differ even in the same locality.

Further 'characteristics' sought in the study were the perceptions and career aspirations of the 12 teachers who had benefited from the Ahokyer scheme. Each respondent found the sponsorship scheme helpful in some way, with the most common response being the payment of the financial costs of their final year, such as costs incurred in respect of examination fees and project work. However, all the sponsored teachers expected to leave the district after three years—the period of the contract—pursue university education and either exit teaching or move to secondary teaching. 'I want to further my education to become a graduate teacher'; 'I want to go to the university to study PE [Physical Education]'; 'To continue studies and leave the teaching profession'; and 'To enter the university and teach at the secondary school' were some of the responses expressing the teachers' career aspirations for the next five years. Thus, if the career decisions of the sponsored teachers are used as proxy for their retention, then the scheme's impact appears insignificant, as all of them intended to leave the district within five years for further studies, and only few planned to return to teaching after obtaining degree qualifications.

Compensation

Compensation includes a reasonable salary, incentives for choosing to teach in a rural setting (e.g. a salary bonus, accelerated promotion and housing allowances) and rewards for excellence in teaching (Sher, 1983). In Ghana there are no disparities in salaries for rural and urban teachers, as teachers' salaries are based on

qualifications and years of teaching experience. Rural teachers are, however, supposed to enjoy a salary bonus, accelerated promotion and supply of basic consumer items but these are not implemented in some districts, and in others are only poorly administered (Cobbold, 2006). Thus, as far as compensation is concerned, the scheme's ability to attract candidates and retain teachers would depend on the level of incentive offered and its value to the beneficiaries.

As already noted, trainees in the ITTCs pay no tuition fees. In addition, they are paid a monthly allowance to cover board and lodging as well as the cost of basic textbooks. Traditionally, it is this support from the government and the prospect of gaining study leave with pay to pursue further courses in the universities on full salary (without loss of employment entitlements after some years of teaching) that attracted people into the profession. This implies that any other incentive aiming to attract people into teaching, especially in rural communities, and retain them for the long term ought to be relatively more generous. In Ahokyer District the only inducement offered during the 2000/2001 academic year for the three-year course was an insignificant financial incentive of ₵900,000 (the equivalent of US\$100, using 2004 exchange rate of ₵9,000 to the dollar) per trainee as against the government allowance of US\$2154. This appeared to have had very little influence on the candidates' decisions to enter teaching. It was rather the allowance paid by the government that provided the inducement to train as a teacher; candidates entered into the district sponsorship contract because the teacher training college admission process required it. As one beneficiary, representing the rest, put it, 'As for that [the sponsorship] it is part of the requirements [for applying to teacher training colleges]. The actual incentive is the "allowa" because without it the sponsorship is nothing'.

Besides the value of the financial incentive which was considered unattractive, there were concerns on delays in payment; underpayment of the agreed amount; and payment in piecemeal instead of in one lump sum. Sample comments supporting this point would be: 'Teacher trainees suffer before they get the money'; 'The amount promised to be given to us was not given'; 'The scheme was good but the funds were not released at the right time I needed it'; 'The funds were not up to the total amount intended to be given'.

Recipients also complained that the district did not explain the details of the sponsorship to them, and did not visit them in their colleges to see how they were faring. Accordingly, they suggested that the scheme be clearly explained to applicants before they enter into the agreement; the amount should be paid in full as agreed, in advance, and on time; half of the money be given to trainees during the course and the other half paid when they take up their first appointment to cater for accommodation expenses; and a mechanism should be put in place to monitor sponsored trainees.

Some of these suggestions had been clearly outlined in the national policy document to guide the districts; their non-implementation could, therefore, be due to the district's lack of commitment to policy specifications. In its report, the Education Sector Review Committee (2002, p.64) noted, in regard to the

implementation of the district sponsorship scheme: 'District Directors of Education are not serious about identifying persons who have links with the district, nor are they guided by any projections as to immediate and short-term teachers [sic] requirements'. It could as well be the result of the district's interpretation of the policy specifications. Ball (1994) draws attention to a similar point when he argues how at the policy formulation stage, the point of 'encoding', policy as text might privilege the ideas and values of the top actors involved, but at the implementation stage, the point of 'decoding' the text, ground-level actors interpret messages in the context of their own culture, ideology and resources.

In fact, the interviews with the District Officers revealed little evidence of deliberate attempts made by the district to attract candidates for sponsorship. On the contrary, the district depended on its proximity to a university which often attracted beginning teachers to the urban centres in the district. This further stresses the role of implementation in actually changing policy. We must recognize, however, that 'when decisions are made on the basis of local expediencies ... and policy is formulated to fit, the policy structure becomes an assembly of unrelated pieces' (Jantsch, cited in Forster, 1991, p. 27).

The district sponsorship scheme provides an example of the 'grow your own teachers' schemes, which are currently being pursued in some districts in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and the UK to meet the demand for teachers in hard-to-staff areas (Lonsdale & Ingvarson, 2003). Experience with initiatives which use financial incentives to attract candidates into teaching has shown that such inducements alone have very little effect on recruitment and retention. For instance, commenting on the effect of the Massachusetts Signing Bonus Program (MSBP), Johnson (2004, p. 61) states: 'We were surprised to find that the bonus [of \$20,000]—which was widely believed to be a large financial incentive—was of modest importance' to the teachers. Rather, it was 'the program's accelerated route to certification, which provided a quick access to a paid teaching position' that served as the primary incentive (Liu *et al.*, 2004, p. 218). Furthermore, the payment of the signing bonus over four years to encourage retention 'played virtually no role in participants' decisions about whether (or for how long) to stay in public school teaching in Massachusetts' (Liu *et al.*, 2004, p. 218). This case is in the context of a developed nation where teacher candidates pay for their pre-service training, and resources enable governments and education authorities to offer more generous incentives for teacher training. Yet financial incentives alone did not exert any strong impact on recruitment and retention. It would seem that in the Ghanaian context where the government pays nearly all the expenses for initial teacher training but where, ironically, teachers loathe rural teaching, more attractive incentive packages are needed to entice teachers to stay in rural schools for a relatively long time.

Summary and implications

The onerous living and working conditions in rural communities present challenges to educational jurisdictions trying to staff schools in such areas. Efforts at

overcoming rural teacher supply problems have consisted in using different kinds of strategies, either to compel or entice candidates to accept rural teaching appointments. Though rural incentives have been an important feature of education systems in developing countries (McEwan, 1999), they are relatively new in Ghana. This paper has examined a district teacher trainee sponsorship scheme which combines both compulsion and enticement to recruit teachers for rural schools. Based on an analysis of the policy documents and interview data from one district, the conclusion is drawn that the scheme is founded on a valid premise grounded in the rural education research literature and parallels similar initiatives being pursued elsewhere.

However, much remains to be done to strengthen the retention dimension of the scheme. There is a need for creative initiatives on the part of districts to address the factors that have been identified in this study as missing in the scheme's implementation. In particular there are four policies which need to be put into practice:

1. districts need to select candidates who not only hail from the area but also have an intrinsic interest in working in rural schools in the district;
2. districts need to include in their policy a provision that requires sponsored candidates to do their one-year practicum in the communities and schools where they would work, with adequate financial and material provision made for this;
3. they must put in place structures that would enable sponsored teachers to upgrade their qualifications and update their knowledge and skills later in their career while maintaining their loyalty to the district beyond the contracted period;
4. districts need to source funds from voluntary non-governmental organizations and charity groups to enable them to offer more enticing financial incentives.

The issues raised in this paper are also found in other societies too. The unwillingness of qualified teachers to accept posting to schools in rural and remote communities, which results in staffing difficulties in such areas, and the consequent deployment of uncertified teachers in schools is reported in Finland (Krokfors *et al.*, 2006) and India (Pandey, 2006). In Finland, uncertified teachers have the opportunity to study for a teaching certificate while working, through a multimode teacher education programme. In contrast, in many states in India there is no programme to upgrade the teaching qualifications of such teachers, called 'para-teachers'. The para-teacher scheme in India is founded on arguments similar to that for the district sponsorship scheme reported in this paper. The socio-cultural argument is that local teachers who share the experience and cultural practices of their students are better able to establish good rapport with the community and relate with students in meaningful ways (Pandey, 2006). In the Indian context, however, the economic argument that the use of para-teachers is a more cost-effective measure of overcoming teacher shortages appears to have been over-

emphasized. The recruitment of para-teachers is now a national policy, though in some states many trained and qualified candidates remain unemployed. It is important for education systems grappling with teacher shortages to note that whether for economic or socio-cultural reasons, the use of uncertified teachers to fill positions in schools raises quality issues. That is, quality of teaching and learning is likely to suffer, the quality of education jeopardized, and the status of the teaching profession endangered, unless programmes to train such teachers are put in place.

As noted previously, the empirical data for this study relate to only one district and, therefore, the conclusions derived from them are not intended to be generalized to all districts in the country. However, data such as these hold great potential to illuminate the prospects of the district sponsorship scheme in attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools, and should provide guidance to policy makers in countries grappling with the difficulty of staffing rural and remote schools. Extending this study to other districts in Ghana would deepen our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme.

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Appendix. District sponsorship of teacher trainees

Administration of the scheme

The District Sponsorship of Teacher Trainees Scheme is recommended to be administered by a District Sponsorship Screening Committee with membership from various stakeholders of education in the district. The functions of the Committee include:

- Advertise locally and in the national news media sponsorship opportunities to attract applicants for sponsorship.
- Select Ghanaian applicants with the requisite entry qualifications for admission into post-secondary teacher training colleges, with consideration given to applicants' ability to speak the local language of the sponsoring district, and gender balance.
- Prepare contract documents which must be signed by all sponsored candidates, their guardians and reliable guarantors committing the applicants to come back to the sponsoring district after their training to teach for at least three years and a maximum of five years.
- Recommend incentive packages for sponsored candidates.
- Request for progress reports from the training colleges on their candidates in order to review their status in the colleges.

Suggested incentive packages (of which any may be selected)

- Payment of teacher trainee's transport and travelling (to and from college) allowance during the period of training.
- Payment of initial admission and registration fees.
- Provision of some material/financial support during on-campus teaching practice and the one-year placement of candidate's course.

- Meeting cost of project work/long essay during the final year.
- Payment of cost textbook and stationery.
- Payment of examination fees and clothing allowance.

Source: TED (2000).