

Education in Small States Research Group

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Past Activities 2007

Nkobi O Pansiri carried out qualitative fieldwork between April and July 2007 on school retention in basic education in Botswana. The case study focused on three remote primary schools and one linked junior secondary located in the North West District Council. These schools serve some minority ethnic groups, namely the Basarwa, BaHerero, BaYei and BaMbukushu. Participants in the study included children who dropped out of the school system, parents, children who are still in school, teachers, boarding staff, education officers and officers who work for the Remote Area Development Programme.

Research methods used in the fieldwork included documentary analysis, field observation and qualitative interviews. It emerged from the fieldwork that school retention in the case study area is a major problem facing the government of Botswana. This is evidenced by the many children of school going age found in remote settlements around those schools who have withdrawn from the education system.

Various issues emerged from this field work. Children raised sensitive issues, some of which are emotionally touching, as major factors that influenced their decisions to withdraw from the school system. In some cases parents corroborated stories narrated by their children about their experiences of schooling. Such issues include unfriendly policies of boarding, harsh pedagogical approaches, poor management of the Remote Area Dweller Programme (RADP) and some cases of the abuse of children. From field observation, it can be seen how family backgrounds contribute to drop-out problems. This is because there is little at the household level that encourages children to see value in schooling. For example, lack of permanent shelter for storing clothes and educational materials, including a place to do homework are common among families of a certain ethnic group. There are also issues of cultural conflict between the main Setswana culture propagated by the school system and the culture of the dominant Basarwa people. The elderly Basarwa people do not believe that schools are made to improve their lives, but rather see them as another way of helping other ethnic groups to dominate them and their children.

Major constraints experienced during the research include travelling from one point to another in a terrain of heavy sand; mosquito bites causing sleepless nights; problems with research equipment such as tape recorders that use re-chargeable batteries in settlements without electricity; isolation from communication network systems; and difficulty in understanding local languages.

In conclusion, this fieldwork was not only an interesting experience but a challenge that identified major problems that need the concerted attention of all stakeholders. The study identifies critical issues relating to policy and practice, as well as methodological questions for qualitative researchers. Participants made comments such as 'Please come and help us so that our children can benefit from our school'; 'What is going to happen after your visit?'; 'We want to hear our voices in the radio to make sure that government has also heard what we said'. This means that this case study cannot be an end in itself but a means to an end.

Having served as a public servant for a continuous period of 34 years, former Bristol graduate, **Dr Linda Williams**, took up a new appointment in 2007 as Chairperson of the Public Service Commission in the Turks & Caicos Islands.

Dr Williams is the product of a very small fishing community of south Caicos, one of the Islands in the Turks & Caicos chain of islands. Her career began as a school teacher and progressed through the ranks of School Adviser, Chief Education Officer, Director of Education and Permanent Secretary of Education. The last seven years of her public life were spent serving as Senior Executive in the public service, and for a short period as Supervisor of Elections.

Dr Williams is a graduate of Shortwood Teachers' College (Jamaica), the University of the West Indies (Jamaica), the University of Exeter (UK) and the University of Bristol (UK), where she successfully completed her doctoral studies in education.