

Full Length Research Paper

Minimizing teacher transfer requests: A study of Suba district secondary schools, Kenya

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Teacher transfer requests interfere with the stability and continuity of teaching thereby causing low student performance. The purpose of the study was to investigate how teacher transfer requests can be minimized. The study employed a descriptive survey design. The population of the study included 16 head teachers, 126 teachers and the provincial staffing officer. The sample had 13 head teachers, 98 teachers and the provincial staffing officer after 30% of the stratified population were involved in the pilot. The 3 strata were rural location, urban location and the school located within the Islands, which had diverse working conditions. However, 29 (30%) of the teachers were randomly sampled for interviews. The data were collected using questionnaires as well as interview schedules. The study revealed that teacher transfer requests could be reduced if transport and communication to schools was improved; electricity and houses were made available to teachers; teachers employed from the locality and posted next to their families, class sizes were reduced, teacher induction and mentoring programs encouraged, retention bonuses instituted and teachers involved in decision making at school level. The study recommended that the government should provide electricity and improve accessibility in Suba district by improving roads; school boards should facilitate the availability of housing facilities to teachers. More teachers should be employed through decentralized system to reduce student teacher ratio. The head teachers and school managements should adopt induction programs to support new teachers and provide retention bonuses for teachers to make them want to stay longer.

Key words: Teacher transfer, mobility, retention.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas high-performing schools are distinguished by stability and continuity of teaching, studies show that teaching traditionally has been characterized as an occupation with high levels of transfers (Bryk et al., 1990). Ingersoll (2001) and Feng (2005) contend that since teacher transfer does not contribute to a net loss in the total supply of public school teachers in a country, most empirical research have assumed that it is less significant. On the other hand, Caillods (1989) maintains that because the art of teaching is a developmental process, it involves a complex set of skills, many of which can only be well polished on uninterrupted job

experience, makes the impact of teacher transfer on learning process to be the same as attrition.

In Kenya, given that the government had frozen supply-driven teacher recruitment in 1997 and resorted to replacing only those lost under natural attrition in 2001, teacher shortage has worsened with increase in student enrolment as a result of the Free Primary Education (FPE) (UNESCO, 2003). Therefore, it has been essential to safeguard the exit of the few existing teachers by the school managements, for in general, getting a chance to recruit teachers under this approach is a long, expensive and uncertain process at school level (Republic of Kenya, 2003a).

Amongst the twelve districts of Nyanza Province in Kenya, Suba district teachers have been leading in the number of transfer requests (Ariko, 2009). Ingersoll

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(2001) contends that high levels of employee transfers or desire to leave are both cause and effect of dysfunction and low performance in organizations. Teacher transfer requests raise questions about the professional satisfaction of teachers and have potential implications for school overall performance. It is necessary to find solutions on how teacher transfer request can be minimized. Therefore, purpose of the study was to investigate the how teacher transfer requests can be minimized.

Strategies employed to minimize teacher transfer request in USA

A study by NCREL (2001) in its seven-state region (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin) conducted amongst the 3,506 superintendents, shows that across all the states, there are school districts and schools that appear to be implementing effective strategies for minimizing teachers transfers. Some of them which have been received include teacher incentives, induction and mentoring as well as instituting a retention bonus.

The Council of the City of New York (2004) underscores the importance of improvement of school safety and discipline in minimizing teacher transfer requests. They noted that it is vital that teachers feel safe when they enter a school to improve teacher retention. Feelings that schools are unsafe are pervasive among teachers and one of their main sources of dissatisfaction. Teachers and students deserve comprehensive school safety plan that addresses safety issues at every school. The school safety might also be contingent upon the student discipline and the culture of surrounding community.

The NCREL (2001) survey supports the notion that when districts restructure their schools to make them smaller, more high-quality teachers stay in those districts. Research indicates that restructuring schools to make them smaller may result in an improved environment for teaching (Bryk, 1994). For example, in the Chicago Public Schools system, an effort to improve student achievement spurred a movement to create smaller schools within big schools. In addition to improved achievement, this urban school system has found that the new, smaller schools created out of large schools have increased cooperation among teachers and have involved teachers more in the process of educational reform (Joravsky, 2000).

Ingersoll (2001), notes that provision of retention bonuses has been successful in minimizing teacher transfer requests. Retention bonuses involve rewarding a teacher who successfully completes a period of service in a region designated as hard-to-staff. A study by Texas Centre for Educational Research (1999) on teacher retention revealed that the legislature authorizes the

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to provide assistance to qualified teachers to repay their student loans. In addition, under the "Loan Deferment and Cancellation Programs", Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides a number of opportunities for teachers to defer or cancel federal student loans if they teach in a designated shortage area. Individuals with loans under the Stafford Loan program may cancel up to \$5,000 of a federal loan by teaching for five years in hard to staff areas.

Survey results cited by Hare and Heap (2001) indicate that teacher induction programs are very effective in minimizing teacher transfers. According to the NCREL (2001) survey, adoption of teacher induction and support programmes proved successful in keeping high-quality teachers in the seven NCREL districts. For example, in the state of Michigan the law formally requires that new teachers receive "intensive" professional development or additional training within 15 days of the first three years of teaching. Whereas there is a one year of support as part of the teacher-licensing system in Indiana, other states like Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin provide some funding to encourage districts or groups of districts to develop support programs. A majority of districts providing teacher support and induction reported that transfers had been reduced by 50% or more (NCREL, 2001). Similarly, Spuhler and Zetler's (1995) three-year evaluation of the Montana Beginning Teacher Support Program (BTSP) found that retention rates were higher for those who participated in the mentoring programs.

Another strategy that has been found to be successful in minimizing teacher transfer requests is to recruit teachers from the community they belong. NCREL (2001) study revealed that states like Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have seemed to make the most use of these mechanisms. Under this alternative the rationale is that it is easier to retain people who have deep roots in the community. Craig et al. (1998) argue that the assumption in teacher recruitment from the community is that, when student teachers from within each region are recruited, then it is hoped that personal history and family connections will entice them to return to teach in their home area after they attain their teacher certification

Strategies employed to minimize teacher transfer request in Africa

Craig et al. (1998) observe that financial incentives, in the form of a hardship allowance, travel allowance, or subsidized housing, in addition to non-monetary incentives such as special study leave or better training opportunities have had positive impact on teacher retention in Africa. Mulkeen (2005) found out that a number of countries in Africa have employed this strategy: Mozambique for example employs a system of financial bonuses for teachers who locate in rural areas and teachers who teach two shifts. Two shift schools are

found more frequently in the areas of a high population density. In Lesotho, a flat bonus of 275 Maloti (47 USD) is paid per month to teachers who locate in the mountainous hardship zones. Similarly, in 2001, the Uganda government introduced a hardship allowance of 20% of basic salary for 'hard-to-reach' areas (Mulkeen, 2005).

Hedges (2002) study reveals that in Ghana, a policy that involved posting newly qualified teachers in pairs seems to work well. Those posted with another teacher, seemed to draw strength from the ready-made friendship, especially in hostile communities, even if they had not known each other beforehand. Another strategy in Ghana involved linking rural deployment with a teacher education outreach program, with the aim of helping female teachers to feel safe and have a greater sense of control over their deployment (Hedges, 2000).

The Education Management Information System (EMIS) data in Malawi reveals a strong association between the availability of housing in an area and the retention of teachers in schools and more so female teachers (Mulkeen, 2005). Similarly in Uganda, a study on Primary School Teachers Attrition considered provision of housing to be a key factor in ensuring teacher retention especially in rural areas, while in Mozambique, the same study reveals that the Ministry puts up a director's house in some schools. In addition, some NGO's and even local communities, have constructed teacher housing in an attempt to make rural locations more attractive. In Lesotho too, teacher housing is not normally provided, but some NGOs and community groups have provided accommodation (Mulkeen, 2005), with some observable success on retaining teachers.

It is noteworthy from these studies that successful attempts in minimizing teacher transfer requests in the USA have been due to teacher induction and mentoring, improvement of school safety and discipline, restructuring schools to make them smaller, recruitment of teachers from the community they belong and the provision of retention bonuses (Council of the City of New York, 2004; NCREL, 2001; Spuhler and Zetler, 1995; Hare and Heap, 2001; Texas Centre for Educational Research, 1999). However in Africa the provision of financial incentives in the form of a hardship allowance, travel allowance housing, special study leave, training opportunities have had positive impact on teacher retention in Africa (Craig et al., 1998; Mulkeen, 2005). This study therefore investigated the extent to which these strategies would also work in Suba district to minimize transfer requests of teachers in secondary schools. In addition, the study investigated the extent to which the improvement of physical and social amenities would reduce teacher transfer requests.

METHODOLOGY

The study used descriptive survey design to explore teachers',

head teachers' and staffing officer's knowledge and feelings on how teacher transfer requests could be minimized in Suba district. The population of the study consisted of 16 head teachers and 126 teachers of the 16 public secondary schools as well as the provincial staffing officer. The sample was selected by saturated sampling technique after 3 (18.8%) head teachers in 3 schools out of 16 and their 28 (22.2%) teachers out of 126 had been involved in the pilot study. The 3 schools for pilot study were identified by stratified sampling by location of schools. The 3 strata were rural location, urban location and the school located within the Islands, which had diverse working conditions. The sample consisted of 98 teachers, 13 head teachers in 13 secondary public schools, and the provincial staffing officer. Essentially, the whole population was involved in the study except those who were involved in the pilot study. Questionnaires were used to collect information from teachers and head teachers while in-depth interview helped in collecting information from the provincial staffing officer who approves teacher transfers.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the form of frequency counts and presented in tables according to school, student, teacher and management factors. Bar graphs were then used to show the summaries of teachers' and head teachers' responses on how to reduce teacher transfer requests. Data from the open-ended sections of the questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively by arranging the responses thematically, after which the main themes and patterns in the responses were identified and analyzed to determine the adequacy, usefulness and consistency. Responses from in-depth interview with the Staffing Officer were audio taped, transcribed and analyzed in an on-going process according to themes, categories, and sub-categories that emerged and then tallied and presented in quoted words and phrases.

RESULTS

The teacher responses as shown in Figure 1 indicated that by availing electricity, improving transport and communication, improving housing facilities and offering chances for further studies would reduce teacher transfer requests in Suba district. Majority of the head teachers had similar responses though they had greater preference to need for availability of electricity and availability of housing facilities for teachers.

Similarly, teacher responses to the open ended questions confirmed the feelings expressed in the closed ended questions. Consequently, 78 (79.6%) were for improvement of accessibility of schools by improvement of roads and means of transport; 87 (88.8%) were for provision of electricity and 71 (72.5%) were for the provision of housing facilities next to or within the schools for teacher transfer requests to reduce.

The teachers and head teachers were further asked to indicate which of the possible listed solutions may reduce teacher transfer requests influenced by teacher factors. Their responses were as indicated in Figure 2. The results obtained show that teacher transfer requests influenced by teacher factors would be reduced generally by employing teachers from the locality and posting teachers next to their families. However, bonding of teachers as a solution to teacher transfer requests as recommended by head teachers was not popular amongst teachers (Figure 2). To explore how the teacher

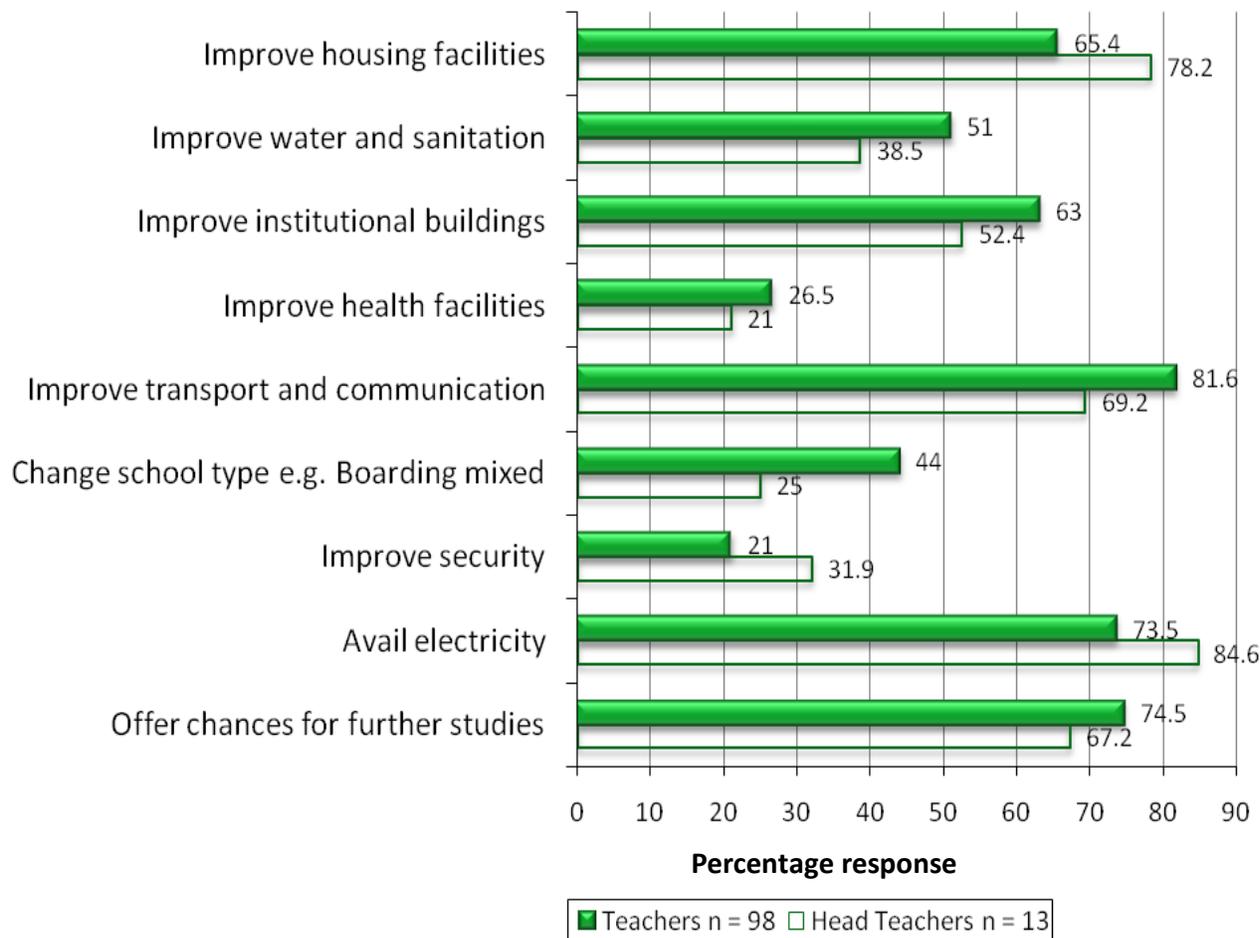


Figure 1. Teachers' and head teachers' responses on how teacher transfer requests due to socioeconomic and environmental factors could be minimized.

transfer requests due to student factors could be reduced in Suba district, both teachers' and head teachers' responses were recorded as shown in Figure 3.

As indicated in Figure 3, teachers' responses indicated that many teachers were for the reduction of class sizes and admission of high achieving students for teacher transfer requests to be reduced. Though head teachers had a similar response, but to a comparatively lower percentage to teachers' response (Figure 3). The head teachers however had greater preference for the increase of number of streams for teacher transfer request to be reduced.

To explore how the teacher transfer request due to management factors could be reduced in Suba district, both teachers' and head teachers' responses were recorded as shown in Figure 4. The obtained results revealed that the majority of head teachers preferred decentralization of teacher recruitment and institution of retention bonuses as a solution to teacher transfer requests influenced by management factors. The teachers on the other hand preferred that when human relations were improved, teachers were involved in

decision making, retention bonus was introduced and induction as well as mentoring programs is adopted then teacher transfer requests may be reduced.

The possible success of retention bonus in reducing teacher transfer requests was also expressed by the staffing officer when he said that:

Teacher retention bonus can be more successful than bonding a teacher. Teachers view bonding policy to be punitive and defensive while retention bonus presents an aspect of a goal to aspire for. For example teachers that successfully complete one year of service would be eligible to certain benefits. For each year of service a teacher would have a bonus placed aside and when they complete a fixed number of years. If a teacher leaves a district, unvested funds are forfeited.

Similarly, results from open ended question revealed that 67 (68.4%) of the teachers expressed interest in transferring to or continue staying in hard-ship zone school if hardship allowance could be offered. In addition, of primary interest is the impact of retention bonus on

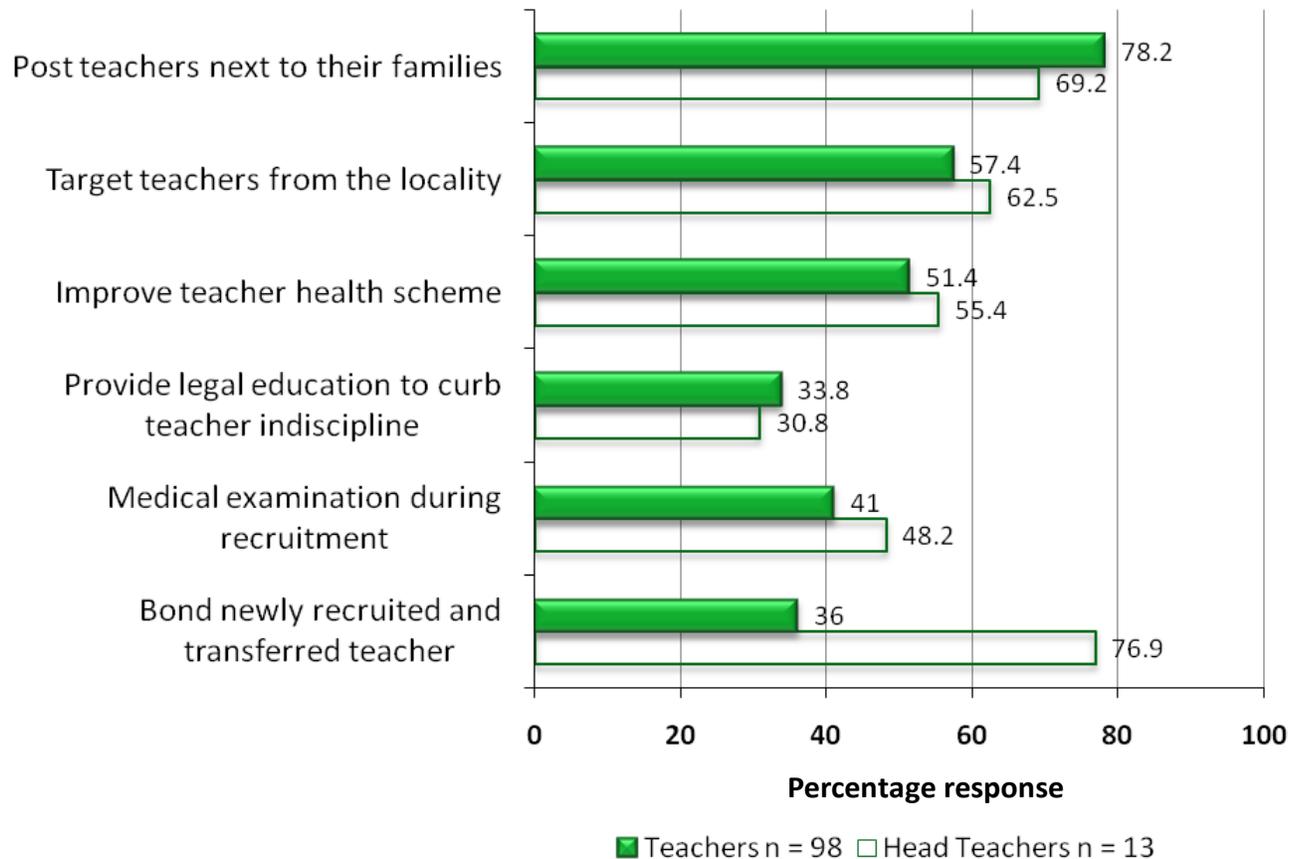


Figure 2. Teachers' and head teachers' responses on how teacher transfer requests due to teacher factors could be minimized.

reduction of teacher transfer requests. The data from Suba district schools suggest that teachers may respond to retention bonus more than bonding policy. In addition 83 (84.7%) teachers expressed unhappiness with the 5 years teacher bonding policy in Suba district.

DISCUSSION

In many ways the improvements that were considered for reducing teacher transfer requests were a reflection of the reasons for requesting for transfers which had been found in Ariko's (2009) study. Ariko's study notes that factors that influenced teacher transfer request for example were lack of housing, poor accessibility, lack of electricity and poor communication which the teachers felt should be improved for transfer requests to be reduced. It was therefore quite logical that these conditions that influenced the transfer requests needed to be improved for they may lead to reduction of teacher transfer requests.

Consistent with other studies by Kayizzi (1991) and Matovu (2001) on how to reduce teacher transfer requests, the data from Suba district suggested that teachers do respond to availability of housing. However,

there are important differences in the response of teachers and head teachers. The head teachers responded more to the need for availability of houses (Figure 1). Probably because of more responsibilities attributed to head teachers, they needed to be housed within the school more than teachers. Quality housing near the school could be a significant incentive for teachers, and particularly for female teachers with families (Mulkeen, 2005).

The study also showed efforts to improve security and health facilities less valued as ways that could reduce teacher transfer requests (Figure 1). This implied that insecurity was not quite an issue to teachers in Suba district that would make them request for transfers. In spite of the low response on improving health facilities, still health issues could not be down played. The TSC (2004b) observed that one of the most captivating of the emergent issues is that transfer requests have been tied to HIV/AIDS. Teachers argue that separating spouses is tantamount to condemning them to HIV/AIDS exposure since studies show that HIV/AIDS prevalence in Suba district is high. Probably it may be prudent to infer that HIV/AIDS prevalence could have led to both head teachers' and teachers' responses that, teachers should be posted next to their families to reduce transfer

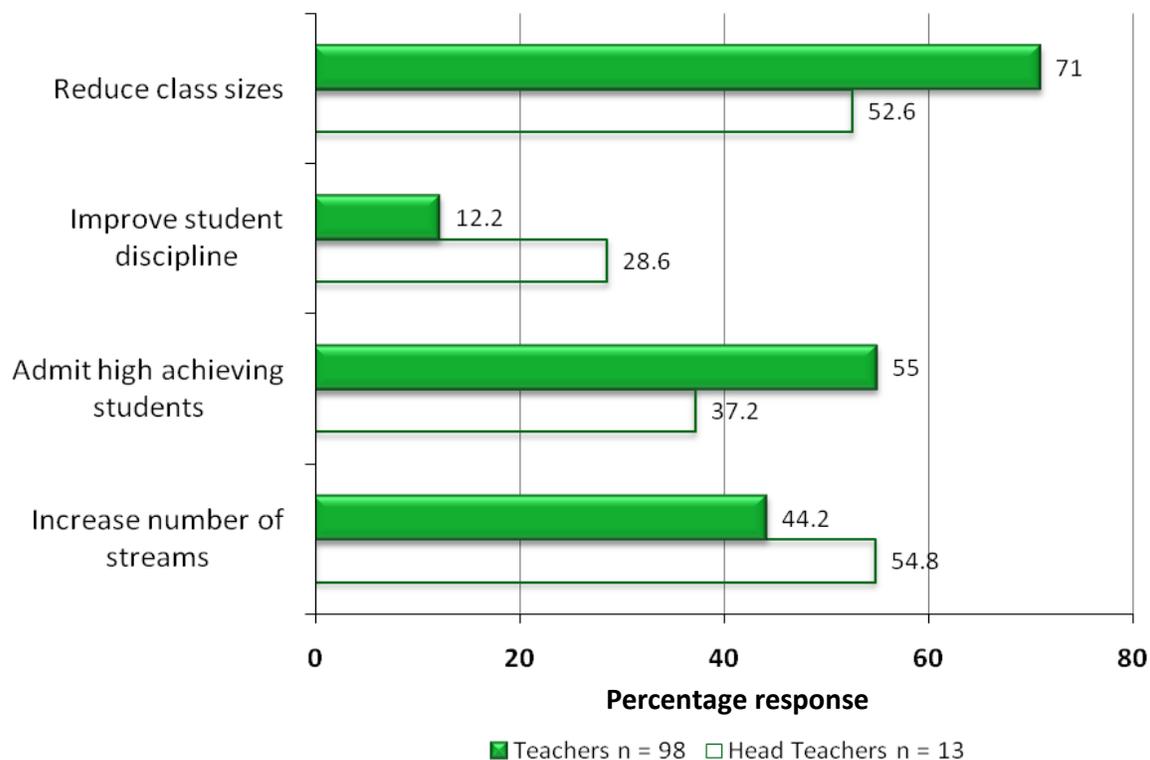


Figure 3. Teachers' and head teachers' responses on how teacher transfer requests due to student factors could be minimized.

requests (Figure 2).

This study revealed that targeted recruitment of the local teachers from specific geographical regions may reduce teacher transfer request. According to Ariko's (2009) study, rural location of schools in Suba district influenced teacher transfer requests. Mulkeen (2005) notes that teachers would only accept a rural post if they saw it as temporary, and as a path to a more desirable job or related career progression. Hedges (2002) raised an interesting possibility that teachers from poorer backgrounds were more likely to value the relative security of the teaching profession and take up their postings in the locality. However, this strategy could involve a trade-off between a merit-based system for rural roots if the teacher recruitment system is probably adjusted to favor teachers from a particular area.

The differentials in response between teachers and head teachers on bonding of teachers as a solution to teacher transfer requests is of concern in this study. While head teachers affirmed that bonding of teachers should be continued to reduce transfer requests, teachers negated the policy. The fact that the head teachers were the accounting officers for their institutions and participated in recruiting the teachers, they were therefore probably keen on the bonding policy for stability of their staff. On the other hand, teachers could have been only keen on getting on to the TSC pay roll and

transfer later to a place of their choice. By and large the bonding policy may only control transfers but not reduce transfer requests which are basically occasioned by attitude of the teachers on the prevailing situation in their schools.

Though, studies by UNAIDS and WHO (2004) shows that the HIV/AIDS prevalence in Suba district was highest in Kenya, both teachers and head teachers did not indicate that there was need for an improved health scheme or need for medical examination during recruitment to reduce teacher transfer requests. This finding was rather surprising, because it was expected that in view of the prevailing situation they could have preferred an improved health scheme. But still the findings indicated in Figure 2 show that both head teachers and teachers felt that posting teachers next to their families could reduce transfer request linked to teacher factors. This finding could mean that it was a reaction towards alleviation of sickness related to HIV/AIDS that could lead to transfer requests. The TSC (2004b) reported that transfer requests had been tied to HIV/AIDS and the teachers argued that separating spouses is tantamount to condemning them to HIV/AIDS exposure.

Similar to this study, the Council of the City of New York (2004) study also recommended that reduced class sizes would reduce teacher transfer requests. Fundamentally, the low pupil teacher ratio is regarded as

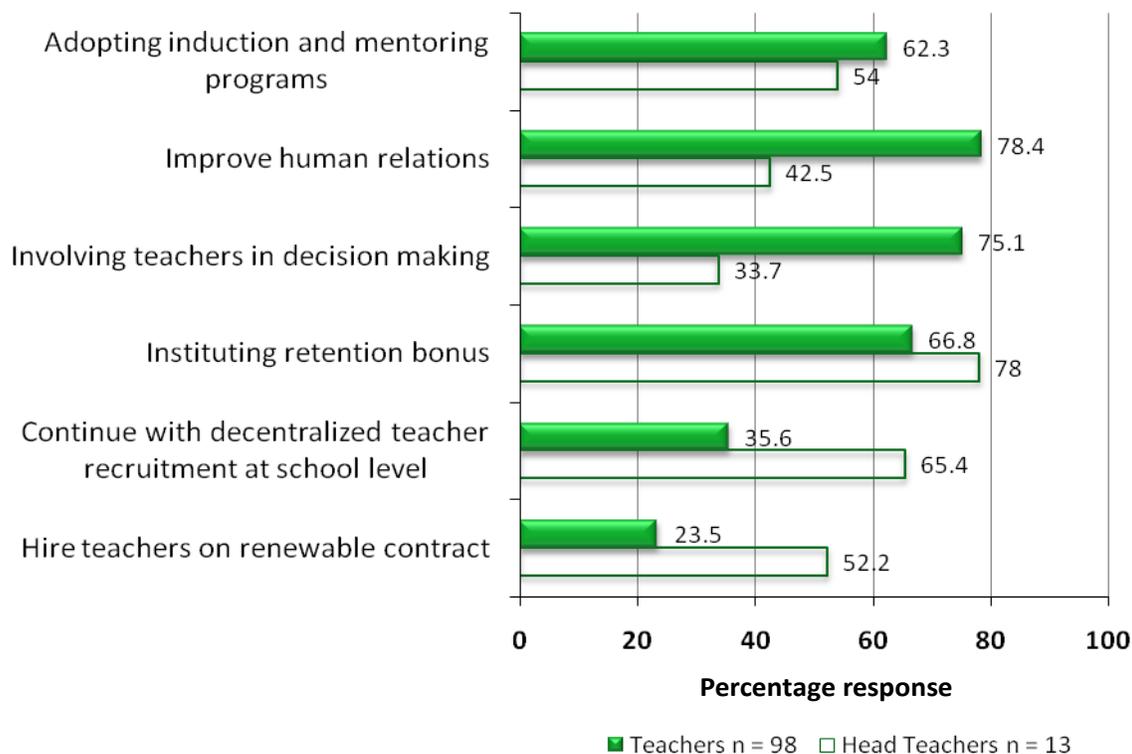


Figure 4. Teachers' and head teachers' responses on how teacher transfer requests due to management factors could be minimized.

a measure of school quality that influences teacher retention. Currently, according to TSC, (2004b) the ideal class size in secondary schools should be of 35 students per class, while the Curriculum Based Establishment (CBE) should enable an assistant teacher to take 24 to 28 lessons per week. On the contrary, responses to open ended questions revealed that the student population per class ranged from 40 to 65 with teachers taking up to 45 lessons per week, a situation which 64 (65.3%) of the interviewed teachers were not happy with.

Essentially, lowering class sizes goes hand in hand with increasing number of streams. No wonder they were both considered by head teachers and teachers in this study as methods that could reduce teacher transfer requests. However, while teachers responded more to reduction of class sizes, a greater response from head teachers leaned towards increase in the number of streams. This difference in response may be speculated to depend on two factors. First, due to added advantage of responsibility allowances associated with increase in number streams, head teachers could have preferred it to reducing class sizes. On the other hand, since teachers are involved in the actual teaching, they directly feel the impact of class sizes; therefore they preferred reduction of class sizes as a solution to the reduction of teacher transfer requests. Consequently, class size reduction and increase in number of streams come along with the

implications of need for recruitment of more teachers who must be willing to stay. A lower pupil teacher ratio increases the unit cost of education and it is uneconomical for the government to provide. Though the government has been willing to employ more teachers, FPE had degenerated the teacher shortage problem, while the World Bank insists that the 235,000 teachers in the TSC payroll are more than adequate (TSC, 2004b). The head teachers' preference of decentralization of teacher recruitment to reduce teacher transfer request indicated in Figure 4 is in line with Gaynor's (1998) findings. Indeed, many countries have considered decentralizing the teacher hiring process to a local level. The decentralized local recruitment system is more likely to be able to keep in touch with the needs of the schools, to respond quickly and flexibly to staffing needs. However, teachers did not consider decentralization of teacher recruitment as a solution to reduce teacher transfer requests for it could have been opened up to a greater possibility of undue influence being exerted by individuals. The other important finding on how to reduce teacher transfer requests was involving teachers in decision making. Involving teachers in decision making in school management and improving human relations improves the teachers' sense of belonging in the school community, thereby reducing the desire to request for transfers.

This study also revealed that instituting retention bonus could reduce teacher transfer requests (Figure 4). Typically, retention bonus entails a set-up where teachers who manage to work for a period in a rural area are liable for promotion, student-loan cancellation, and scholarship, support teachers with personal computers, higher salaries, and more district-paid benefits. In fact teachers may accept a rural post if they see it as temporary, and as a path to a more desirable job or related career progression (Mulkeen, 2005). Retention bonus is almost similar to the hardship allowance. Studies similarly reveal that hardship allowance has been successful in reducing teacher transfer requests. Tesfaye (1999) in the Regional State of Benishangul - Gumuz, Ethiopia singled out the absence of incentives such as hardship allowance as the main factor that affects the teacher transfer requests. However, given that hardship allowance is computed at 30% of the basic salary, it is applied indiscriminately to teachers in town and those in remote areas (TSC, 200b). Therefore adoption of retention bonus may be better for reducing teacher transfer requests.

Findings on mentoring and induction programs shown in Figure 4 were similar to Eberhard et al. (2000) research findings, who revealed that teacher transfer requests rates could be cut in half through comprehensive induction especially among younger teachers. Meanwhile, Ariko (2009) found that younger teachers were more likely to request for transfers in Suba district. It is therefore possible to infer that mentoring and induction would reduce teacher transfer requests which were pronounced among younger teachers. Teacher transfer request could be reduced if new recruits were introduced to those schools humanely, in ways that engender self-esteem, collegiality and professional stature. The importance of adoption of mentoring and induction is suggested by the fact that both teachers and head teachers responses to it was almost similar and in high magnitude.

Differential responses between teachers and head teachers were however noted on their responses to the management factors that could be improved to reduce teacher transfer requests. A greater proportion of teachers than head teachers advocated for improvement of human relations and involving them in decision making. The plausible explanation for these differences was that teachers were the beneficiaries to these factors which they expected head teachers to deliver in their favour. Probably due to need for more autonomy on teacher recruitment and control over teacher transfers by the head teachers, a far greater fraction of head teachers affirmed that hiring teachers on contract and decentralized teacher recruitment at school level could reduce teacher transfer requests.

Conclusion

A major finding of this study is that in order to minimize

teacher transfer requests in Suba district, there is need for improving transport and communication to schools, availing electricity to teachers and improving housing facilities for teachers. Teacher transfer requests associated with teacher factors could be reduced by employing teachers from the locality, posting teachers next to their families and bonding newly recruited teachers. Reduction of class sizes, admission of high achieving students and increasing number of streams in the existing schools could reduce teacher transfer requests related to student factors. Finally to reduce teacher transfer requests associated with management, this study found that adopting induction and mentoring programs for teachers was necessary. Secondly, instituting retention bonuses for teachers who stay longer in those hard-to-staff schools in addition to hardship allowances could reduce the transfer requests.

In conclusion, while many of the factors that contribute to teacher transfer requests are outside the control of policymakers or local school management, there is still much that policymakers can do. The variables that undoubtedly should receive the most attention are improving accessibility by improving roads, provision of housing and electricity. It is also important for head teachers to be keen on non-monetary alternatives for retaining teachers, such as improving teaching conditions, improving human relations and developing induction and mentoring sessions. Future research should focus on teacher transfer policies and their implications on teacher transfer requests.

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