
**MANAGING SCHOOLS WITH MIGRANT LEARNERS: A DAUNTING
CHALLENGE FOR RURAL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AT THE NORTHERN
OUTSKIRTS OF SOUTH AFRICA**

Leyneth Maila
University of Venda

Buyisani Dube
University of Venda

Peter Mulaudzi *
University of Venda

ABSTRACT: *The influx of undocumented and unaccompanied migrant learners in the rural schools of the District of Vhembe in Limpopo Province of South Africa is alarming. These learners come to South Africa with unique challenges. They are affected by socio-economic factors. They do not have identification documents. They are dogged by language barriers and are often victims of xenophobic attitudes. Their inclusion in the school system brings about new challenges to the school management teams. The study argues that effective management of school is a necessary pre-condition for addressing the educational predicament of migrant learners. As such, principals have the responsibility to manage their schools effectively and efficiently. A qualitative research was conducted at Tshipise-Sagole district to determine the extent to which principals address the educational challenges of migrant learners. Six schools with a significant number of migrant learners were purposefully selected. Data were collected through individual interviews with 6 school principals. Data were analysed thematically. The study revealed that managing schools with migrant learners remains a daunting challenge to principals. It is also revealed that principals as custodians of migrant learners play a vital role in addressing these difficulties. The study recommended that school principals should profile migrant learners' needs and barriers in order to address them amicably and provide necessary support. Government support and involvement of various stakeholders are cited as very important aspects as this should be a shared responsibility.*

KEYWORDS: *school management, migration, migrant learners, inclusive education.*

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a common international phenomenon. It is experienced by both the developing and developed countries. People move from their countries of origin to other countries for socio-economic, political and other reasons. Literature reveals that young children of school-going age cross national, regional and international borders either accompanied by parents or as unaccompanied minors (Save the Children UK, 2007). South Africa became the home to many people from different countries because of colonialism in the 1600s and the growth of mining in the late 1800s and 1900s. Most minors came from Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Lesotho and elsewhere (Motha, 2005). Recently, South Africa experienced a new wave of unauthorized migrants, refugees and asylum seekers fleeing social and political hardships from African countries

such as Burundi, Angola, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Somalia and Ethiopia. Furthermore, according to Palmary (2009), the most distinguished experiences among migrant children emanate from war and conflicts. The data on the administrative statistics 2008/9 from the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and on Further Mathematics Support Programme (FMSP) estimate related projections based on the national census data. Polzer (2010) argues that since 2004 till the end of 2009, 47 596 were recognised refugees:

- In 2009, 223 324 applied for asylum status. However, only 4 567 were approved, 46 055 rejected and 172 702 were added to the backlog of unprocessed cases;
- 32 344 economic migrants were issued with work permits in 2007/8 and 312 733 people were deported in 2007/8.

This article focuses on challenges of managing schools which host migrant learners on the Northern outskirts of South Africa. Consortium of Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) (2008) reports that in terms of migrant learners' access to education and experience in schools, there is less information available because official schools surveys only collect information on whether children were born in South Africa or not. Palmary (2009) states that literature on migrant learners in South Africa is tiny and that the most cited reasons for migration are war, conflicts, economic factors and then the experiences of migrant learners on educational challenges. Data collected from Statistics South Africa in 2008 indicates that 12% of migrant children of school-going age in South Africa were not in school. The Lawyers for Human Rights and CoRMSA 2010 report also estimates that 24% of school-going age children of asylum seekers were not in school. The 2006 EFA global monitoring report further shows that despite rising enrolments, about 100 million children of primary school going age were still not enrolled in primary schools in 2002 (UNESCO, 2006). It was speculated that if the trend continues, it will leave as many as 72 million children out of school in 2015.

People migration and the right to education

Migration is not confined to one country. The International Organization of Migration's World Report (IOM, 2011) estimates that the number of international migrants stood at 214 million, with the number expected to reach 405 million by 2050. Secondly, the same report emphasizes the need to accommodate migrant children in schools. The quest for the host societies to successfully integrate migrants and the manner in which communities experience migration would constitute one of the major policy challenges for IOM member states. The host countries and schools are likely to experience more inflows of migrants. The desire to grant migrants the necessary support will be perpetuated.

Since the first democratic elections in 1994 and mostly in the early 2000, South Africa experienced a high influx of migrant learners from other African countries. South Africa is the destination of many black migrant learners and has a legal framework that is critical in promoting their rights and welfare. It strives to promote the integration of migrants into the South African society. The rights of children to basic education are enshrined in international and domestic laws. Section 29,

of the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution of 1996, sets out that everyone has a right to basic education. The South African school's Act of 1996 states that 'no child may be prevented from going to school. SASA section 5(3) similarly, stipulates that no child may be refused access to schooling on the basis of documentation, language, nationality or inability to pay school fees. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, 108 of 1996 promotes the right to basic education for all learners, and this right is articulated in various international conventions which are based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The conventions include the 1966 International Convention on Economic, Social and cultural Rights, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2005 Jakarta Declaration was adopted at the International Conference on the Right to Basic Education as a Fundamental Human Right and the Legal Framework for its Financing.

With all the various policies in place, most of the South African principals struggle to manage schools smoothly because there are no support systems and training that assist them on how to deal with these unique challenges. Chisholm (2007) argues that despite the constitutional guarantees as well as policies and programmes that have been put in place to ensure the right to education for all, it is acknowledged that the right to education has not been met in South Africa. Curriculum management seems to have become the main challenge. Schools find it hard to drive inclusive curriculum since resources are insufficient to cater for these needs. As such, schools are stuck with the provision of the general school curriculum. Spreen and Vally (2012) claim that the barriers to the rights to education for migrant children in South Africa include poverty, school-related financial and cost issues, school management and government non-implementation of policies and legislations. These factors pose challenges for school principals in terms of providing the necessary mechanisms for effective monitoring, supporting and managing of schools.

Educational experiences faced by migrant learners

The fact that schools cannot cater for the language needs of migrant learners is worrisome. The language barrier negatively affects the overall school performance of learners. CoRMSA (2008) points out that there are scarce resources and teachers to assist migrant learners with difficulty in understanding or conversing in languages that are operational in schools in South African. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2010), proficiency in the language of instruction is a major tool for learning. Asanova (2005) concurs, noting that language forms the foundation for interaction within the school environment. Yeh *et al.*, (2008) further opine that language is a cultural bridge that assists migrant learners with the direction to the host society.

Migrant learners also experience socio-cultural challenges. According to Chow (2006), socio-cultural factors involve constraints in the areas of assimilation to the host society, linguistic adjustment and identity construction. Migrant learners usually express negative racial experiences and perspectives which show that more needs to be done in order to address what they describe as their experiences in areas of displacement (Candappa, 2000). Consequently, migrant learners are predisposed to conforming to the prevailing cultures and identities of their host countries (Suarez-

Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Gibson and Carrasco (2009) view the importance of cultural responsiveness as one way of getting the attention of migrants at schools.

OECD (2012) argues that many migrant learners live in poor or low-income households and this is cited as a cause for the poor performance of migrant learners academically. Borjas (2011) also states that most migrant learners live in families with high rates of poverty. Many migrant learners appear to be raised in households that receive some forms of assistance compared to children in the host country.

CoRMSA (2011) report enlists the following barriers as hindering the education of migrant learners as well as impacting efforts of principals to effectively manage schools:

- Refusal by schools to admit learners whose asylum permits are due to expire before the new academic year.
- Inability of migrant learners to understand the learning content because of the language barrier.
- Lack of proper documentation.
- Refusal of the department of education to offer migrant learners the opportunity to apply for exemption from paying school fees.

Addressing the educational experiences of migrant learners

The provision of support and effective management of schools with migrant learners is essential. The South African education system is still in a transformation process and the old apartheid structures and governance systems are objects of a restructuring and transformation agenda. Transformation of the education system is carried out to promote and uphold the founding principles of the constitution and the fundamental rights and freedoms of every person. One of the many aspects of the education system that needs to be redressed is the management of schools. The new strategic path ushered in a shift of emphasis from management to governance. According to Section 16 (1) of the SASA Act 84 of 1996 (South Africa, 1996b) the responsibility of governance of every public school is vested in its Governing Body, whereas the professional management of a public school is undertaken by the principal under the authority of the Head of Department. The following factors are identified as important in addressing the educational challenges which are experienced by migrant learners:

Creation of a positive teaching and learning environment

School principals should create a positive teaching and learning environment. Thomas and Collier (2000) argue that the characteristics of good schools include the existence of strategies that can enhance the education of undocumented and migrant children. Schools should create an environment wherein parents are welcomed and involved; and students are valued.

Inclusive school environment

Migrant learners are important beneficiaries of the education system and as such, school principals need to develop and embrace their diversity and enhance their potential for academic achievement.

School principals should also create capacity building and development opportunities for their schools through organising contexts for human rights education. The School Management Teams, educators and learners need to acquire knowledge and skills as well as develop values and attitudes which are necessary for an inclusive school environment. Rangvid (2007) argues that strengthening the culture of achievement in schools with a high concentration of migrant learners might be a promising approach. Exerting migrant learners with the pressure to learn the language of instruction may not be an important tool to ensure high academic achievement, but to initiate them to a culture of academic excellence.

Curriculum management

It is the responsibility of principals to manage the curriculum. Migrant learners need a curriculum that will accommodate their unique needs. Adebayo (2010) argues that the curricula in South Africa do not cater for the diverse backgrounds of migrant learners. Managing the teaching and learning programme involves curriculum support, protecting teaching and learning time, staffing the programme and monitoring the progress of learners in the school (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). It is vital for school principals to provide curriculum support and monitoring strategies that will assist to address the needs of migrant learners. OECD (2010) contend that monitoring and evaluation can help to improve school performance by tracking the outcomes of learners on time, identifying those who need help and designing appropriate interventions.

It is very critical for school principals to be able to identify the needs and barriers for migrant learners. These would then need to be addressed through the employ of well thought out and appropriate interventions. Visionary school principals always endeavour to provide support for effective and efficient running of their institutions.

Creating and managing inclusive learning environments

Tubbs, Heard and Epps (2011) propose seven standards or competencies that school principals should demonstrate in creating and managing an inclusive learning environment that would benefit all learners. These competencies minimize barriers to migrant learners from foreign countries to rural schools at the Northern outskirts of South Africa. Programmes for the preparation of principals should ensure that candidates have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to independently develop and sustain an inclusive learning environment.

The standards or competencies are meant for educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the achievement of all learners by:

- facilitating the development, articulation and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the school community;
- promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional programme, applying best practice to student learning and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff;
- managing the organisation, operations and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient and effective learning environment;

- collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilising community resources;
- acting with integrity, fairly and in an ethical manner;
- understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context; and
- Internship: the internship provides significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice, and develop the skills in standards or competencies 1–6 above, through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings, planned and guided cooperatively by the district personnel.

The role of the principal and the school management teams

School Management Teams (SMTs) have a significant role to play to ensure the school adopts an inclusive approach by embracing change as a constant and nurturing feature and instilling this understanding among staff members (DBE, 2010). In order to ensure that schools are established as inclusive centres of learning, care and support, the school principals and their SMTs should establish the following key factors:

- have an unwavering belief in the values of inclusive schooling and considerable knowledge and skills for translating the concept into practice.
- the principal is a visible and vocal advocate of inclusive practices. SMTs should communicate clearly to staff members their expectation to establish the school as an inclusive centre of learning, care and support.
- ensure that all efforts to address school policies, improvement plans and programmes are developed in a manner that reflects inclusive practices.
- create a safe, friendly and welcoming school climate for learners, parents/families as well as staff such that it fosters collaboration and inclusivity.
- promote the view that special needs education is service, not a place.
- take the lead in ensuring that there are additional support programmes that are meant to reach out to learners with learning difficulties.

The purpose of the study was to examine challenges that school principals face in managing rural schools with migrant learners at the Northern outskirts of South Africa.

Research question

The study was guided by this research question: *What are the challenges of school principals with regard to managing rural schools with local and migrant learners in South Africa?*

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed procedures and techniques that are delineated hereunder:

Setting

The study was carried out in rural schools in the Tshipise-Sagole District of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Tshipise-Sagole District lies alongside the Limpopo River which borders South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Participants

The sample consisted of 6 purposively selected school principals, 3 from primary schools and 3 from secondary schools. Those were principals whose schools enrolled a significant number of migrant learners.

Data Collection

Data were accessed through individual interviews with the six school principals. After permission was sought from the District Director, each school principal completed a consent form to participate in the study. Assurance that their responses would be kept confidential was given and they understood that they could voluntarily withdraw from participation.

FINDINGS

The sourced data was subjected to a thematic analysis so as to exhibit critical insights on the phenomenon under study. Data were coded and segmented into relevant categories, and explained inductively to generate meaning. The thick and rich descriptions were made on the sourced data to provide more enlightenment on the responses of participants regarding the challenges of managing schools with migrant learners. The anonymity of participants was up-held through the use of numbers for their identity (P1 to P6).

The barriers of migrant learners to education

Principals in all the six schools shared the same sentiments in regard to educational barriers that migrant learners experience and that it is their responsibility to ensure that all learners succeed by addressing those educational constraints and managing schools effectively. They pointed out that managing a school with migrant learners is a serious challenge because it hinges on the future of innocent souls. They also indicated that they sometimes fail to respond adequately to the needs of these learners as to create a very problematic state of affairs. The principal of one of the schools said that:

Migrant learners are not fully included in our education system and in particular, our schools, because we teach without regarding their needs. Our curriculum is designed to cater for South African learners and migrant learners just have to follow suit. There are no programmes that support inclusion and integration of migrant learners, the focus is only on learners with special needs (P6).

Some of the barriers that were delineated as hampering the learning of migrant children include language, socio-cultural background and economic experiences. The principal from another school revealed that:

Migrant learners cannot speak our language. Some teachers try to speak in English to explain words, but some migrant learners, especially small ones, do not even have a background of English and therefore, cannot understand. Other educators who try to speak the languages of migrant learners sometimes speak with these learners in their home languages in class and it causes confusion in the teaching process (P1).

However, it emerged that the schools which used Tshivenda as the dominant mother tongue experienced less challenges pertaining to the integration of migrant learners, especially those learners from Zimbabwe. It was explained that learners from Zimbabwe, in particular those that speak Shona, understand Tshivenda and English languages better than those who speak other languages.

The role of school principals

School principals revealed that it is their responsibility to manage their schools effectively by providing quality and equal education to all learners, despite that being a strenuous undertaking. One principal pointed out that:

Managing a school with learners from various backgrounds is a huge challenge. We do our best as a school to ensure that our school runs smoothly, but somehow we are not achieving our desired goal. Learners share the same classes and are taught by the same educators but sometimes migrant learners and local learners do not relate well. Migrant learners usually form their own groups and study together (P5).

Another principal added that:

In my office, I often solve issues of local learners who tease migrant learners and at times in ways that are really offending. However, it is only through instilling discipline and a sense of oneness that local learners can respect their fellow migrant learners. This will avoid the labelling and segregation of migrant learners (P3).

Parental involvement in assisting migrant learners

It emerged that some migrant learners stay with their siblings in a child-headed set up while others reside in make-shift shelters. These circumstances create situations where either the parents or guardians are not there to promote the learning of their children or are not interested in what goes on in school. A majority of participants emphasised this reduced involvement of parents of migrant

learners in school activities and suggested that efforts should be continuously made to encourage parents to develop an interest in the schooling of their children. Parents should attend parents' meetings and parents' evenings and be elected as members of SGBs because parental involvement contributes to the promotion of good relations and academic achievement. Two principals said: *Schools should always keep in touch with parents and give them hope. The Department of Home Affairs should not only assist South African learners in terms of applying for identification documents (ID), which they are doing now. They should also assist migrant learners in order to speed up the process. It is useless to educate learners who will drop out and end up roaming the streets because they lack documentation due to the delay by Home Affairs (P4).*

Sometimes parents just register their children and never report to school even when they are requested to. They usually think they will be interrogated about their children's lack of documentation because the process at Home Affairs is too long. This may even take months (P1).

DISCUSSION

Principals have a critical role to play in addressing the educational challenges of migrant learners and to ensure that their schools are managed effectively and efficiently. However, the unique challenges that their schools experience affect their roles and responsibilities. Literature review and empirical investigation reveal that language is a serious barrier to learning. It emerged that migrant learners are usually taught in other languages which are different from their home languages and this retards their ability to achieve. The lack of basic needs for learning such as uniforms, transport and stationery, make migrant learners feel uncomfortable and this affects their self-esteem. The challenge to obtain proper documents puts migrant learners at a disadvantage, especially at Grade 12 where they are supposed to sit for examinations and when they apply for bursaries. However, it was reported that various non-governmental organizations assist learners with school uniforms and that some of the migrant learners are sheltered in place where they are well catered for. The study also revealed that the parents of migrant learners are barely involved in the education of their children. The failure by society to meet the needs of migrant learners has often been cited as a breeding ground for aggressive learner behaviour.

IMPLICATIONS

Addressing the educational challenges of migrant learners is closely related to how effective and efficient school principals manage their schools. Effective school management implies that school principals support and promote the right to education, inclusive of migrant learners. The adoption of inclusive education and education for all policies assist in the mitigation of challenges experienced in the management of schools with migrant learners. This entails the involvement of all critical stakeholders in the running of schools, including parents, educators, school management teams, school governing bodies and the department of basic education.

CONCLUSION

Effective school management within regard to schools with migrant learners depends to a large extent on the support given to migrant learners through the promotion of an inclusive approach to education. Migrant learners should be fully incorporated in all the activities and programmes of the school as a strategy to aid their social integration and academic achievement. To foster effective school management, there has to be a balance between how school principals manage their schools and the flow of support that is drawn from the critical players in the education system. This is pivotal in the wellness of managing schools with migrant learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the responsibility of managing schools with migrant learners should not be solely the responsibility of school principals. This should be a shared responsibility. It is crucial, however, that the school principals should possess the right skills and vision to lead the school on the path of quality teaching and learning. Schools should have a system of profiling migrant learners and their education challenges in order to address them properly. With the profiling system in place, schools will be able to trace and keep track of the loopholes that exist and ensure that they are clogged. Schools also need the support and involvement of other concerned stakeholders and the government. The introduction and reinforcement of inclusive education and diversity programmes in schools should be highly regarded as this can assist to alleviate challenges of migrant learners. These generally appear in the form of ill-treatment and exclusion from other school programmes. School principals should strive to empower parents of migrant learners by making them feel welcomed and involve them in school activities. Parents may also come up with ideas on how their children can be assisted and this can bring some most needed relief to school principals.

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