

Challenges to the Implementation of PLAP in Primary Schools: Perceptions of ZOU Bachelor of Educational Management Students

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Abstract

The study explored the challenges that impact on the implementation of PLAP in the Primary schools. The research was conducted with teachers who study towards the BEd Management degree with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in the Midlands Region. The study used a qualitative research approach and collected data through open ended questionnaires and interviews. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants for this study. Data were thematically analysed in line with the qualitative research approaches. The study explored and found out that work over load, lack of resources, diagnosis of learner problems and implementation of continuous assessment are challenges that militate against implementation of PLAP. These factors contributed to lack of motivation of teachers to effectively implement PLAP at classroom level. This calls for the government and stakeholders in education to seriously look into factors that are de-motivating teachers to implement government education programmes effectively.

Keywords: Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP), challenges, continuous assessment, primary schools.

1 Background of the study

Zimbabwe had once experienced a vibrant economy and once the best country in Africa with the best education system delivery. The advent of independence in 1980 met with several education reforms to battle out the illiteracy rate that had deliberately been created by the former colonial master. To fulfil one of its goals the Zimbabwean government provided education to the masses. Towards the end of 2006 the economic environment in Zimbabwe hit across all sectors and the worst affected were also the primary and secondary schools. The impact of the crisis left the child in the centre of the problem and teachers could not remain committed in the classrooms.

The outcome of the 2007 to 2008 pass rate results in primary schools was disastrous. The system was fragile and many teachers abandoned their teaching profession in search for better forms of employment for survival. This brain drain culminated in poor service delivery thereby affecting the learning and teaching processes (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2012) MoPSE. Zero pass rates were recorded in certain schools as a result of the exodus of the teaching personnel. To this effect the Ministry of Education Sport, Arts and Culture in Zimbabwe launched the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) in October 2012 in Manicaland Province after realising the under-achievement of students at both primary and secondary schools which was caused by the socio-economic meltdown from 2006 to 2008. (Nkoma. et al. 2013; Herald 10 August, 2013).

The full definition of (PLAP) is Performance Lag Address Programme. This is a programme aimed at helping the learners achieve better pass rate from the effects of the worst economic meltdown of 2008. PLAP and normal remediation are different. Firstly the usual remediation procedure works on the students' "weaknesses within the students" level of study. As for PLAP students' weaknesses are believed to have cropped up from concepts missed at lower levels thus affecting their present performance, (Mukoko and Mdlongwa, 2014). This intervention strategy was pilot tested in Manicaland province of Zimbabwe and cascaded to all regions in order to alleviate the adverse effects of "learning gaps" in learners. In spite of the teachers returning to rejoin the education sector poor pass rates remained a setback to pupils' achievement. The number of schools recording zero percent pass rate continued to increase significantly for example, from 2011 and 2012, a total of 288 and 295 schools recorded 0% pass rate respectively (MoPSE Grade 7 Analysis 2011,2012). The situation created gaps of learning and could be remediated by the implementation of PLAP. Research findings by Miske et al (1998) indicate that higher rates of attendance tend to give greater learner gains while irregular attendance may lead to low achievements in school.

The major objective of (PLAP) was to improve the national examination pass rate in schools by first compensating the lost teaching and learning time. The development of PLAP was meant to complement the existing efforts of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in improving the Grade 7 National examination pass rate (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2013). PLAP is meant to appraise the performance learning gap so as to sustain the learner's ability to perform better under conditions and

circumstances that match one's developmental needs. PLAP is a result of deep-stick evaluation which entails assessing the pupil-learning process, teacher-pupil records, resources provision, and monitoring and evaluation programmes. In order to close the achievement gaps a manual for primary and secondary school teachers was written to specifically address the problems of under achievement (Muzawazi and Nkoma, 2011 as cited by Nkoma, 2014). PLAP is a programme designed to address learning anomalies and eradicate zero percent pass rate in schools, (Moyo, 2013).

The causes of underachievement in schools are complex and may be difficult to determine (Nkoma, 2014). For instance one cannot deny the fact that the performance of Zimbabwe economy had some negative implications to the learning curve of students between 2005 and 2008. In several instances there was rampant absenteeism and truancy in schools during this period. Pupils who missed lessons developed gaps of knowledge that became difficult to fill. Most pupils who play truancy are the least capable academically (Malcolm et al., 1996). This confirms Leland's (2005) assertion that economic pressures outside the classroom have an effect on the learner and these pressures directly affect students' motivation which then has an unequivocal effect on their achievement.

The underlying performance during the era can be statistically viewed. In 2006, no primary schools had zero percent pass rates (Annual Report, 2007). In 2008, 45 primary schools had zero percent pass rates (Annual Report, 2009). In 2009, 57 primary schools had zero percent pass rates (Annual Report, 2010). In 2007, six secondary schools had zero percent pass rates (Annual Report, 2008), while in 2008, eighty-eight secondary schools experienced zero percent pass rates (Annual Report, 2009). These figures are a result of the poor learning and teaching during the period. This background made it mandatory for the researchers to carry out this research. PLAP requires that the last point of success of the learner be established first through the administration of achievement tests. The PLAP methodology focuses on the multi-grade teaching approach whereby all learners with performance lag in Mathematics and English have to be planned for weekly (MOPSE 2012). Planning of lessons and syllabus comprehension are therefore paramount in this intervention. Instructional leadership should be viewed as an important component of PLAP as its functions are directly related to supporting classroom teaching and learning (Murphy, 1988). For PLAP to be effective the school vision needs to have high expectations for all (teachers and students) which raises the overall achievement of all students (Porter et al 2008). Thus instructional leaders need to value a blend of supervision, staff development and curriculum development (Southworth, 2002) while implementing PLAP. Head teachers are therefore need to take cognisance of staff supervision, staff development and provision of learning materials in order to realise the benefits of PLAP. In line with Zimbabwe Agenda for Social Sustenance and Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) which is results based management, the head teachers must therefore take responsibilities to supervise teachers and pupils in the implementation of the programme. Head teachers had to be alert on teachers who focused on student current syllabi or grade level without considering students last point of success (refer to Nkoma et al., 2012 and 2013). Head-teachers are responsible for motivating teachers and students, ensuring a safe and secure environment, communicating to parents and other administrative responsibilities (McIliffe, 2003). The syllabus is the first port of call so that the planning undertaken addresses the learning barriers of each student from the point of success of learners in concepts that have persistently provided too high learning gradient. The effective implementation of PLAP requires the teacher to first of all administer pre-assessment to identify the strengths, weaknesses and interests of pupils. Those students with academic challenges are the ones who fall for remediation. Thus curriculum differentiation recognises the differing learning rates, styles, interests and abilities and the need to provide appropriate instruction at students ability levels (Ward, 1980). Pupils are first assessed within their classrooms and assigned to different grade levels within class groups for instructional purposes (Muzawazi and Nkoma, 2011). Empirical research findings by Brown and Knight (1994) pointed out that evaluating pupils learning on a continuous basis by focusing on basic instructional objectives plays an important role in maintaining the quality of education. Thus continuous student assessment became a corner stone to PLAP in order to ascertain each learner's improvement, challenges and strengths. Suknandan and Lee (1998) found out that low attainment groups were less motivated to participate in their classroom experience. The above discovery likely could have caused serious challenges to teachers in trying to catch up with PLAP domain. Thus bridging learning gap could have been laborious as pupils had differing learning abilities. Learning difficulties are a result of a combination of emotional, social, physiological and intellectual factors. Sampson (1975) states that remedial treatment depends ultimately upon the ability to produce individual solutions to individual difficulties. Taking cognisance of Nhargava (2008), education can leverage significant improvements in many a country as it is key to achievement of development goals. It is imperative for teachers, head teachers and parents to acknowledge identify and address the situational barriers to education through addressing the educational performance lag for the 2008-9 period. Presently there is little if any research on PLAP in terms of its implementation in Zimbabwe Midlands Region although the problem of learner difficulties is still prevalent in Zimbabwe; hence the motive to undertake this study was to explore challenges faced in the implementation of PLAP.

2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore challenges in the implementation of PLAP in the primary schools.

3 Objectives of the study

- 1) To explore challenges faced by teachers in the implementation of PLAP in the primary schools.
- 2) To proffer some intervention strategies to mitigate the problems.

4 Statement of the problem

Performance Lag Address Programme is an initiative to try to close the achievement learning lag of pupils at both primary and secondary school levels. The achievement gap has been necessitated by teachers who abandoned pupils and went to the Diaspora in search of job opportunities against economic meltdown in Zimbabwe in 2008. Furthermore lack of adequate and effective teaching created performance lag in pupils which could not be remediated by extra lessons considering students' prior-knowledge to begin planning and instruction. However, what is not known is how PLAP is being implemented and what challenges confront this initiative which is intended to restore sanity in Zimbabwean education. This study therefore seeks to unravel the challenges to the implementation of PLAP in the primary schools and proffer solutions to problems.

5 Research Methodology

This study was placed within the interpretive paradigm and used a qualitative research approach to collect data from primary school teachers and head teachers. Qualitative research implies a direct concern with feelings, experiences and views as lived or felt or undergone (Erly1991:4). The researchers used open ended questionnaires and interviews as main data collection methods. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling seeks individuals and sites that can best supply relevant information needed to answer the research questions raised (Creswel, 2008: 214). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from interviews and open ended questionnaires. This study had chosen to use various sources of data analysis so that diverse points and views cast light up on a topic. Thus qualitative researchers generally use this technique to ensure that an account is rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed (Denzin, 1978).

6 Findings and Discussions

The research revealed that Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) was being conducted in all the primary schools under study. Many participants confirmed that there were challenges that impact negatively in the implementation of this initiative. The following factors were deemed as challenges by the teachers and head teachers.

6.1 Teacher attitudes

Many participants echoed that this initiative was simply dropped on teachers, pupils and parents without adequate workshops and implementation was different and difficulty without any prior-consultation. The programme demanded an immediate action and the first port of call was to diagnose the pupils learning difficulties. One participant lamented that *"I am not a specialist in diagnostic tests, neither am I a psychologist, I really feel ashamed it's difficulty to be honest to establish every child's last point of success accurately. How many classes am I going to teach under the same roof?"* The comment made by the teacher seems to suggest that teachers had no choice other than accepting the change as piece meal. Teachers as stewards of their individual classes had to make sure that each child's learning problems have been indentified in order to give a right prescription to the problem. Further such comments were made.

'The demands from this job are too much, people are different by nature and how many schemes of work must be prepared? Imagine a situation in which in a class of grade six some students are operating at grade four, five and six, how would one collaborate and synchronise effective teaching to attain high pass rates at grade seven, besides there are other learners who need to be catered for who are physically impaired and require preferential treatment. Others need the normal remediation not on the basis of PLAP domain.'

The comments made by the teachers tend to suggest that there are challenges in the implementation of PLAP but they ended up giving a cursory approach as the comments above feel they are overworked. It also emerged from the research that teachers implemented PLAP just because it is a policy and had no choice. Some grade seven teachers echoed their sentiments which were endorsed by Chireshe (2011) who found that curriculum as indicated by teachers is examinations oriented and hence teachers focus on preparing learners for examinations to achieve high pass rates and gain recognition. However, participants' views did not render PLAP as useless but would see it fit under a collaborative effort. Thus teaching for examination has its own limitations. In this study the head teachers who are also studying towards Bachelor of Education degree concurred with Popham (2001:21)'s view,

“Teachers drill their learners relentlessly of types of test items contained in the particular high stakes test so that their learners pass. Such repetitions of instructional activities tend to deaden learner genuine interest in learning.”

6.2 Work overload

Teachers perceive PLAP as too demanding and do not even get rest. One teacher confirmed this and said, “I think 80% of the teachers in schools purport that PLAP is a very laborious way of redeeming pupils from their last point of success.” PLAP is not done during the weekends, holidays or extra lessons but during the teaching learning situation right in the classroom. The research further revealed that there were many class levels that are formed from the results of diagnostic testing. Each level required its own material and content tailored to the students’ last point of success. One head interviewed concurred that PLAP helps classes revise concepts from various lower grades; this improves classes’ mastery of concepts and performance. However, he went on to say:-

“Teachers are given extra load, extra plan books, record books, schemes of work. There is a lot of paperwork placed up on the teacher. Some of these documents are not found updated during my class teacher supervision routines. Sometimes a class is as big as fifty pupils whether morning session or afternoon session.”

Studies in Zimbabwe have shown that the quality of instruction is affected by high teacher-pupil ratio, inadequate remuneration, inadequate supervision and poor incentives (Chivedza et al, 2012; Chakanyuka et al, 2009; Makopa, 2011; Nkoma et al, 2013). The comments made by the head teacher tend to suggest that PLAP has increased the teacher’s load but still requires commitment, collaboration and support to assist learners genuinely without pointing fingers for not complying with the policy.

The research further revealed that PLAP has also brought with it costs to parents and teachers. Some participants have indicated that naturally some teachers developed negative attitudes to less capable pupils thus would seem to shoot down the essence of this initiative. Individualised instruction is cumbersome purported by one participant. Studies in Zimbabwe have shown that low ability groups receive differential treatments and instructions from teachers and are stereotyped and labelled by other students and teachers (Chisaka, 1996, Mukavhi and Sana, 2012).

6.3 Lack of teacher motivation

The study revealed that the initiative is treated with some resentment. One participant echoed that “We are in partnership .What is done to improve the child should also to be done to improve the teacher. PLAP has no intention to improve the teacher’s welfare but just to do good to the child only. We are demotivated.” Carron (1996) noted that the teaching profession has suffered greatly from the negative effects, from the economic crisis and adjustment policies which have had severe impact in the standard of living of teachers. The empirical findings seem to suggest that a token of appreciation was needed to foster the effective implementation of PLAP. When asked what the major drive could be for effective PLAP implementation some interviewed emotional teachers gave the following responses;

“It’s not more work that keeps us at this work place but it is money, the salary that keeps workers at their jobs. We want money to keep us floating we are sinking with these paltry salaries.”

“To make matters worse the government has since withdrawn incentives and banned extra lessons. To be fair think about the plight of the child and also think about the plight of his teacher.”

The study further revealed that teachers were ready to exert an extra effort in the implementation of PLAP if this programme had monetary benefits. Teachers revealed that their class loads range from 45-57 pupils. Grading pupils into their level of operation has been a mammoth task to both teachers and pupils. Some teachers confirmed that PLAP can be a medicine that kills the patient because the same pupil is expected to write the same test or examination at the end of the year in his/her normal grade and pass besides writing the very long and difficulty PLAP tests. The other teachers bragged of failing to administer PLAP tests which took a lot of their teaching time.

“One teacher scoffed that there is a lot of cheating and children are promoted and no one is actually testing the pupils .PLAP it is a matter of writing records.”

This disposition indicated that teachers lacked the dedication and were no longer applying themselves fully during the teaching and learning situation. This lack of commitment is attributed to poor job motivation which has resulted from elimination of incentives, increased work load and poor salaries. Mertler (1992) cautions that, the work and living environment for many teachers is poor, which tends to lower self-esteem and is generally demotivating. However the analysis of the findings indicates that there were huge benefits of PLAP if all the necessary logistics are put into consideration.

6.4 Lack of resources

Successes of most innovations are resource driven and according to this study PLAP is stifled by poor resource power mainly in the form of time, material, physical and financial. Teachers, and head teachers are failing to cope while students are losing out their right to education. Carron & Chau (1996) also noted that students without the basic resources in their environments and in schools perform poorly as a result the learning difficulties they experience within their classrooms. All the head teachers who participated in this study concurred that the implementation of PLAP is stifled by shortage of finance, materials and time resources. The emergency of several individualised groups of learners under the same roof posed a challenge of resource management and availability. One teacher lamented that,

“In the best interest of PLAP how would you tackle this problem? Pupils cannot share desks unless they have a similar last point of success. Sometimes other pupils are writing on the lap and are constantly disturbed. I am already tired but this is just ten thirty, I am leading a crew of fifty five students.”

The classroom itself exposed both the teacher and pupils to fatigue. Some teachers confirmed that teaching was no longer a calling job. It emerged from the study that teachers were overloaded and in some schools the authorities could not provide charts or media which are essential tools in lesson demonstration. *“We are supposed to scavenge for resources which are not available at our own costs.”* said one angry participant. PLAP as a new initiative programme was not slotted on the class time table but it demands the preparation of documentation which gobbles a lot of time. Sentiments from the teachers who were interviewed revealed that people were not honest and there was a lot of cheating because PLAP was just meant to address the learning lag that existed between (2007-2008). But to date every pupil and every class must be assisted the PLAP way right across the primary school curriculum.). Contrary to the empirical evidences of this study the junior teachers lamented death of skills needed to assist grade four pupils whose last point of success is at grade two the infant class.

One head teacher also confirmed that it is an anomaly to call junior trained personnel to help and reduce learning gradient of pupils who are operating at grade two levels. As such these teachers did not have the requisite skills to teach infant classes. In this respect one is tempted to conclude that the major agenda for PLAP is a noble agenda which is faced by a plethora of challenges.

6.5 Continuous assessment

It emerged from the research that effective implementation of the PLAP remained under the stewardship of the classroom teacher and results of learners made a pointer to all the lesson transactions that transpired within the confines of the classroom. One teacher had this confession to make, *“You cannot make any milestone in your life unless one constantly checks, measures and tracks and find where you are and where your students are, so continuous assessment is needed in order to make gains through PLAP.”* Airasian (1991) opined that continuous assessment depicts the full range of sources and methods teachers use to gather, interpret and synthesise information about learners; information that is used to help teachers understand their learners, plan and monitor instruction and establish a viable classroom culture.

The study revealed that while continuous assessment was laborious to teachers it paid benefits to grade seven teachers. Teachers whose class pupils pass very well at grade seven were acknowledged for their contribution by community members. One head teacher confirmed that many parents make phone calls requesting certain individual teachers to take their grade seven children. Parents were only interested in results not in PLAP according to the findings of this study.

It also emerged from the study that continuous assessment would over work teachers and pupils. The pupils spend a lot of time doing extra work, or extension work which the teacher would not mark. Sometimes pupils were requested to mark assignments for each other upon the teacher's guiding answers. Some teachers in the gave the following sentiments,

“Children find their life too busy, let alone the grade sevens. They come to school around 6:30AM and knock off between 4:30pm and 5:00pm. Some would sheepishly go to extra lessons and would rest at seven in the evening.”

“At seven o'clock in the evening they start to do their home work. This seems to be the trend with other grades.”

“The head teachers descend on us teachers demanding to see record books of weekly written tests, remedial exercises and other job demanding documents. PLAP emphasises on removing learning barriers in English and Mathematics only leaving other subjects marginalised.”

The above statements show that while continuous assessment is vital the assessment being administered by some teachers is traditional and mainly focuses on testing which encourages superficial learning, but did not assess the wider skills of pupils. This study revealed that the type of assessment that seems to be

fashionable to many teachers has repercussions of learner fatigue, stress, boredom and school learning phobia. This kind of learning is tantamount to insinuate cheating, truancy, absenteeism and indecorous behaviour on the part of pupils.

When head teachers were interrogated on what they believe is assessment. They advanced that assessment is meant to address learner problems and therefore it is developmental and must be practised. These participants have dismissed extra lessons because they believe that pupils could not take lessons seriously knowing that they will compensate the lag in extra lessons. Boud (1994) suggest that, "Students can escape bad teaching: they cannot avoid bad assessment" So effective implementation of PLAP also hinges on effective assessment.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

The major purpose of this study was to explore perceived challenges faced by teachers in the implementation of PLAP in the primary schools and suggestions to improve the learning situations. Based on the findings the following conclusions were drawn:-

- 1) There was inadequate orientation of teachers and head teachers on the introduction of PLAP and parents as stakeholders have negative attitudes to it.
- 2) Teachers resented PLAP because it has brought with it increased work load that did not lead to increased salaries.
- 3) Some teachers were tempted to cheat in an attempt to meet the demands of PLAP.
- 4) In spite of challenges in the implementation PLAP has far reaching benefits to children' learning.
- 5) There is critical shortage of resources for PLAP to achieve lasting results.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study comes up with the following recommendations:-

- There is need to clearly differentiate normal classroom remediation from Performance Lag Address Programme. (PLAP).
- To impart positive attitudes on any new educational programme as they tend to face resistance.
- Bottom up approach to policy making is needed so that teachers become participants in grassroots innovations.
- Carry out workshops on continuous assessment and expose teachers to a variety of assessment techniques in order to close learner achievement gaps.
- Government should remunerate teachers adequately so that the teachers would be more professionally and more attitudinally do their work with minimum resentment.
- Need to introduce specialist teachers for Mathematics and English in the primary school in order to reduce the work load on the teacher.
- Need to staff develop teachers on professional ethics so that they are not easily swayed towards unprofessional conduct.

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