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ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS TOWARDS THE POLICY OF TEACHING PRACTICAL/VOCATIONAL SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

In 1999, the State President of Zimbabwe appointed a twelve member Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training in Zimbabwe. The commission led by professor Nziramasanga, comprised prominent educationists, administrators and industrialists. It undertook extensive and wide ranging consultations with a wide cross-section of stakeholders. They examined the nature of and status of education and training in Zimbabwe among other things and then came up with recommendations. One of the conspicuous recommendations that the committee put forward was that every secondary school child must do at least one practical subject. As a follow up to this recommendation, the Ministry of Education, then promulgated a policy to this effect. The Secretary's Circular Minute Number 2 of 2006:6 item 4.3.5 states that, "all pupils are expected to do at least one practical/technical subject in addition to the six core subjects. The policy further declares that "school heads should note that the choice of practical subjects depends largely upon the environment, facilities and staff available in the school, including the individual learners' preferences". This study was therefore, principally directed at investigating the perceptions of secondary school teachers towards this policy. The study adopted the descriptive survey. The target population comprised of all secondary school teachers in Nkayi District. The random sample procedure was employed and it was drawn from seven secondary schools out of twenty-six schools. A total of thirty-seven respondents were used of which twenty four were male and thirteen female. The main findings indicated that the majority of teachers wanted all secondary school pupils to be offered practical subjects. Most schools though, did not have adequate resources for use in the practical subjects. The respondents also rejected the comparison of the current policy of teaching practical subjects with the colonial F2 secondary school model. The majority of teachers also felt that effectively teaching vocational subjects could easily reduce the unemployment rates in the country. The study recommends that teachers teaching practical subjects should be given

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incentives. Secondary schools should award vocational school certificates in conjunction with academic certificates.

Key Terms

- Policy
- Curriculum
- Vocational subjects
- Secondary schools

1. INTRODUCTION

During the early years of independence, the new nationalist government in Zimbabwe was committed to speeding up development and also extending educational opportunities to its people. The belief that large investments in education would pay off in economic terms reinforced its long standing faith in education as a means of remedying a whole range of social, economic, and political problems and justified its responding to the clamour of its electorate for greater educational opportunities (Chanaiwa, 1980). In addition to inequalities in educational opportunities, there were disparities in the nature of the curricula followed by the two systems of education. Only 12,5 percent of the African population had access to academic secondary education and 37,5 percent to practically - oriented education, with the remaining 50 percent being left with no education beyond that acquired at primary education.

Against this background, the post-independence government decided to give tremendous priority to education. The people's aspirations in education were going to be frustrated had educational development been gradual (Mhlanga, 2000). Above all, there was a belief that education was the panacea for most of the country's social and economic problems. The government also believed that there were more societal than private benefits to be gained in investing in an individual's education (Lewis, 2008). Because of that belief, primary education was declared free. That resulted in an unprecedented demand for education. All sectors of the education system were expanded. The (World Bank, 1990) says, "the expansion of secondary education in the first ten years of independence was more phenomenal in Zimbabwe than in any developing country in the whole world".

Despite the above efforts at democratising education, and piecemeal vocationalisation of education, the extent and rate of growth of unemployment in Zimbabwe is quite high particularly among school leavers. After all attention had been focussed for some time upon the acute shortages of skilled manpower and in the drive to Africanise jobs, there was a tendency to disregard early warning signals about the growing competition for employment among school leavers and about the rate with which they were migrating to the urban areas in search of work (Sachikonye, 1990). Scarce resources had been expended on their education in order to promote economic development. Now, it appears that not only were many of them unable to repay the cost of their schooling by engaging in productive activity, but they represented a major drain on the resources of society through the funds and energies diverted to their upkeep and through the social problems presented by their presence in large numbers in the towns.

As a result of the above situation, schools are now being subjected to a barrage of criticism. Most major stakeholders appear to be unanimous in condemning the mainly academic curriculum (Nogard, 1999). In 1999, the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe appointed a twelve member commission of inquiry into Education and Training in Zimbabwe. The commission led by professor Nziramasanga comprised prominent educationists, administrators and industrialists. It undertook extensive and wide ranging consultations with a wide cross-section of stakeholders in the country. They examined the nature and status of education and training in Zimbabwe among other things and then came up with various recommendations.

One of the conspicuous recommendations that the committee put forward was that every secondary school child must do at least one practical subject. As a follow-up to this recommendation, the Ministry of Education promulgated a policy to this effect. The Secretary's Circular Minute Number 2 of 2009:6 item 4.3.5 states that, "all pupils are expected to do at least one practical/technical/vocational subject in addition to the six core subjects". The policy further declares that, "school heads should note that the choice of practical subjects depends largely upon the environment, facilities and staff available in the school including the individual's learner's preference."

It is hoped that the effective implementation of this policy will result in a reduction of school leavers looking for jobs as most of them will be equipped with skills to create jobs for themselves and others through practical subjects. It was on account of this policy that this researcher felt the need to investigate how secondary school teachers viewed the policy. This is because teachers are the chief implementers of any curriculum policy. Teachers' in fact are the ultimate arbiters of classroom practice (Griffiths, 2005). Any curriculum policy that ignores the perceptions of teachers is bound to come across a lot of problems during implementation. This is corroborated by (Wolfson, 1997) who says, "Curriculum is what teachers develop and not what others develop and force upon teachers". Thus, no matter how well intentioned a curriculum policy may be, no one can predetermine the actual product of the teacher-learner interaction. Against the background of the current policy and legislation, this paper reports on the views of teachers on teaching of practical subjects.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The study sought to investigate the attitudes of secondary school teachers towards the policy of teaching practical subjects.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The study sought to scientifically expose secondary teachers' perceptions towards practical subjects in order to provide policy makers, bureaucrats and education managers with a firm foundation from which to successfully implement their well intentioned policy of teaching practical subjects at the secondary school level in Zimbabwe.

1.3.Research Questions

1. Did secondary school teachers prefer the academic curriculum over the practical one?

2. How does the recognition of qualifications and how they were controlled and administered influence teacher attitudes towards practical subjects?
3. Were teachers who taught practical subjects treated with low esteem by colleagues, pupils and the community?
4. Were state planners, policy makers, bureaucrats and education managers more interested in promoting the academic curriculum over the practical subjects?

1.4. Significance of the Study

The importance of this study stemmed from the fact that it attempted to identify and establish the views of secondary school teachers currently prevalent with regards to the vocationalist curriculum perspective. The vocationalist curriculum perspective was important since its major objective was the usefulness of the school product after schooling. It was also hoped that the findings would help heads of schools, educational planners, policy makers and administrators realise the prevailing perceptions of teachers towards practical subjects so as to devise programmes that will enhance the promotion of effective teaching of practical subjects.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

In view of the small size of the sample and sub-samples used, the findings of the study would have limited generalisability. It has to be pointed out also that attitudes about an issue are essentially subjective and cannot be measured accurately. In other words, attitudes have no universally recognised and accepted scales of measurement and measures that were used in this study cannot be considered to be very accurate.

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

This study was concerned with feelings of teachers from secondary schools in one district in Matabelelend North Province which is Nkayi District. Out of twenty-two secondary schools in the district, the study sought information from seven schools. The main focus of the study was to investigate the attitudes of the respondents towards vocational subjects at secondary school level only. Post secondary school level vocational or primary school level education were not the concern of this study. Feelings of secondary school teachers towards other issues other than the policy of teaching vocational subjects were outside the parameters of this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is controversy on the nature of curricula that should be offered to schools in developing economies like Zimbabwe. Little (2008) states that the vocationalist perspective asserts that schools exist as part of a broader system of socialisation designed to develop people who are able to meet the demands that society places on its members. Education is considered an end in itself since its major objective is the immediate utility of the school product. The vocationalist perspective assumes that spending on education should produce results by showing increased productivity among educated workers. On the other hand, Dore (2006) asserts that the academist perspective believes that students should be given a general academic function on which any subsequent training, vocational or technical could be easily built upon. Education in this perspective, is seen as

a preparation for living and should concern itself with the transfer of learning principles of the application of knowledge as opposed to the transfer of specific skills. Dore (2006) says "this type of education creates educated parasites from our students as well as school leavers who are economic lepers".

The academist curriculum is the one that is mainly offered by Zimbabwean secondary schools. It had perhaps been too readily assumed that offering this curriculum would more than pay for itself by the economic activity it would generate. As a result, there was phenomenal expansion of secondary education in the country. As Lewis (2005) pointed out, "in the circumstances of a poor country, the amount of education which will pay for itself in economic terms is bound to be limited because of the limited absorptive capacity of the economy". This implies that education systems can very easily produce more educated people than the economy can profitably employ. However, Harbison (2006) observes that one of the major reasons for this situation is that the education system may be producing people with the "wrong" kind of skills for a developing economy. The consequence of this observation is that it is not uncommon to find large numbers of unemployed educated people, whilst employers complain that they are unable to recruit people with the skills they need.

Nogard (2006) argues that this is a consequence of the classical, literary or academic tradition which has prevailed in the schools. One reason put forward by Nogard (2006) why such traditions have survived despite the constant efforts to introduce into schools a more practical and vocationally oriented form of curriculum is that in the past it was the more literary and general forms of education which led directly into the kinds of employment which are available (these being of a clerical or administrative nature). Findings by Thompson (1985) corroborated by Schumacher (1978) and Thomson (1988) found that in most African countries, the lawyer, the doctor and the administrator rank highest in public esteem above the engineer and the agriculturalist, the industrialist and the trader. Even at the intermediate levels of employment, clerical occupations rank higher than technical and commercial occupations.

Consequently, as Treffgarne (2002) admits, well intentioned efforts to diversify the school curriculum and to produce skilled people for technical and craft occupations have tended to wither away, mainly because pupils and their parents saw vocationally biased courses as leading to dead-ends by comparison with the academic courses which offered entry to higher education and thence, to more rewarding occupations. As a result, the status of vocational subjects and indeed of teachers responsible for teaching them, tended to remain low and to attract the lower-ability pupils and failures from the academic streams (Wolfson, 1997).

In another study, Foster (1981) argued that "the role that education played was not likely to be a powerful agency of changing if all we meant by education was the development of specialised vocational or proto vocational education in agriculture". Stenhouse (2002) has also stressed that more important than learning elementary skills, was the acquisition of certain attitudes of mind and the bases for understanding of cooperating in charge. Adding to the quantity of factual knowledge is not the problem but changing the quality of thinking very much was. Wolfson (1997) adds that these attitudes and understandings are not to be taught by adding to the curriculum isolated subjects such as elementary agriculture or building studies, but through permeating all teaching with the

desired attitudes, knowledge and qualities of thinking. Anderson (1997) has warned of the dangers of developing too strong a practical and distinctively vocational orientation in schools.

Out of this discussion, the teacher stands at the epicentre of the debate. This study sought to reveal the actual feelings of secondary school teachers towards the vocational curriculum perspective.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used the quantitative methodology and made use of a survey research design. The population consisted teachers from seven secondary schools in Nkayi District in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. The sample consisted of 37 teachers of which 24 were male and 13 female. The inquiry explored teachers' perceptions towards the vocational curriculum. Griffiths (2005) emphasises the role of teachers in the implementation of curriculum. He states that teachers are the ultimate arbiters of classroom practice. He also found that any curriculum policy that ignores the perceptions of teachers is bound to come across a lot of problems during implementation. Moreover, Wolfson (1997) argue that curriculum is what teachers develop and not what others develop and force upon teachers.

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which was largely made up of close-ended questions and a few open-ended questions. All respondents were given the questionnaire by the researcher at their schools. The researcher also personally collected the questionnaires in order to increase on the rate of return of the instruments. Data collected from the questionnaires produced descriptive statistics around the variables under study. These statistics were computed and inferential implications from them derived and recorded.

3.2. Findings and Discussion

The study set out to explore the views of teachers towards vocational subjects in Zimbabwean secondary schools. This section is presented in two parts namely, presentation of data and discussion.

3.3. Presentation of Data

Table-1. Distribution of sample teachers by sex ((N = 37))

Sex	Number of teachers	Percentage
Male	24	65
Female	13	35
Total	37	100

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by sex. It reveals that 65% were male and 35% female. This gender imbalance could be explained by the fact that most qualified female teachers tend to join their husbands in urban areas.

Table-2. Professional qualifications of respondents (N = 37)

Qualification	Number of teachers	Percentage
Certificate of Education	6	16
Diploma in Education	17	46
Vocational	6	16
University Degree	8	22
Total	37	100

Table 2 reveals that only 16% of the respondents were in possession of a practically oriented professional qualification. The majority of teachers had academic oriented qualifications.

Table-3. Which students should be offered practical subjects? (N = 37)

Type of student	Number of teachers	Percentage
Academically weak	3	8
All students	29	78
Those who wish	5	14
Total	37	100

This information clearly shows that the majority of respondents view practical subjects as important to the lives of all students. Only an insignificant 8% felt that practical subjects should be offered to the academically weak students.

Table-4. Were teachers teaching practical subjects treated with low esteem?(N = 37)

Lowly regarded	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	14	38
Disagree	23	62
Total	37	100

The majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that teachers teaching practical subjects were treated with low esteem.

Table-5. The examination system in Zimbabwe promotes the academic curriculum(N = 37)

Promotes academic curricula	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	17	46
Disagree	20	54
Total	37	100

More than half of the sample teachers (54%) felt that the examination system in Zimbabwe was not an obstacle to the effective teaching of practical subjects.

Table-6. Practical subjects associated with low intelligence (N = 37)

Associated with low intelligence	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	21	57
Disagree	16	43
Total	37	100

The information in table 6 above indicates that 57% of the respondents associated practical subjects with low intelligence.

Table-7. Offering practical subjects could reduce problems of unemployment in the country (N = 37)

Could reduce unemployment	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	32	87
Disagree	5	13
Total	37	100

The respondents who believed that offering practical subjects could help reduce unemployment in Zimbabwe constituted 87% of the sample teachers. This is quite significant in that it shows that the majority of teachers believe that if effectively taught, practical subjects may make school leavers more productive.

Table-8. The Head of school promotes the teaching of practical subjects(N = 37)

Promotable	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	26	70
Disagree	11	30
Total	37	100

Table 8 above shows that most of the respondents believed that their heads promoted the teaching of practical subjects in their schools.

Table-9. Practical subjects teachers do not possess adequate skills for effective teaching (N = 37)

Lack skills	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	31	84
Disagree	6	16
Total	37	100

The majority of teachers agreed with the statement that teachers taking practical subjects lacked adequate skills for effectively teaching practical subjects.

Table-10. Education planners and education bureaucrats promote teaching of practical subjects (N = 37)

Promotive	Number of teachers	Percentage
Agree	2	5
Disagree	35	95
Total	37	100

The overwhelming majority of the sample teachers felt that education planners and education bureaucrats were pro-academic subjects than practical subjects.

4. DISCUSSION

Most of the teachers indicated that all students should learn practical subjects instead of offering them to those who are academically weak. The teachers' views on this issue appear not to be in keeping with traditionally held values which associated practical subjects with weak students. As Jansen (1979) observed, the academically gifted were to pursue the mainstream academic curriculum right up to university level and the weaker ones given a watered down curriculum largely composed of practical subjects" commenting on the F2 system.

The majority of teachers rejected the notion that teachers teaching practical subjects were treated with low esteem by their colleagues and pupils. This means that the majority of teachers view teachers taking practical subjects as equal in status with those taking academic subjects. This interestingly contradicts sharply with findings by Swartz (1992) who found that most teachers associated teaching practical subjects with low intelligence. This is untrue because such teachers have high degree of appreciation of the beauty of nature, art, science, music, poetry, language and mathematics.

The sample teachers felt that the examination system was not an obstacle towards the successful implementation of the policy of teaching practical subjects. However, their observations differ with findings by (Moyo, 2003) who found that in Zimbabwe, emphasis is placed on performance of students at examinations, mainly public examinations. As a result, teachers and students spend most of their time drilling for examinations thereby neglecting other aspects of learning/teaching like the acquisition of skills in practical terms.

The majority of teachers associated practical subjects with low intelligence. This could be attributed to the fact that most of the teachers in the study are themselves products of an essentially university-oriented, academic learning system. This academic culture is also perpetuated by the continued role of "the university" in the structural organisation of schools. As Swartz (1992) observes, the school system in Zimbabwe still retains its "upward-looking focus", the main core of subjects for Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) and Ordinary Level are still styled in a manner that seems to gear students for entry to 'A' level and eventually university studies. And the examinations, as is the case of most academic type education systems elsewhere in the world still reflect mainly university-based knowledge and test general rather that specified skills, even in the context of a glaring "mismatch between academically oriented education possessed by thousands of Ordinary and Advanced level graduates and the specific technical skills required by industry" (Sachikonye, 1990).

An overwhelming majority of teachers believed that if practical subjects were properly taught, they were most likely to reduce unemployment in the country because the school graduates would use the skills acquired at school to create jobs for themselves and other people. Loafing would be under control in most cases.

Most of the respondents thought that their heads were supportive of the teaching of practical subjects. They encourage pupils to do the practical subjects and also prioritised ordering material to be used during the teaching/learning of practical subjects. This is important as Taylor (2001) argues that the head of a school plays a very critical role in the implementation of any curriculum in the school. Practical subjects prepare learners not only for the world of work, but for life

It is also very evident from the information obtained from the respondents that teachers who taught practical subjects did not possess the requisite qualifications to effectively teach these subjects. If the current universities that now have a technological bias: Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE), National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) embark on a strong recruitment drive, this problem would soon be history.

Teachers in this study believed that state planners and education bureaucrats' actions promoted the academic curriculum. The Public Service Commission in particular as the largest single formal employer in the country was said to be recruiting job seekers who possessed at least five ordinary level subjects which included English, Mathematics or/and Science. Surprisingly enough, even the School of Nursing despise Agriculture, Agricultural Science and Food Science in spite of their bias to science which is a prerequisite to training of nurses in Zimbabwe. No single practical subject was ever mentioned. This compromises the status of practical subjects in the eyes of parents, pupils and teachers. As Mugomba (2002) aptly puts it, "no one would like his/her child/student to do a subject that leads to a dead-end".

5. CONCLUSION

From the findings, present researchers conclude that the teaching of practical subjects should be inclusive of learners of diverse abilities. It should desist from being used as a tool to label students according to their ability levels.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this study, the researcher would like to make some recommendations.

- Schools need to be equipped with adequate and relevant resources for teaching practical subjects effectively.
- In order to lay a firm foundation for practical subjects, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture should also introduce the practical subjects at the upper primary school level. Students in Zimbabwe start doing practical subjects effectively at secondary school level and are expected to have fully acquired skills in these subjects just within four years. This is contrary to the situation with academic subjects like Mathematics, English and Science which are compulsory for students at the primary school level.
- Possession of at least one practical subject at ordinary level should be made a requirement for employment so as to make sure that teachers, parents and pupils take practical subjects more seriously. Currently, the tendency is that employers require prospective employees to possess mainly Mathematics, English and Science which are academic subjects plus any other two, which may or may not be practical subjects. This situation runs contrary to the Ministry of Education's policy of making practical subjects compulsory for all secondary school pupils. It is unjustifiable to compel pupils to do subjects which have very slim chances of securing employment for them.

- More staff development workshops for teachers teaching practical subjects should be organised so as to increase their capacity to effectively teach these subjects when the rest of the teachers opt to teach academic subjects. Over and above their normal salaries, they should be given allowances to motivate them to produce their best performance and also so that the practical subjects departments can attract highly qualified teachers.
- Secondary schools should be attached to institutions that award trade certificates like polytechnical colleges so that these institutions provide certificates for the practical subjects departments. This would enable school graduates to seek further education at vocational institutions and possibly look for employment using these certificates. Presently, secondary school certificates are awarded by the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) and combine both practical and academic subjects.

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