

The Experiences of Part-time Primary School Teachers Studying in One University in Lesotho

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of part-time students at a university in Lesotho, aiming to comprehensively examine both the challenges and opportunities that come with this mode of study. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance was used as the theoretical framework as it is relevant in understanding the dynamics between educational structure, dialogic interactions, and the psychological and communication gap in distance learning environments. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants, evenly distributed across the first-year to third-year level, with four students representing each academic year of study. The researchers employed the Google Meet video conferencing platform to collect data from the participants. All interviews were recorded, and subsequently, the collected data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the challenges outweigh the opportunities presented by part-time study. Although some coordinators and lecturers provided psychosocial support, students reported challenges such as feeling isolated and discriminated against, lack of time management, financial constraints, and infrastructural limitations, among others. The study recommends that financial aid programs, grants, and scholarships should be designed specifically for part-time students to make higher education more accessible to them. Additionally, flexible payment options should be made available to accommodate various financial circumstances, easing the anxiety that financial constraints impose. Lastly, institutions should take proactive measures to create a more inclusive and respectful campus environment.

Keywords: Challenges, experiences, opportunities, primary school teachers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a crucial aspect of any society, and teachers play a significant role in shaping the future of the nation. One of the most significant current discussions in education pertains to teaching. Many scholars hold the perception that teaching is a demanding profession that requires dedication, passion, and a lot of hard work (Kurata *et al.*, 2022; Mokhets'engoane & Pallai, 2023). More recently, there has been a growing recognition of the advancement of technology and the proliferation of information, which has greatly increased the multifaceted role of a teacher. Malik (2018), therefore, concludes that technological advancement in education has drastically increased the role and challenges of teachers in the 21st century.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that as the education sector evolves, teachers must keep up with the latest trends and best practices to deliver quality education to their students (Department of Education of Australian Government, 2022; Green, 2021; OECD, 2021). Considering this, the pursuit of further education remains an issue of interest to the teachers. Many primary school teachers in Lesotho express a desire to enhance their skills, update their knowledge, and deepen their understanding of pedagogical practices. However, the demands of their teaching responsibilities often leave them with limited time and resources to engage in full-time higher education programs. This has led to a growing trend of primary school teachers opting for part-time studies to bridge the gap between their professional aspirations and practical constraints.



The decision to engage in part-time studies while maintaining full-time teaching commitments is driven by a multitude of motivations. Some teachers seek to advance their careers and attain higher qualifications, which could open doors to leadership positions within the education system (Soelistiyono & Chen, 2023; Wang et al., 2010). Others aspire to better address the evolving needs of students in a rapidly changing educational landscape. Moreover, the pursuit of part-time studies can be viewed as a testament to the teachers' dedication to self-improvement and a reflection of their commitment to providing quality education.

However, taking on part-time academic studies while managing full-time teaching duties poses several complex challenges that warrant thorough investigation (Evans, 2021). McCarthy (2019) validates this by emphasizing that balancing classroom teaching with academic tasks like assignments, coursework, and examinations can result in heightened stress and even burnout. This combination of responsibilities creates a demanding situation where teaching obligations and scholarly commitments intersect, potentially affecting teachers' well-being and their ability to sustain their profession effectively. Adding to the difficulty is the insufficient level of support from institutions and limited access to necessary resources. Educators who are juggling these dual roles might struggle with a lack of guidance and mentorship, amplifying the difficulties of managing both teaching and scholarly pursuits. Additionally, the shortage of available resources, including research materials and technological tools, can significantly impede their effectiveness in either role (Mokhets'engoane & Pal-lai, 2022; Selialia et al., 2023).

It is important to note that these challenges have broader implications beyond just the well-being of individual educators. The strain of managing both roles can potentially impact the quality of teaching, consequently influencing the educational experience of students. This means that the overall educational landscape in Lesotho could face compromised outcomes and potentially hinder student development due to the limitations faced by educators engaged in part-time academic pursuits.

Considering the significance of these challenges and the vital role that primary school educators play in Lesotho's education system, there exists a notable gap in understanding the unique experiences of those who undertake part-time academic studies while actively participating in teaching. This gap revolves around the intricate interplay between the challenges encountered and the potential opportunities that arise from this dual role. Thus, this study focuses on the various complexities surrounding the experiences of educators who are concurrently pursuing part-time academic endeavours and fulfilling teaching responsibilities. The primary objective of this research is to uncover the specific challenges and opportunities that these educators encounter as they navigate this combined journey.

The research objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To explore the opportunities that emerge from the unique intersection of part-time academic pursuits

and active teaching roles among primary school educators in Lesotho,

2. To identify the specific challenges faced by primary school educators in Lesotho who are engaged in part-time academic studies.

2. MOORE'S THEORY OF TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE

This theory, developed by Michael G. Moore, is used as a theoretical lens in the study. Moore (1997) defines "transactional distance" as the psychological and communication gap between the instructor and the learner in a learning environment influenced by course structure and interactions. This implies that in the distance learning scenario, there is a communication gap that exists due to the separation of the teacher and the students. In further understanding this theory, Moore and Kearsley (2012) account for three factors needed in the distance learning environment: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. According to Moore (1997), dialogue takes into consideration all forms of communication between the teacher and the students. This emphasizes that if there is interaction between the two, problems existing could be easily alleviated. As one scholar vocalized, "Within the context of clearly defined educational targets, cooperation, and understanding on the part of the teacher, and, ultimately, it culminates in solving the learners' problems" (Giosso et al., 2009, p. 2).

Another important factor is the structure of the course. It is defined as the rigidity and flexibility of the course. It includes the extent to which both goals and the objectives of the course are prescribed and the pedagogical approaches that might be employed (Falloon, 2011). Lastly, learner autonomy involves learner independence in the learning process. Therefore, Transactional Distance Theory highlights the significance of achieving an equilibrium between structure and dialogue in educational settings. In the case of part-time students, the structure of students' academic programs and the level of interactivity and support they receive greatly influence their perception of part-time studies. It is this apprehension that has prompted the adoption of this theory in pursuit of the present study.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. The Benefits of Studying Part-time

Studying part-time offers several benefits for teachers who wish to advance their careers. It allows them to continue teaching while pursuing their studies. This means that they can apply the knowledge and skills they acquire in the classroom, benefiting both themselves and their students. They gain a deeper understanding of the subjects they teach, making them more effective educators. This enhances the quality of education they provide to their students. Part-time studies also provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their teaching practice and identify areas for improvement. This, in turn, leads to professional growth and development.

Again, studying part-time is more flexible than full-time study, allowing teachers to balance their work and

personal commitments (Falloon, 2011). Further, studying part-time is often more affordable than full-time study, as teachers can spread the cost of tuition fees over a more extended period. Part-time studies provide an opportunity for teachers to advance their careers and improve their qualifications. Most primary school teachers have a negative attitude towards technology, referring to themselves as BBTs (*Born Before Technology*). Studying part-time improves teachers' attitudes towards technology because it plays a significant role in part-time studies. Using online learning platforms such as video conferencing and other digital tools enables teachers to attend classes remotely and complete assignments online. This provides flexibility and convenience for teachers who cannot attend classes physically (Nkhi et al., 2023). Technology also provides an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with fellow students and access learning resources from anywhere.

3.2. The Challenges of Teachers Studying Part-time

Studying part-time can be a great way for teachers to enhance their skills and knowledge, but it also comes with its own set of challenges (Sappa et al., 2015). Primary school teachers studying part-time face numerous challenges, including the inability to manage time, financial constraints, and failure to balance work and studies. In this section, we will explore some of the challenges that teachers face when studying part-time.

First and foremost, teachers who are studying part-time need to be able to manage their time effectively to ensure that they can meet all their commitments. One of the biggest challenges that teachers face when studying part-time is time management. Balancing work, family, and study can be extremely difficult, and it requires a lot of planning and organization because teaching is a demanding job, and adding study on top makes it even more challenging (Creagh et al., 2023). Teachers who are studying part-time often find themselves struggling to keep up with their workload, which can impact their ability to perform well at work. Further, Teachers who are studying part-time often have limited study time available to them. This can make it difficult for them to keep up with coursework and assignments, which can impact their grades and overall performance.

Another challenge is maintaining a work-life balance. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is important for everyone, but it can be particularly challenging for teachers who are studying part-time. Studying part-time can be inflexible, especially if teachers have to attend classes at set times. This can make it difficult for them to balance their work and study commitments because they have other responsibilities, such as caring for the family (Ali et al., 2017). Apart from that, Soelistiyono and Chen (2023) contend that balancing work, study, and personal commitments can be difficult, and it requires a lot of effort and dedication to overcome these challenges and achieve their goals. Furthermore, working as a teacher is a physically and mentally demanding job, and adding study to the mix can be exhausting. That is why Parimala (2019) reinforces that teaching is a demanding profession that requires a lot of commitment. Teachers who are studying part-time often find themselves feeling tired and drained,

which can impact their ability to perform well at work. They are at risk of burnout, which can have serious consequences for their health and well-being. Arguably, burnout can lead to physical and mental exhaustion, as well as feelings of cynicism and detachment from work.

It is undeniable that financial constraints limit students' participation in part-time studies in most institutions globally. Part-time studying requires one to pay for oneself, and it does not come cheaply. The findings of the study conducted by Soelistiyono and Chen (2023) suggest that financial challenges prohibit several students who intend to pursue part-time studies. Many teachers struggle to afford tuition fees and other study-related issues. This can put a strain on their finances and make it difficult for them to make ends meet. Most teachers pursue those studies with the hope of achieving better career opportunities; however, this may not necessarily lead to better career opportunities. Some teachers may find that their employers do not value their additional qualifications or that there are limited opportunities for career advancement. As a result of financial challenges, Moore et al. (2022) opine that students find it very stressful and challenging to maintain healthy relationships with their more affluent peers.

Finally, the available literature suggests that lack of support is a huge challenge to part-time students. Studying part-time can be a lonely experience, especially if teachers do not have the support of their colleagues or family members. Without support, it can be difficult for teachers to stay motivated and focus on their studies (Letseka-Manka et al., 2023). Support networks are essential for primary school teachers studying part-time. These networks include family, friends, colleagues, and fellow students. Family and friends provide emotional support and encouragement, while colleagues provide practical support, such as covering classes when teachers have to attend classes. Fellow students provide a sense of community and support during the challenging times of part-time studies.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study is a case study that involves the experiences of primary school teachers who are pursuing part-time studies at a higher institution in Lesotho. The primary goal of this case study is to provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Crilly, 2019; Hays, 2003; Yin, 2011). Consequently, the research employed the case study methodology and utilized purposive sampling to select participants. Purposive sampling was employed in this study because it allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research focus. (Black, 2013; Saunders et al., 2012). In this case, the researchers aimed to gain insights from primary school teachers who were actively engaged in part-time studies, making purposive sampling an ideal choice for targeting this specific group.

Using the Google Meet video conferencing platform, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants, evenly distributed across the first-year to third-year levels, with four students representing each

academic year. All interviews were recorded, and subsequently, the collected data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. This approach allowed for a rigorous exploration of the rich and diverse experiences of primary school teachers in their pursuit of part-time studies.

To ensure the confidentiality of participants, their real names were withheld, and they were assigned pseudonyms such as participant A, participant B, and so forth. Additionally, participants were informed that their involvement in this study was entirely voluntary and without any associated costs. They were also reassured that they had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point if they wished to do so.

5. FINDINGS

From the participants' responses, two themes were generated: opportunities brought by the part-time mode and associated challenges. The direct quotations from the participants' responses were included.

5.1. Opportunities

According to the participants in the study, it appears that students often encounter more challenges than opportunities while pursuing part-time studies. However, it is important to note that students do express appreciation for the positive experiences they have encountered during their part-time studies. For instance, one participant vividly stated:

"Some lecturers are truly God-sent. They genuinely care for our academic welfare, displaying remarkable humanity and kindness. They nurture us and create an unbelievably conducive space for learning and teaching. Their expertise is commendable, and may they keep it up."

These remarks highlight the students' gratitude for the supportive and dedicated lecturers who play a crucial role in their part-time education journey. Despite the challenges faced, these positive experiences contribute to a sense of encouragement and motivation among the students. Another student emphasized:

"They receive psychosocial support from the program coordinator and some lectures, which is highly commendable."

5.2. Challenges

One of the challenges faced by primary school teachers who are pursuing part-time studies is geographical location, often compounded by network connectivity issues. Several participants in the study underscored this challenge. As one participant articulated:

"Most times, I must climb to the hill to access the internet and participate in class proceedings, but this is not always possible. We are given adequate reading material, but the challenge is access to the internet."

In addition, some participants expressed a challenging situation they face, noting that reliance on solar energy for charging electronic devices poses a significant obstacle. They remarked:

"For some of us, we rely on solar energy to charge our gadgets, and when we experience prolonged cloudy days, like

the current situation where 3 days have passed, it becomes a devastating setback for our virtual class attendance."

Additionally, the participants highlighted the geographical isolation of their location. One participant stated:

"We are situated far from urban areas in extremely remote areas, which makes it difficult to access reliable internet services or utilize internet cafes for the submission of assignments. These circumstances have led to overwhelming frustrations among us as students."

An additional obstacle that emerged during the study was the absence of a consistent electricity supply coupled with adverse weather conditions. One participant articulated:

"Given our remote geographical location, the availability of electricity is severely limited, rendering it a formidable challenge for us to engage in online classes".

Another participant vocalized:

"Weather conditions in our area pose a significant challenge, with long periods of heavy rain lasting up to a week or more. This becomes problematic as we heavily rely on solar energy to charge our electronic devices, and prolonged cloudy or rainy weather disrupts this energy source."

One significant challenge emphasized by part-time students pertains to the financial burden associated with self-funding their education. The exorbitant tuition fees were underscored as a substantial obstacle in this regard. One participant lamented:

"We spend a lot of money on this program because of the already limited salary, and this causes anxieties that affect our focus on our school work."

This viewpoint sheds light on the profound impact that financial strain can have on the educational experience of part-time students. It highlights the need for accessible and affordable education options to alleviate the financial pressures that many learners face.

Part-time students raised a pressing concern regarding the treatment they receive on campus despite the significant financial contributions they make. They expressed feelings of ill-treatment and disrespect while navigating the campus environment. One participant pointed out:

"While we may be categorized as part-time students, we fulfill our financial obligations by paying the full amount of what is expected from us. However, it is disheartening that we often feel ill-treated and disrespected when we are on campus. When we seek assistance in various offices, we are met with an unwelcoming atmosphere, where it seems like our presence irritates the employees."

This sentiment draws attention to the need for equitable treatment and respect for all students, regardless of their enrolment status. It emphasizes the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive campus environment.

Another challenge articulated by part-time students relates to the struggle of maintaining a work-life balance. As parents and caregivers, they face a multitude of responsibilities, including household duties, childcare, cooking, and spousal obligations. These commitments significantly encroach upon their available study time. One student elaborated:

"Our limitations are closely tied to time constraints. Balancing the demands of being parents and caregivers with our

academic pursuits is a constant challenge. Our time for study is compromised due to these competing obligations."

This challenge stresses the unique struggles faced by part-time students, who often juggle multiple roles and responsibilities alongside their educational pursuits. It highlights the need for flexibility and support mechanisms to help them successfully manage these demands while pursuing their studies.

6. DISCUSSION

The study's findings suggest that students who are learning remotely face more challenges than opportunities. However, it is crucial to note that some lecturers create a positive and supportive learning environment that helps these students feel more connected to the campus community and greatly aids in their academic development (Manka, 2022). In emphasis, Letseka-Manka et al. (2023) have identified a strong sense of belonging as a significant factor in determining students' overall academic success.

The available evidence based on the findings indicates that there is a problem with internet connectivity, which severely affects the full participation of students at a distance. These findings seem quite interesting as they corroborate Henaku (2020)'s findings that lack of internet connectivity could hamper students' engagement in online classrooms. Furthermore, Dube (2020) concurs that poor internet connection poses a threat to student learning.

Along similar lines, the study by Morena and Mokhets'engoane (2023) discovered that due to rurality and remote areas where many primary teachers emanate from, there is a challenge of stable internet connection. They indicated that students must travel long distances to areas where there is stable internet. Again, the findings portrayed that during the winter season or rainy days, it even becomes a challenge to charge their laptops since they rely on solar energy. In support of this view, higher education institutions in South Africa are also faced with the problem of poor internet connection. This was revealed in a study conducted by Mpungose (2020) during the COVID-19 period. This, therefore, illustrates the considerable efforts some individuals must make to overcome these obstacles in their quest for learning opportunities and fundamentally underscores the formidable hurdles faced by students in remote areas, emphasizing the importance of considering such challenges in the context of distance education.

The findings of the study further revealed that the students from the concerned institution feel pressured and discriminated against by other students who are attending in the regular mode. These findings resonate with Letseka-Manka et al. (2023) view that distance learners in one particular institution in Lesotho also lacked a sense of belonging as a result of exclusion and discrimination faced within the campus. These researchers agree that failing to provide a conducive and inclusive learning environment that caters to the needs of all learners, irrespective of their mode of study, is a recipe for disaster.

It is also apparent from the study that simultaneously working and studying can be challenging for the students. This has also been revealed by Kwakwa and Alhassan (2012)'s study, which states that working and schooling at

the same time is a burden that sometimes discourages students from studying. These researchers have emphasized that students have to battle with class schedules, time for private studies and assignments and, at the same time, be expected to fulfil their daily work activities wherever they are employed.

It was also revealed that students who are part-time experience financial constraints. This is evident in the fact that they have to incur a lot of costs when commuting to the university for physical classes, as well as the payment of tuition fees, among others. Similar findings have been shared by Dev et al. (2023) that financial constraints have a significant impact in hindering progress and affecting the motivational levels of students in higher education.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Part-time studies are becoming increasingly popular among primary school teachers in Lesotho. This is due to the growing demand for qualified teachers and the need for career advancement. The experiences shared by part-time students in a recent study provide valuable insights into the challenges they face and the opportunities that can be leveraged to improve their educational journey. However, the findings also reveal that the challenges students encounter often outweigh the benefits. These results highlight the multifaceted nature of their experiences, which include financial constraints, campus treatment, balancing work and personal life, and infrastructural challenges.

First and foremost, it is evident that the financial burden of part-time education looms large for many students. The exorbitant costs of tuition and the need for self-funding weigh heavily on their minds. These financial anxieties not only impact their ability to access education but also disrupt their focus on academic pursuits. Addressing this challenge is imperative to ensure that education remains accessible to all, irrespective of their financial circumstances. To alleviate this burden, institutions should actively seek ways to provide financial support. Scholarships, grants, and financial aid programs tailored to part-time students can make higher education more accessible. Additionally, flexible payment options should be made available to accommodate various financial circumstances, easing the anxiety that financial constraints impose.

Furthermore, the infrastructural challenges, such as limited access to reliable internet and electricity in remote areas, hinder the effective participation of part-time students in virtual learning environments. These obstacles emphasize the necessity of investing in digital infrastructure and expanding educational access to remote regions. By doing so, institutions can ensure that no student is left behind due to geographical limitations.

The issue of ill-treatment and disrespect experienced by part-time students on campus is deeply concerning. All students should be welcomed and treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their enrolment status. Fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus environment is vital to enhancing the overall student experience and promoting a sense of belonging. Institutions should take proactive measures to create a more inclusive and respectful campus

environment. Staff should undergo training programs on inclusivity and respect, ensuring that all students, regardless of their enrolment status, feel welcome and valued.

Lastly, the struggle to maintain a work-life balance among part-time students who fulfil various caregiving roles highlights the need for flexible learning options and support mechanisms. Institutions should consider implementing strategies that accommodate the diverse responsibilities of part-time students, allowing them to effectively manage their academic and personal lives.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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