

Out of school missing boys – a study from Lesotho



Pulane J Lefoka

This paper is based on the findings of a study on boys' underachievement that was undertaken by the Commonwealth in some Commonwealth countries. Lesotho participated in the study and selected the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC), an arm of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) responsible for programmes targeting out of school youth and adult learners. The study selected the Basic Education programme because of its relevance to the research objectives.

Unlike others offered by the LDTC, the Basic Education programme deals directly with herdboys as well as a range of other candidates from different backgrounds. The study followed 'the out of school missing boys' – and comprised of documented analysis and interviews of stakeholders, namely the LDTC staff, both field and centre based, the programme facilitators, parents and guardians of herdboys and the boys themselves.

Lesotho is a small country covering a total of 30,335 square kilometers (11,000 sq miles) of land area. There are four ecological zones, namely the lowlands, foothills, mountains and Senqu River Valley. These zones differ in terms of topography, altitude, climate, number of people and population concentration. For example, the mountain ecological zone although a larger land area, is characterised by harsh and long winters, cool and short summers (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2003). It is in the heart of the difficult ecological zones of the country that livestock ownership is high and it is where 'the out of school missing boys' are most likely to be found.

Basotho Society

It is in this patriarchal society that believes in male superiority where a male, regardless of the high female population rate, is considered head of family and the sole decision maker. This practice is based on customary and common laws supported by the national constitution. Yet, regardless of this practice, Basotho women enjoy high rates of educational attainment and literacy (Kimane et al., 1998, Abagi 2003, Government of Lesotho & UNAIDS, 2004). Women are therefore presented as having attained better education than their male counterparts yet, because of cultural norms and practices, males continue to enjoy a recognisable status. The implication of this scenario is that, males, due to their low education attainment cannot, under fair and normal circumstance, compete with women in labour markets (Ministry of Education and Training, 2004).

Lesotho has a society that is predominantly Christian. More than 90% of Basotho are Christian and around 4% are observers of traditional religion. It is in this society where proprietorship of schools, due mainly to the Christian missionaries' initiation of formal education in Lesotho, is that of the churches. It is a country whose economy is known to be poor.

The rate of unemployment is high (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2003). An almost inevitable result of this poverty, particularly when taken in combination with the high level of livestock ownership among the people of the region, is that mountain children are less likely to attend school than children from other regions.

This situation, especially in regard to boys, might mean a lifetime as a shepherd with no apparent economic prospects while for girls it might mean staying at home to help a family or having to work as a domestic worker. (Gay & Hall, 2000, UNICEF, 2003)

Education in Lesotho

Regardless of the complex gender-related issues in the country, on the whole Lesotho has made recognizable strides in ensuring that all its citizens attain basic education. This is a giant step in addressing significant gaps between boys and girls. In Gay and Hall (2000) the observed gap is widest amongst the lowest economic groups and narrows as wealth increases. What seems to be apparent though, is the difference between the numbers and/or percentages of girls and boys in school. The difference is that in formal education the numbers of girls in school are higher than those of boys, while in the 'out of school programme' the number of male learners has been higher than that of girls for a long time.

Commenting on the number of learners who were using the facility, the Learning Post Programme (LPP) administrators who participated in the study indicated that in 20 centres, there were 424 learners. 316 of these learners were male and only 108 were female. In five of these centres there were no females at all. Although this is not a large population sample, the information confirms the fact that the Learning Post facility tends to be more commonly used by male learners most of whom are boys or indeed herdboys.

Developing Trend

A new trend is however developing in that the proportion of people, who in 2001 had never been to school, was considerably



higher for males than for females - and it was also higher for older, rather than young age groups (Kingdom of Lesotho, 2003). This change could be attributed to the progress that Lesotho is making in providing basic education through the implementation of policies such as Free Primary Education (FPE). However, there are those boys, who regardless of numerous efforts aimed at addressing the literacy and numeracy problems continue to be missing out of schools.

Basically, by establishing the LDTC and its Learning Post Programme in particular, the Ministry of Education and Training is reaching out to out of school youth and adults. This programme tends to attract, more than any other group, the educationally disadvantaged male section of the society. Indeed, historically there have always been more male than female learners. This view is consistent with the documented findings (Government of Lesotho and UNICEF, 1994, Makhetha & Motlomelo, 2004) that the LPP seems to reflect a feature different from that of the formal education system where there are, as illustrated in the second section of this report, more female learners than male ones. This discrepancy can be attributed to a long established practice in Lesotho where males usually do not attend school due to social responsibilities and, or, cultural practices such as tending livestock or participation in traditional tribal initiation rites.

The herdboys

The term herdboy is as old as the Basotho nation. It is not pejorative and simply means a shepherd or herdsman. The practice has always been to use a male child family member or to hire one to look after animals. This practice is associated with the tradition that wealth is measured in terms of the number of livestock a family has. It is interesting that, despite the introduction of formal education in Lesotho, the herdboy practice has continued. The result is that many boys were not able to attain formal education, as they could not attend school.

Besides ensuring that wealth of the family is well looked after, the herding of animals is considered a good practice. It socialises the male child in particular, to learn to become a responsible and well-behaved and less mischievous member of society who should learn to contribute to the welfare of his family (Mokhosi, Shale, Molapo & Jegede, 1999). According to these researchers, socialisation to herding animals tends to start at an age range of 3 to 5 years old, this being the time when young boys, although not compelled to begin herding, may volunteer to accompany their elder brothers or relatives to look after animals. In this particular study and as reflected in the biographical data, the youngest herdboy was 6 years old.

The learners who participated in the study and whose results are shared in this paper were males. 18 of the boys in the study were employed while 17 were herding their families' livestock. The herdboys' ages ranged between 10 and 20 years for the majority and between 23 and 46 for a smaller group. Their experience of serving as herdboys ranged between 6 months and 13 years. The herdboys' parents are housewives and farmers and the majority have primary education. The level of education of parents and an apparently poor economic background seem to be a contributory factor to the boys' engagement in the type of employment they have, as well as for their absence from the formal school system.

Obstacles affecting access to basic education

The government of Lesotho is committed to ensuring that Basotho are a fully literate society through the provision of basic and functional literacy (Ministry of Education and Training, 2001). However, a number of obstacles contribute to inequitable access to schools and provide reasons why children may be denied access to formal education. For boys these include; taking care of animals; acting as heads of families; being orphans; having unemployed parents and being victims of poverty. For the girls while most obstacles are similar to those of boys, they also take care of sick parents and siblings (Odumbe, 1990; Mokhosi et al., 1999, Abagi, 2003, Makhetha and Motlomelo, 2004; Government of Lesotho and UNICEF 1994). The Learning Post Programme becomes relevant to the extent that it provides its learners with an opportunity to come out of the programme different from when they started participating in the programme.

Catering for the herdboys

The LDTC is engaged in a marvelous programme, providing the means by which a number of boys who are engaged in numerous societal activities and duties e.g. cow herding, can be catered for educationally. However, the 'voice' of stakeholders and efforts to rally behind the Learning Post Programme would add more value.

The participants in the study showed that in order for the LPP to achieve its mandate fully, the stakeholders should meaningfully participate in the programme. Consistent with the documented evidence (Motlomelo and Sakoane, 1989, Odumbe, 1990, Sakoane, 1994, Makhetha and Motlomelo, 2004), they indicated that, despite the very clear conditions set by the LDTC, the problem of attracting more learners to use the Learning Post facility still persists.

Moreover, contributions by the field based education officers toward the success of the programme as well as permission by the schools' proprietor to use the schools' facilities for the programme in the evenings would also add value to the efforts made to reach the out of school learner. The other problem which works against the achievement of the goals, as expressed by the participants in the study, is that much as the programme is benefiting from funding of organisations such as the World Bank and UNICEF, it is not receiving as much attention as the primary school sector. The respondents' views confirm the LDTC's (1995) and Sakoane's (1994) contention that the absence of a conducive environment remains an obstacle to achieving the quality education necessary for out of school learners. This situation affects this otherwise noble initiative.

However, regardless of the number of problems that the Learning Post Programme might be experiencing, the Programme is regarded as the best in as far as addressing the basic education needs of out of school learners. The mere thought of having members of society, who might not access basic education in formal settings, is in itself a driving force behind persisting that the programme be given the attention it deserves.

Positive views about the Learning Post Programme indicate that it has the potential to educate many and help Lesotho achieve one of the Millennium Development Goals namely, provision of universal education to all. The programme is viewed as good. Besides, it is brought to the people in their own localities.



The caretakers

The idea of volunteering is not that common in Basotho society. However, with the LDTC Learning Post Programme this idea seems to be taking root, if only by default. School caretakers view themselves as volunteers, mainly because they are not receiving any salary. The idea of 'ploughing back in the community' seems to have motivated some of the volunteers who have achieved some formal education themselves.

One of the respondents who herself had benefited from one of the LDTC programmes indicated that she mainly felt sorry...

'...for those Basotho who were illiterate and could not write nor read. I was helped by the LDTC to complete my secondary education. I, because of my poor background, managed to end my secondary education at Form B. However, enrolling with LDTC provided me with the opportunity to sit for my Junior Certificate examination. I later enrolled with the then National Teacher Training College, now Lesotho College of Education. Regardless of the fact that one does not get much in monetary term by serving in the LDTC programme, my fulfillment is through seeing many Basotho able to read and write and knowing that I contributed towards someone's education.'

In search of education

The Basotho are an education loving people. Regardless of a long history of difficulties affecting who could attend school, parents have always made it their responsibility to encourage their children to attend formal school. The herdboys who participated in the study said that it was their understanding that to be literate – and in order to continue with education in the future – there was need to take advantage of available education facilities. They also associated education with better employment. In their view, being given the opportunity to go to school would eventually liberate them from being exploited.

One of the herdboys who reported that he started schooling after herding animals until he was 16 years old, indicated the frustration of joining the formal school at an advanced age:

I enrolled very late age-wise, failed grade/standard 1, proceeded to 2 without anybody's permission, also failed and went on to grade 3 and also failed. What was interesting was that teachers pretended they did not realize that I was indeed not consulting them but was just moving on. After grade/standard 3 I decided to relinquish the studies.

This particular incidence might be an indication that the school was not addressing his needs given his age level. In this regard, the formal education system could be regarded as having contributed to this particular person's dropping out of the school. The question therefore is, whether or not formal school addresses the needs of the learners.

It follows therefore, that the curriculum must be sensitive to societal needs if it is to prepare learners to be relevant to the society they will serve. Notwithstanding the fact that in some Learning Posts, vocational skills such as carpentry, farming, stone cutting, production of candles and sewing have been introduced in the curriculum, the administrators expressed the view that

there are problems experienced in offering vocational skills. For example, the people responsible for teaching these skills are not competent themselves. This finding is consistent with those by UNICEF (2003), Makhetha and Motlomelo (2004) and Mokhosi et al., (1999).

Some positive developments have been recorded. Learning Post learners come out of the programme with some basic skills. It attracts offenders, some of whom have changed their behaviours.

Limitations to the education sought

The level of formal of education being sought by the herdboys has limitations. Most will attain basic education. This means up to the level at which they can read and write at the end of primary education. Yet the herdboys would like to stop herding and go to school or herd only during school holidays. A number of reasons are advanced for this view. Those who are against this type of job indicate that the conditions under which they (herdboys) operate, be they natural, health or societal reasons, are harsh. For example, since clinics are not easily accessible in some remote areas, the herdboys' health problems cannot be easily attended to. Ignorance about deadly diseases is a serious problem for these boys. Regarding societal issues, the boys are said to engage in unacceptable behaviours such as stealing and planting and smoking dagga (cannabis). (Gay and Hall, 2000, Mokhosi et al., 1999).

A major challenge for the herdboys, it would seem, is not only the desire to be able to read and write, but is how education can help them refrain from unacceptable behaviour or indeed attain relevant education. It is interesting that other studies have established that the majority of herdboys indicated that they considered it unfair that they do not have ample opportunities to go to school (Mokhosi et al., 1999). It would seem that while life skill education is being introduced to both formal and out of school programmes at the basic education level, it is needed even more by the herdboys and other out of school groups. Life skills education should be made available to the herdboys in a more intensive manner. In essence, a relevant education system should equip its beneficiary with skills for self-reliance.

Mode of delivery

The mode of delivery commonly used for teaching herdboys tends to emphasise the face-to-face approach to teaching. This situation which has been of great concern with authors and researchers is about to change. They are proposing that a radio facility be used to reach herdboys wherever they are. A recent interview with the UNICEF Education Programme Officer revealed that a new type of donation is about to be launched. UNICEF will provide a 'winder radio, literacy kit and lap desk' for the LP Programme. This would be breaking new ground for the LPP learners.

Dropping out of the learning post programme

Dropping out of the education system seems to be a problem both for those in formal schools and for those who access education informally. In the case of herdboys, a number of factors contribute to this problem. Among these is the fact that lessons are scheduled for the end of the day when the herdboys are tired after doing a full day's work.



In addition, the herdboys who are employed tend to move from one employer to the other. The extent to which they can continue with their education is dependent on among other things, the attitude of a new employer and the location of the job. Such scenarios imply that movement of herdboys contributes to the rate of drop out. Most of the reasons advanced for dropping out are similar and tend to support the findings by Makhetha and Motlomelo (2004) and UNICEF (2003). These studies make reference to issues such as ill health, excessive drug abuse, herding livestock and attending to family chores such as working in the fields and a lack of motivation on the part of the boys.

Conclusion

The Government of Lesotho, irrespective of the fact that gender parity issue is still being addressed, caters for the education of all children. The government, through its Ministry of Education and Training and in collaboration with partners such as UNICEF, is therefore engaged in a commendable activity. Searching out and assisting the herdboys to attain some form of education had been in the Ministry's plans long before the EFA and the now Free Primary Education policy in Lesotho. Ensuring that the Programme runs regardless of the obstacles indicates determination on the part of the Ministry of Education and Training and its Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre.

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Biographical notes

Pulane J Lefoka is senior lecturer in the Institute of Education, National University of Lesotho. She is a graduate of the University of British Columbia where she did her Masters Degree in Teacher Education focusing on Curriculum and Instruction. She taught at the Lesotho College of Education before joining the National University of Lesotho. Her research work is in the area of teacher education. She has undertaken consultancy work in various education sub-sectors.