

Perceptions of School Administrators on the Implementation of Home Economics Subjects in Zimbabwean Primary Schools

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Abstract

This inquiry sought to uncover the perceptions of school administrators on the implementation of home economics subjects in Zimbabwean primary schools. The study adopted the qualitative approach that involved a descriptive survey to solicit data. Twenty school administrators from the ten schools were conveniently sampled. Open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data. The findings from this study revealed that most administrators were biased towards examinable subjects and had negative attitudes towards the implementation of the subjects as they considered them very expensive to run. Lack of proper funding was considered as the predisposing factor of the negative attitudes of the school administrators. This study recommends that home economics subjects be funded so as to improve their implementation. Policy makers should conscientise the school administrators on the importance of all the subjects and give them a clear implementation policy that is financially backed up.

Keywords: home economics, subjects, school administrators, perceptions, implementation.

Introduction and background of the study

The Zimbabwean primary school curriculum is composed of an average of thirteen (13) subjects. Fifty percent of these are practical. These include environmental Science, Music, Art and Craft, Physical Education, Home Economics and Computer Studies (extract from Speech given by David Coltart [Zimbabwe minister of higher education] at African Brains Conference, 2012). Grade seven pupils sit for four national papers which are Mathematics, English, Shona/Ndebele, and a Content Paper. The content paper comprises of a bit of Religious and Moral Education and Environmental Studies are the two which have a lion's share and a bit of some practical subjects. This Scenario in Zimbabwean primary schools has placed all practical subjects in a situation whereby they are not taken seriously.

Hakim, (2015).and Azodo (2014) posits that people are attracted or repelled to something by their views concerning that thing. It is common knowledge that most teachers focus on the pass rate of their pupils, as a result they concentrate examinable subjects and consider all other subjects as minor. This implies that administrators may have a negative attitude towards non-examinable subjects as they focus on examinable subjects. In the same vein, Okocha (2009) and Lynch (2000) assert that although school administrators may recognise the employment value inherent in technical related subjects such as home economics they are still prepared to accept the superiority of socially prestigious and white collar professional over technical education. Norgard (2006) argues that the consequences of the classical, literary or academic tradition that prevailed in schools and led to clerical or jobs that are administrative in nature are negative attitudes towards the blue collar jobs which are related to practical subjects.

Most primary school reports for primary school pupils covers only the four examinable subjects. Moyo, (2003) affirms that in Zimbabwe the emphasis is placed on performance of students at examinations, mainly public examinations, as a result, teachers and pupils spend most of their time drilling for examinations. This implies that the teachers will focus on examinable subjects and neglect the other aspects such as skills training. It is against this background that this study seeks to find out the perceptions of school administrators on the implementation of Home Economics (H/E) subjects in primary schools. Hakin, (2015) and Robert (2001) argues that perceptions generally involve an emotional and affective component such as liking and disliking. The implementation of Home Economics subjects in primary schools has no clear policy on which subjects to choose from a very wide curriculum. School heads have the task of choosing which subjects to offer. Home Economics is a discipline which consists of three subjects namely cookery, needlework and home management. The names of the Home Economics subjects mentioned apply to primary level only. The question is on what is the criteria used by school administrators on the choice of Home Economics subject to introduce at the school. The consequences or effects of their choice are also another area to be known.

Primary schools in Zimbabwe have the mandate of skills training so as to enable pupils to acquire skills which will sustain themselves if in case they drop out of school due to several reasons such as poverty. Kulild (2014) and Hobson (2006) assert that skill training is pivotal in poverty reduction for developing nations. The government of Zimbabwe emphasizes psychomotor skills for self reliance. This policy encourages all primary school to teach at least one or two practical subjects. Practical subjects that are on offer are about namely needlework, cookery, woodwork and agriculture. The first two are commonly done by girls while woodwork is normally done by boys. Agriculture has become a subject for both boys and girls and in some schools all pupils

are encouraged to do Agriculture. School Administrators are usually faced with a situation whereby they should choose practical subjects they think are cheap to implement and most important to them and then introduce them at school.

There are several factors that influence the implementation of home economics subjects in primary schools. There is no clear and sustainable funding policy for practical subjects (Mudekunye, Manwa & Manwa 2012; Mavhunga, 2009; Kapungu, 2007; UNESCO Zimbabwe TEVT report, 2005; Gwarinda (2001). In government schools it is less difficult to implement since the school facilities in most schools have a home economics building blocks which caters for cookery and needlework. The situation becomes worrisome in some government primary schools when the home economics block is used for other purposes. This may reflect on the school admin. In private schools it is up to the responsible authority and the admin to establish facilities that caters for home economics subjects. According to Manwa (2014) the main challenge of council school administrators and authorities is to build home economics laboratories due to lack of finances. It is known that home economics subjects are among other subjects which are expensive to run and difficult to manage without proper edifices. Funding strategies for home economics subjects are very weak in that the parents are the main sponsors of home economics (Mudekunye et al., 2012; Mavhunga, 2009; Kapungu, 2007). The larger population of Zimbabwe is composed of people who live below the poverty datum line. This may mean that most of the parents may not afford to pay the practical fees in time or fail to pay. Subjects such as cookery which requires a lot of equipment and consumables has been seen as an expanse to the school which can be avoided. Such a general scenario may be the reason why there are very few primary schools which offer cookery as a home economics subject.

Most schools offer needlework since it has been considered cheaper to run as compared to cookery. The other home economics subject home management has since been neglected since it requires expansive equipment to efficiently and effectively teach it. Although most researches such as Mudekunye et al. (2012) have proved that lack of finances is the major hindrance for offering home economics subjects in primary school. This study seeks to find whether it is not also an attitudinal problem on the part of school administrators and responsible authorities. The objectives which were used to establish the perceptions of administrators were

- a) Nature of perception of administrators towards home economics subjects.
- b) How the perceptions of administrators influence the implementation of home economics subjects.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach which involved a descriptive survey. The chosen research method suits this study since it covers a number of schools in Masvingo district. The qualitative approach was the best method since the data collected was rich of people's feelings and emotions. The researcher will be interested in how the participants interpreted their experiences (Upadhya & Singh, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Attitudes and perceptions entail a degree of favour or disfavour that should be studied from the point of view of participants. Patton (2002) suggests that the participant's experiences and insights are an important part of the enquiry in order to understand the phenomenon under study. Denscombe (2007) also posits that the experiences of the individual are considered significant data in their own right. A sample of twenty participants was purposefully selected from a population of about hundred administrators. The sample consisted of six females and fourteen male school heads, deputy school heads and senior teachers. Ten school heads from ten schools were conveniently sampled and also five deputy school heads and five senior teachers were purposefully sampled. Data collection was done using open-ended questionnaires. Marshall and Rossman (2008) assert that open-ended questionnaires are good when collecting factual information from a number of people. They were used for their strengths of being cheap and fast means of collecting data. Distribution and collection of the questionnaires was done by the researcher. The open-ended questions covered the two research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Data is presented according to the research questions and analysed in narrative form and thematically.

Perceptions of school administrators on the implementation of home economics subjects

The current study revealed that perceptions of most school administrations were biased towards examinable subjects since there was no clear policy on how to implement practical subjects. This finding concurs with the findings by the Special Eurobarometer 369 (2011) that there are many factors that determine the implementation levels of practical subjects such as finances, examination results and attitudes. The factors that influence the choice of the school curriculum for the primary schools were controversial issues which were policy related that raised a lot of questions generally by all school administrators. The Zimbabwe policy is not very clear on which subjects to be implemented since it stipulates that at least one practical subject per pupil that is chosen from a range of practical subjects. UNESCO Zimbabwe TEVT report (2005) states that due to lack of a coherent policy

review and clear guidelines the implementation process faced many challenges that included the financial constrains. The range of subjects to choose from is basically determined by the ministry policy on primary school curriculum. Home economics subjects are on the list to choose from. Most school heads preferred the four examinable subjects excluding the home economics subjects.

The negative perceptions were noted mainly among those old horses who inherited the colonial mentality that practical subjects were meant for the less intelligent pupils. Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) assert that as much as people want their children to acquire practical skills they are still skeptical for their children to land blue collar jobs. This implies that school administrators in primary schools may feel that they are giving the pupils a wrong foundation for them to gain white collar jobs. The mentality was quite conspicuous as some of the school heads showed the concern of the future job prospects of those who are good in practical subjects. One of the school heads was sly in his words and said not all are gifted in practical subjects some are intelligent and highly academic. This was indicative of the wrong mentality that practical subjects are for the less gifted. Some school heads and senior teachers considered practical subjects as important for the pupils who may fail to continue with their education due to reasons such as poverty. This mentality was visible in group 'A' elite schools which teach students from rich families and were not in favour of the practical subjects such as home economics but emphasised practical subjects such as art.

In Europe, almost the same mentality and situation prevails. According to the Special Eurobarometer 369 (2011) about a third of most of the European community submitted that vocational subjects caused people to land low paying jobs which are not well regarded by the society. One very senior school head seemed to have a pre-colonial mentality that considered practical subjects as for slow learners who deserve the low salaries. During the colonial era there were secondary schools which offered mostly practical subjects and were done by those who had more points at grade seven. The senior school head said that pupils should be taught subjects which will channel them to highly paid jobs such as mathematics and science subjects. At such a school all pupils were doing agriculture as a practical subject. Needlework was taught by all teachers regardless of their qualifications. Teaching of the subject is not supervised and some teachers who have no skills of teaching the subject were allocated to teach.

The researcher observed that most school reports captured examinable subjects only. Primary school reports were also seen as a true reflection of the perception of most school heads by most participants who teach practical subjects. There are cultural and organisational factors within schools that act as barriers and these factors include curriculum and examinations, teacher values and expectations, teaching style, pupil grouping practices (e.g. setting) and resource allocation practices (which students get which teachers?)" (Arif, Elvira & Darin 2017; OECD, 2008). This implies that the school culture is determined by the school administration and the school community. School administrators are really pivotal in the implementation of home economics subjects, UNESCO Zimbabwe TEVT report (2005) asserts that although the government regulates the education the greater part is dependent on school heads. However, the emphasis was said to be determined by the examinable subjects. This finding concurs with Moyo's (2003) finding that in Zimbabwe, the emphasis by most administrators and teachers is on the performance of students in public examinations.

The ranking of schools according to pass rate at both provincial and national level has greatly influenced the focus of most administrators. One school head said grade seven examinations is our major concern as a team since the schools are given regional numbers according to grade 7 pass rate. Such a point may reflect that the competition is so intense that most of the subjects which are not directly assessed such home economics are not given the priority they deserve. This entails that most of the resources are channeled towards the teaching of examinable subjects. Mudekunya et al. (2012) assert that due to the difficult economic conditions in Zimbabwe most schools have diverted their attention from the whole school curriculum and channeled their resources to the examinable subjects. This may mean that the school administrators were placed in a predicament where they have to prioritise their subjects according to the available funds in order for them to have a higher pass rate. Zimbabwe has experienced extreme economic and political instability over the past years and for this reason, admissions and financial aid officers need to be especially sensitive to the fact that even relatively wealthy Zimbabweans will be hard-pressed to finance their children's education without any financial assistance (Omoniyi, 2013; Mano, 2001).

Griffith (2005) posits that teachers are the ultimate arbiters of classroom practice. This implies that with the support from administrators teachers may effectively implement the subjects. School heads that were negative were using words such as less important subjects or subjects which were expensive but not examinable. According to Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) any curriculum policy that ignores the perceptions of school administrators and teachers is bound to come across a lot of problems during implementation. Subject and grade allocation is also determined by the value placed on the subjects and grades. Needlework which was done by non-specialists was common among schools which had administrators who had negative perceptions. The level of support they offered the home economics teachers was very mean.

The younger generation seemed to be more positive or neutral in their perceptions. Some of such

administrators were advocating that all primary school subjects such as home economics be examined at grade seven so as to ensure that they are all taken serious. The teachers who are the younger cohort were also in support of the inclusion of all subjects on reports. Park (2007) asserts that the attitudes of people towards any entity reflect the generation they were born. Some primary schools with the younger generation of school heads that have positive perceptions had their school reports with practical subjects section and religious and moral education. Participants who held positive attitudes were supportive to the implementation of home economics subjects. Schools with such school heads offered both cookery and needlework at the school. It was also established that some school heads in government schools use home economics blocks for other purposes.

Some school administrators had an admixture of views. This small group of administrators was neutral in their views as they were considering all subjects to be important but their focus was an examinable subjects. They supported all non-examinable subjects although the level of support was determined by the resources available. Indoshi et al. (2010) aver that factors such as lack of resources may cause some expansive subjects such as practical subjects to be considered as less important even by those who favour them. The choice of subjects was mostly determined by the resources available and being guided by the ministry. School heads of such schools would maintain the home economics blocks and in some cases use them for teas and also ask specialists home economics teachers to teach the subjects.

Influence of the perceptions of school administrators and possible strategies of improving the implementation levels

Most school administrators blamed the ministry for lack of policy on the implementation of home economics and all other practical subjects. It seems the ministry provided an opportunity for school heads to choose among practical subjects as they insist on having at one practical subject for each school pupil. Mano (2001) asserts that the seven years of primary schooling in Zimbabwe culminate in four nationally-set Grade 7 examinations in Mathematics, English, Shona or Ndebele and Content, which is a combination of topics in sciences and social sciences such as home economics. Dual practical subjects taking seem to be an option and not a mandate. This study established that school administrators who were concerned about the policy had positive attitudes towards practical subjects. School heads that had a practical orientation were concerned about the way primary school subjects are offered.

The findings from this study also revealed that of the three home economics subjects only needlework is being offered in most primary schools while cookery is being offered in a few government and mission schools. Some council schools with school heads who favour home economics subjects have home economics blocks while offers both needlework and cookery. Home management is offered by very few government schools which had the facilities put in place long back. This may imply that home economics subjects in most schools are not given the chance of being implanted at most schools. This has a negative impact on progression at high schools through tertiary education. When the subject is not taught at primary school level is likely to face challenges of being accepted at high school level. The way the subject is taught at primary may also instill positive or negative views towards the subject.

School administrators may allow non-specialist teachers in home economics to teach the subjects and may teach in a way pupils are not motivated (Briccia & Pessoa de Carvalho 2016; Bonney, Amoah, Micah, Ahiameny & Lamaire 2015). One non-specialist teacher said that we teach Needlework so that pupils will be able to repair their torn garments. The orientation given to pupils may cause them to see practical subjects as subjects for the poor who will always need to repair their garments. Cookery is also considered as a subject that will assist pupils in meal preparation at home. This may mean that the teachers may not follow the syllabus of the subject but teach what they think is only relevant to the pupils.

Most home economics specialist said that they were not given the chance and facilities to teach all their subjects. Some are not given classes to teach home economics subjects but just to be class teachers. This study reveals that school heads' perceptions have a negative influence on the implementation of home economics subjects. The negative perception of most public school heads is leading to a decrease in public support evidenced in: demands to reduce funding of practical subjects, offer alternatives including vouchers to private schools, and provide national tests to guarantee that teaching and learning are taking place (Anderson, Evans, Kozak & Peterson, 2000). It seems that subjects such as home management may also end up not being taught at primary schools. Cookery as a subject may also end being offered by very few schools. This has great impact on the acceptance of the subjects at higher levels. Non-takers subjects are a reason for lack of employment of subject specialist. This may cause few colleges students to opt for the subjects. Lack of motivation on the part of trainers and students may reduce or devalue the subjects. This concurs with Chireshe and Shumba's (2011) observation that teachers' motivation influences teacher competences and delivery of lessons. Negative attitudes of school heads may be imparted to the young generation and then the cycle of devaluing the subject may continue due to lack of motivation. Children especially at primary level learn through imitation of their significant others such as parents and teachers.

Attitudes are constructed within a context. Parents and school administrators play an important role in shaping the minds of the children towards practical subjects such as needlework and cookery. Administrators who were involved in the current study echoed that they were also parents who aim high for their children. Azubuike (2011) affirms that some educated parents have a negative attitude towards practical subjects. This implies that administrators who were not in favour of practical subjects were offering the subject to the less intelligent. This is persistent with Azubuke's (2011) observation that an average Nigerian parent does not want his/her son/daughter to earn a living as a full time farmer, watch repairer, a plumber, a house painter, a waiter, dressmaker, for many Nigerians these jobs are for the poor and the underprivileged. In Zimbabwe, the same mentality prevail as most school administrators and parents experienced the harshness of the F2 system that considered practical subjects as subjects specifically for the slow learners. Pupils who have negative attitudes towards practical subjects may have inherited the attitudes from their parents and primary school (Scottish Government: Attitudes to Vocational Learning; Literature Rev, 2008).

This study also revealed that the attitudes of school administrators may cause pupils to be taught subject matter which is substandard by non-specialist teachers were saying that they were not sure of what they should teach. According to World Data on Education (2006) subject allocation, time tabling and time allocated for the subjects reflects the value attached to it. This may mean that all examinable subjects may be allocated highly skilled teachers and allocated more hours. Such a scenario may reflect that the subject maybe taught as a mere craft without using the syllabus. Wrong concepts are usually easy to remember as compared to the correct concepts. The affected pupils may find it difficult to understand some concepts at a higher level as they would be facing a challenge of being untaught what they learnt. The use of incorrect terms or jargon during lessons may worsen the knowledge base of pupils. It is very important for pupils to have a correct foundation so as to allow good progression to the next level. Pupils who fail the subject at a high school may have a negative attitude towards the subject and may fail to register for public exams. Subject drop outs may reduce the number of subject takers at tertiary institution such as teachers' colleges and universities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from this study indicated that there are very few primary schools which offer more than one home economics subjects. Among the three home economics subjects needlework is offered by almost all schools while cookery is offered by very few government schools. Home management as a subject is almost phased out. The findings revealed that the implementation of the subjects is mostly determined by the attitudes of school administrators since most of the school heads that held negative attitudes towards home economics subjects were not supporting their implementation.

This study recommends that the government should revisit the policy that guides school heads on the implementation of practical subjects. Rigorous campaigns which conscientise both school administrators and parents on the importance of all home economics subjects should be done through workshops and in-service training. Campaigns by the Edge Foundation and the Learning and Skills Council in Scotland are targeting school leaders and parents. It is also recommended that the government may also adopt the strategy that is being used by the Scottish government. They aim to ensure that administrators and parents have up-to-date information about vocational options and to discourage them from pushing their sons and daughters towards academic routes which may not be suitable for them (Scottish Government: Attitudes to Vocational Learning; Literature Rev, 2008).

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