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Primary School Composite Class Teaching and Learning Mode: Views of Some Stakeholders

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Abstract

This study was prompted by the observation that many primary schools in Mentors district in Zimbabwe have composite classes. This teaching and learning practice raises questions of quality education against the education for all policy. The purpose of this study was to gather stakeholders' perceptions on the practice as a basis for policy making and managing of composite classes. Data were gathered from purposive samples of 53 teachers and 67 parents who responded to a questionnaire. Findings from surveys were complemented by interviews with 48 pupils in grade six and grade seven. The study found that the composite class mode was imposed by low pupil enrolments in the resettlement areas. Among other recommendations, the study calls for the reduction of composite classes. Alternatively, strategies to handle composite classes can be introduced on teacher education curriculum. Further research on teachers' experiences and effects of composite classes on pupils' performance in Zimbabwe is required.

Introduction

Since 1980, the Zimbabwean government has advocated for 'education for all' policy which resulted in many schools being built in the country. However, in the least populated farming and mining areas like Mentors district, provision of schools was more challenging due to low population. It was difficult to find enough pupils to justify the need for a primary school in each locality. One of the

solutions was to provide small satellite schools composed of composite classes where a teacher teaches more than one grade at the same time (Pridmore, 2007; UNESCO 2001a; Birch & Lally, 1995). Composite classes in Zimbabwe have thus increased in such resettlement areas. In Mentors district, people who used to work in the mines moved onto the nearby farms, compelling the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to open more small schools in the resettlement areas despite their low pupil enrolments.

Composite classes are probably more common than has been realised by policy makers in Zimbabwe. By definition, any school with more grades than operates on a multi-grade teaching or composite class basis. Studies conducted in America by Miller (1991) revealed that pupils in composite classes perform just as well as pupils in single grade classes. This lack of a significant difference in the performance of pupils in composite and those in single classes can provide justification for the current composite class solution. But there is need to provide empirical evidence to support the practice in the situation in Zimbabwe and other similar locales.

On the contrary, a study by Russel, Rowe and Hill (cited in Naylor, 2000) provides evidence of significant and negative differences in Australian pupils' achievements in composite classes. The study points out that composite classes lower classroom performance of pupils. Mason and Burns (1996) also assert that composite classes contribute to poor quality instruction. Although teachers who teach composite classes are not inferior, the demanding nature of composite classes reduces the quality of their instruction. Teachers are required to deliver two or more different curricula to different groups of pupils at the same time resulting in low academic performance by pupils (Mason & Burns, 1996). On the basis of such evidence, it is disturbing to note that composite

classes are common in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mulkeen & Higgins, 2009), including Zimbabwe. The 1:40 teacher/pupil ratio used in Zimbabwe therefore leaves out schools in the resettlement areas which cannot have forty pupils per grade resorting to the formation of composite classes as a coping mechanism.

Statement of the research problem

Composite classes, logically, contradict the rationale and pre-requisites for quality education. Teachers in composite classes teach two or three classes in the same classroom and same day. The major implication is that the teacher has to cope with two or more curricula at the same time. This raises questions of satisfying syllabus expectations for each grade in the expected time. Unfortunately, pupils from composite classes are expected to write the same examination and to perform at par with pupils from single grade classes.

Research questions

The situation raises the following research questions:

- i) How are teachers managing composite classes in Mentors primary schools?
- ii) What are stakeholders' (parents, teachers and pupils) views on the teaching of composite classes?
- iii) How can teachers improve the management of pupils' performance in composite classes?

Hypotheses

Researchers raised the following pair of statistical hypotheses:

Ho: There is no association between stakeholders' group and view towards composite classes.

H₁: There is an association between stakeholders' group and view toward composite classes.

Related literature review

A number of authorities have examined the issue of composite classes from different angles. In this study, the words 'composite' and 'multi-grade' are used interchangeably. To synchronise views of authors and readers on composite classes, the following paragraphs examine factors contributing to the formation of composite classes, performance of pupils in composite classes, challenges of and parents' views on composite classes.

Factors contributing to the formation of composite classes

According to Naylor (2000), there are two major factors contributing to the formation of composite classes. The first one involves the philosophy that pupils benefit from the range and diversity of composite class grouping. A critical eye notes that pupil grouping at classroom level is a class teacher's organisational function. Gaustad (1997) proposes that composite classes promote pupils' cognitive and social growth. It is also expected to reduce pupils' antisocial behaviour. Gaustad (1997) did not explain how the antisocial behaviour is reduced by forming composite classes. Composite grouping is also expected to facilitate the use of research based developmentally suitable instructional practices such as active learning and integrated curriculum (Mason & Burns 1996). In Zimbabwe composite classes are not formed by the teacher. An evaluation of education officers' views in this study can assist to explain how composite classes may arise in Mentors district.

What is clear is that the application of different teaching methods is anchored on the assumption that teachers know the teaching methods and have the time to

apply them. This study wonders how teachers can encourage the application of composite classes in the context of its absence in the teacher education curriculum. This problem is further clarified in the question, “*What teaching methods are used by teachers in composite classes in Mentors district?*”

The second reason for the existence of composite classes is purely administrative. Veenman (1995) suggests that the formation of composite classes is a strategy put in place to cope with low pupils' enrolments or uneven class sizes. Lemos (1991) also reports that, in some countries, composite classes are associated with falling enrolments as well as economic and political factors rather than a consideration of pupils' needs. As such, it is considered to be a challenge to be overcome and not a benefit to pupils. Wilson (2003) adds that composite classes are formed as an economic or administrative necessity in trying to cater for low school enrolments, mostly in sparsely populated areas.

Lungwangwa (1989) reports that in Zambia composite classes are established as a way of extending full primary educational opportunities to low population areas, which cannot have a full mono-grade school. In Zimbabwe, schools were located to reach the out of school children resulting in the formation of the composite classes (UNESCO, 2004a). In fact, primary school children are not expected to walk more than five kilometres to get to school. From this point, the provision of composite classes is seen as a better devil than long distances and no school. Brown (2010) regards them as palatable options or a last resort. This perspective conveys the view that composite classes are there to stay. There is a need to focus the study's lenses on class management methods for the benefit of the child rather than struggle to remove them.

Sentiments above funnel to the conclusion that composite classes have a

significant role in providing access to education in the district. They are an ideal and economic way of providing education for the underprivileged. The Zimbabwe government is not yet in a position to reduce teacher to pupil ratio of one teacher to forty pupils at primary school level. It is also not in a position to build more schools. This situation militates against the realisation of the goals of the world Declaration for 'Education for All' affirmed in Jomtien in 1990 and the Dakar Framework of Action in 2000 (Brown, 2000b; Little, 2005). One can argue that the declaration is on the provision and is silent on the quality. The existing small schools with composite classes then, are an accepted important cost saving and socially accepted strategy in the education system in Zimbabwe. It is imperative then to find strategies to manage them, so that pupils can benefit. This angle focuses this study's lenses on the teacher and teaching method variables which affect the quality of learning and pupils' academic achievement.

Composite classes and pupils' academic achievement

A review of thirty experimental studies in United States of America (USA) and Canada reflects debatable findings. Pratt (1986) criticises pupils' performance findings for imperfect control of difference between teachers and schools. As a result their findings opted for multi-grade teaching. The implication of the critic on variable definition leaves readers believing that composite classes are acceptable. Miller (1999) was more explicit by proposing that pupils' performance is not compromised and neither is it better in composite classes and concluded that there is no significant difference in the performance of pupils in single and composite classes.

Studies by Mycock (1967; 1970) in England found that pupils in composite classes did well in vocabulary growth, reading accuracy and mathematical skills. Well, this can be accounted for by the high degree of interaction between

pupils. However, it is not clear whether the pupils involved were in composite classes by natural occurrence or by purposive selection. Speculation can reveal that if the composite classes were formed intentionally as a teaching method, and pupils' selection based on their ability, that could account for them doing better. In addition, the provision of learning material to cater for composite classes could have contributed to the pupils' reading accuracy and vocabulary growth. That lack of control on a multiple of variables influencing pupils' performance left this study questioning the validity of the findings. They cannot be used to account for pupils' performance in Mentors district primary schools in Zimbabwe without evidence from studies to enhance the ecological validity of the findings.

A study of the Indonesian small school project designed to assist composite class teachers has useful instructional suggestions. Bray (1987) reports that of the one thousand three hundred primary schools in central Kalimantan, four hundred and sixty have only one to three teachers. Self-study materials were developed for grades four to six and other materials were developed by older volunteers to help younger pupils. Self-study materials gave teachers' time to work with pupils who had particular difficulties. Bray (1987) found that project pupils performed better than other pupils in most subjects. However, we do not know the demographic characteristics of the project group. Neither are we informed of how the teacher variable was controlled.

In addition, the provision of self-study materials could have worked well with the project pupils. The idea of peer tutoring also has its advantages on the pupils, which could have made the project group perform better. Veenman (1995) argues that there is no empirical evidence for the assumption that pupils may not perform well in a composite class. He attributed pupils' low performance in

composite classes to teachers who receive no additional training for composite class teaching. One can infer that pupils' learning might not be negatively affected by composite classes if teachers apply the appropriate teaching methods.

On the other hand, Mason and Burns (1996) challenged Veenman (1995) by arguing that although composite classes can promote other pupils' performance, they are potentially problematic for most pupils and increase teacher stress. They justify their stance by pointing out that two or more curricula require more preparation and more teaching time on the part of the teacher. Teacher stress is worsened and curriculum coverage is compromised resulting in negative teaching and learning outcomes.

Mason and Burns (1996) further suggest that Veenman (1995) ignored two important factors which make the 'no difference proposal' problematic. They noted selection bias of pupils placed in composed classes and teachers deployed to teach them. They explained that evidence from literature indicates a tendency of placing pupils who are more able in composite classes and deployment of experienced teachers to teach them. They continue to argue that evidence from literature shows that composite classes are likely to demand more time for lesson preparation, less time for instruction per grade level and less time for individual pupils. There is also greater demand for class management and more demanding on the part of the teacher, causing negative outcomes in terms of pupils' achievements. One can observe that pupil and teacher deployment here are at par with the practice in Zimbabwe. Teachers have mixed ability pupils in their classes. Teacher deployment has nothing to do with the teacher's expertise in teaching composite classes. In fact, teacher's ability is not a major factor considered for composite class teacher allocation.

A study of primary school pupils' performance in composite classes conducted in the 1980s in England suggested that nine and eleven year olds did better in single-grades than composite classes (Bennet, Roth & Dunne, 1983). This finding suggests that pupils' age is a variable to be considered when applying the composite class mode. The survey indicated that teachers in composite classes found it difficult to judge their pupils' ability levels and to match them with pupils' performance tasks. This was attributed to teachers' lack of training in handling composite classes. These findings were accepted by the government and were used as a basis for national policy, which rejected the composite class mode.

Nielsen, Gillet and Thomson (1993) surveyed pupils' performance in eighty-five composite class schools in rural areas. A comparison of pupils' academic achievements between multi-grade and mono-grade schools was carried out. They found that multi-grade pupils' achievements were the lowest, ranked third among the country's schools. The low achievement was associated with the multi-grade system of classroom organisation. However, the findings revealed large variations in achievement scores from individual schools. The variation could have distorted the results. One can observe that other factors influencing academic achievement other than the composite class were not accounted for.

In the African context, Lungwangwa (1989) studied the impact of a pilot multi-grade teaching project in four primary schools in Zambia. The end of primary school examinations results were analysed and compared to the national achievement average. The study revealed that the proportion of pupils from multi-grade schools passing the examinations was comparable to the national average. This finding suggests no significant impact of multi-grade on pupils' performance. However, Lungwangwa did not indicate class sizes of the

composite classes in the study in Zambia. The schools could have been fully equipped to cater for composite classes resulting in pupils performing well.

Hiroshima International School (2013) suggests that composite class arrangement allow gifted lower level pupils to do upper grade work and slow learners to do lower grade work as compared to a one size fits all class approach. This arrangement allows slow learners to go back to the lower grade and pick subject content concepts where they left. In addition, Hattie (2009) supports composite classes for peer tutoring. Specifically, Hattie (ibid) registers that peer tutoring has academic and social benefits for tutors and those tutored. While the pupil tutors are helping their peers, they also reinforce their knowledge of the content. Composite classes also help to improve pupil-pupil interaction. The idea of peer tutoring again relieves the teacher of the pressure associated with composite class teaching. We wondered whether such advantages were being realised by composite primary school pupils in Mentors district.

Poisson (2002) declared that the performance of African pupils' in composite classes is not always satisfactory. This is attributed to the fact that most of these composite classes are adopted out of necessity rather than as a teaching method. They are dictated by the economic situation prevailing in most African countries rather than teachers. In fact, teachers' voices are rarely heard in the formation of composite classes in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Vithanapatharina (2006) supports this stance by saying, if composite classes are formed out of necessity; the quality of multi-grade practices is often poor and substandard. Since such classes are formed for economic reasons, it is most likely that there might not be enough resources to help ease the plight of composite class teachers. Only a few education systems have managed to make these composite classes into a positive teaching approach (Little, 2006).

While there is a general agreement in the literature that multi-grade teaching is quite demanding on the part of teachers, there is no general agreement as to how this affects the quality of teaching and learning. Brown (2010) illustrates that many countries in North America, the Caribbean, Europe and Asia are doing well with composite classes. This can be attributed to the fact that the classes are formed as instructional models; their presence is well prepared for and utilised to the best advantage of the pupils. On the contrary, Titus (2004) reiterates that teachers in Africa are either untrained or trained in the single grade pedagogy and that this skills gap can account for the lower academic achievement of pupils in composite classes. Ill prepared teachers experience challenges as they grapple in the dark for strategies to manage composite classes that they were not prepared for.

Challenges faced by composite class teachers

A critical eye from Boyd (1984) observes that the knowledge required to work with composite classes appears not to be transmitted through textbooks, in the curriculum, teaching methods, syllabus, teachers guide nor via content. The situation is complicated by the realisation that teachers are not trained for composite classes in teacher training colleges and universities. A single grade structure appears to be taken for granted as a form of organisation in the education of teachers. Teachers are thus expected to adjust to the composite class setting if and when they come across it. Hawes (1979, p. 15) objects to the training of teachers for composite classes by saying, "... a teacher with modest education and training cannot be taught to handle more than one class at a time". This stance assumes that teachers are able to adapt to composite classes without necessarily having to undergo special training on composite class teaching. It appears as if mono-grade type of classroom organisation is still the assumed ideal structure for most of those who research and advice on curriculum development.

An improvement noted by Lungwangwa (1989) is that in Zambia, composite class teaching has been introduced in teacher education courses. Unfortunately, student teachers did not take it seriously because they feared that a good performance might lead to unpopular deployment to disadvantaged areas where composite classes are common. We assumed that there were no teacher incentives for teaching composite classes in those remote areas.

Veenman (1995) acknowledges that teachers in composite classes were less satisfied with their jobs as compared to their colleagues in single grade classes. This was due to heavy teaching load and demands for classroom management. Teachers also agreed that composite classes need time for preparation and place more demands on teachers' organisation of learning activities as well as classroom management. Wilson (2003) concurred with Veenman (1995) and added that head teachers, even those with composite class experience, believe that combined classes are more difficult to teach than single-graded classes. Teachers are of the opinion that composite classes add to their workload and planning time. What is coming out clear is that teachers are not for composite classes.

In addition, Russel et al. (1998) state that teachers in Australia preferred single-grade classes. They were scared by a wide range of pupils and the amount of work in composite classes. In North Carolina, Cotton (2006) reported that teachers believe they had to maintain separate curricula for different grades within the same class. This results in double duty thereby burdening the teacher. As a result, such teachers have less job satisfaction resulting in their quality of work being compromised. This can in turn affect the performance of the pupils. Masson and Burns (1995) agree that teachers view composite classes as stressful, they demand twice the work in terms of planning and instruction.

Senegalese teachers say that if they do not use composite classes, they will have no school, meaning probably no jobs for them. Therefore, they teach composite classes to keep their jobs. They also associate composite classes with teaching in the disadvantaged areas, and the associated risks of social and professional isolation as well as poor working conditions (Berry, 2001). In fact, lesson planning is more difficult; classroom management is more complicated because of the need for having more than one group on task at the same time. Teachers are also required to write multiple lesson plans and end of term tests need to be set for each grade level. Suzuki (2004) concluded that teachers with the experience of composite classes think that composite class teaching is more difficult than mono-grade teaching. Another view from Titus (2004) confirms that multi-grade classrooms are poorly resourced compared to large urban schools staffed by trained teachers. However, in some countries the composite classes created for pedagogical reasons are well equipped, maybe because their existence was not accidental but well planned for.

Ames (2004) supports the view that the isolated and isolating conditions of primary school teachers' work and the poverty of communities served by composite classes reinforce the negative attitudes of teachers towards the schools. Since most of the composite class schools are situated in disadvantaged areas, this could be another factor adding to teachers' dislike of composite schools.

Parents' views of composite classes

Many parents are not comfortable with enrolling their children in composite classes. In Zimbabwe, parents have a say in the running of schools in their communities, hence their views are critical. However, research from the United States of America shows that parents can understand and support the system if

they are well informed and involved in the educational process (Wilson, 2003). In most cases, parents are not consulted in policymaking and implementation. This can result in resistance from the parents probably because they lack the rationale for such policies. Kygshell (2006) shares the observation that parents view composite classes with doubt and suspicion. They think that the classroom organisation is not keeping with mainstream education and rate it as a 'second best' solution.

However, Gaustead (1997) also advises policy implementers to explain the rationale for composite classes to buy in stakeholders' support. The problem is, composite classes were formed due to low enrolments and the government cannot employ additional teachers. Under those circumstances the School Development Committee can employ additional teachers if possible. This is possible in Zimbabwe boarding schools. Unfortunately it can be difficult for the parents in resettlement areas due to lack of finance to pay the extra teacher(s).

Brown (2010) regards parents' attitudes towards composite classes in many developed countries as negative, while in developing countries the negative attitude is rather among teachers and school heads. This variation can be accounted for by the fact that, school administrators create composite classes in developed countries as an option without informing the parents on its benefits. In contrast, composite classes in most developing countries are created out of necessity and the parents understand that the composite classes are the last alternative. They are left with no choice but to cooperate. Cornish (2006) concluded that parents' views of composite classes are commonly reported as negative. One wonders what implications these contradicting views have on the teaching of pupils in schools with composite classes.

Implications for schools

Little (2005) reports that there is lack of teacher accountability in the performance of pupils in disadvantaged composite class schools. The argument of the Australian Council for Educational research (1993) is that the lack of clear evidence of advantages of composite classes raises questions about the rationale of this form of grouping particularly considering their greater demands on teachers' time and skills required.

In a positive sense, where there is an administrative pedagogical reason to have composite classes, pupils will not necessarily be disadvantaged. It is rather the teacher's effectiveness and quality of teaching that determines the class outcomes. Wilson (2003) deduced that studies on composite classes recommend extra resources, time and planning. Teachers in composite classes need to be supported by sympathetic administrators, school heads and parents for positive results. Successful learning is likely to be more dependable on the quality of instructional practices than on teacher's organisational strategies (Kyne, 2005). It is critical then for this study to seek teachers' instructional strategies for composite classes.

Methodology

Research design

The challenges by and instructional strategies for composite classes in Zimbabwe require exploring. This demands guidance from qualitative descriptive case study. This is justified by Kothari (2004) who noted that descriptive research includes surveys and fact finding enquiries of different kinds. According to Mustafa (2010), the major purpose of descriptive survey is to describe the state of affairs as it exists. This facilitates the description of composite classes in Mentors district in Zimbabwe. The study is a case because

the problem is common in resettlement areas (a bounded locality). It affects those in that locality. It is limited to one problem: the teaching of composite classes. The study's aim is to explore and understand the phenomenon; not to generalise findings. Case study was preferred because of its need for the application of different methods to unravel facts and in-depth understanding (White, 2005).

Population and sampling

The population for this study was composed of primary school teachers, parents and grade six and seven pupils in primary schools with composite classes in Mentors district. Purposive samples of 53 teachers, 67 parents and 48 grade six and seven pupils from 13 primary schools participated in the study. Their inclusion criterion was basically being available, being a rich source of the variable (experience with composite classes), and willing to participate in the study.

Instruments

The major instrument for this study was a self-reporting questionnaire. It captured participants' descriptions of how composite classes were being taught, stakeholders' perceptions and how teachers can improve the management of composite classes in primary schools. An interview guide was used to gather explanations from teachers and parents. Grade six and seven pupils were also interviewed. An observation guide helped to focus the study on school structures which support the teaching and learning of pupils in composite classes. Questionnaires were preferred since teachers are literate. Interviews allow follow up questions to seek clarification of points raised. The other advantage of interviews which attracted researchers is that body movements and gestures can be interpreted and infused as part of data interpretation.

Researchers asked for permission to take notes to aid memory during interviews.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was initiated by seeking permission from Mentors district education office. Researchers moved from one school to the other administering questionnaires to teachers. They also collected data on student enrolment, teachers in the school and classes which had composite classes. Completed questionnaires were collected after three days. During the month of March 2015, researchers carried out interviews with parents who had gathered for their Annual General Meetings. Focus group discussion interviews were held with pupils in their schools. Interview records were confirmed by participants. Completed questionnaires were screened for accuracy and answering of key research questions. Qualitative findings are presented in direct speech to preserve their original meanings. A hypothesis test was carried out to confirm findings. Other responses were summarised in tables. Findings are presented under each research question theme.

Study findings

Table 1

Participants' Distribution by Age

Age Group in years	12 - 15	16 - 30	31 - 50	51 - 70	Total
Pupils	48	-	-	-	48
Parents	-	35	25	7	67
Teachers	-	30	18	5	53
Totals	48 (28%)	65 (39%)	43 (26%)	12 (7%)	168 (100%)

N = 168

The majority of participants are adults above 20 years. They are mature enough for their responses to be relied upon. The average number of teachers per school was five. Each of the 13 primary schools sampled had grades one to seven pupils.

Management of composite classes

Table 2

Composite Class Combinations

School	No of pupils	No of Teachers	Grade and pupils' combination						
			1	2	2+3	3+4	4	5+6	7
A	192	5	31		26+17=43		29	28+26=54	35
B	207	5	50	45		20+13=33		26+29=55	24
C	151	4	35	30		19+11=30		20+17=37	19
D	166	5	40	33		20+14=34		20+21=41	18
E	231	5	52	45		29+22=51		25+20=45	38
F	180	5	47		23+18=41		30	20+18=38	24
G	173	5	41	30		23+17=40		26+17=43	19
H	162	5	38		20+16=36		27	23+18=41	20
I	226	5	59		25+23=48		31	29+22=51	37
J	149	5	30	24		26+14=40		22+19=41	14
K	265	5	60	41		36+29=65		30+26=56	43
L	170	5	44	30		25+21=46		23+17=40	10
M	152	4	35		21+25=46		26	13+19=32	13
Totals	2424	63	562	278	214	339	143	574	314

Table 2 shows that the common pupil grade combination model is: Grade: 1, 2, 3+4, 5+6 and 7. Interviews revealed that the District Education Officer instructed school heads not to combine grade 1 and grade 7 pupils. The rationale was that grade 1 pupils in these schools do not go for pre-school. The infant teacher has to cater for that socialisation period in the curriculum. Grade 7 pupils are preparing for examinations they needed maximum teacher attention to improve the pass rate for the district.

A comparison of grade by grade enrolments per school reveals that pupil enrolments decrease at grades 2, 3 and 4. Interviews with teachers gathered that parents transfer their children to other schools out of the district. They attributed the transfers to parents' dislike of composite classes at grades 3, 4, 5 and 6. The smallest composite class from school C has 30 pupils. The biggest composite class from school K has 65 grade 3 and 4 pupils. Out of 2424 pupil enrolment, 1127 (46%) of the pupils are learning in composite classes. Factors accounting for the composite class distribution include the number of pupils per class, availability of teachers, overall school enrolment and national teacher to pupil ratio of 1:40. The staffing officer simply divides the total enrolment by 40 to determine the number of teachers a school should have. The school head does the school grade deployment per teacher.

Observations of the school premises revealed that each of the twenty-six composite classes was housed in a classroom with two chalkboards. Children of one class would face one chalkboard while those of the other faced the opposite direction. The teacher had a plan for each of the two classes. So the teacher had two daily lesson plans. We asked one of the teachers (Mr. T), teaching a combined grade 3 and 4 class, to explain how he managed the class.

Mr. T.: *It all starts at the planning stage. I plan my work so that when grade 3 is doing mathematics, grade 4 pupils are reading, say content. I would teach maths to grade 3 pupils while grade 4 pupils are reading silently in the same class. My presence ensures that, they do not make noise. [Pause]*

We inferred three things here: firstly, that although grade 4 pupils were quiet, there was no guarantee that each of them was reading. Secondly, pupils in these two classes had no chance to read aloud to the teacher for pronunciation and speed assessment. Thirdly, slow learners had no chance of receiving individual remedial reading. This contradicts Bray (1987) who expected teachers to offer individual assistance to slow learners while others are using self-study materials.

Mr. T.: *When the weather permits, one class will go out. For example, grade 3 pupils can go for physical education while I remain in class doing composition writing with grade 4 pupils.*

Researcher: *Who will be teaching grade 3 pupils during their physical education lesson?*

Mr. T.: *No one teaches physical education here. Children play in the grounds.*

In the five schools we observed, children were playing alone in the playgrounds during their physical education period. This confirmed Mr. T.s' perception of physical education being time for children to play. We were worried about their safety. We deduced that teachers perceive

physical education as a subject in which children do sporting activities or any games. This contradicts the ministry's position. Musangeya et al. (2000, p.74) regards physical education as a child centred learning activity which can be done in the classroom, under a teacher's instruction. This position is supported by Regional Director's Circular Number 15, point (3, 1), which stresses that physical education instruction shall be compulsory in all primary and secondary schools (Machingaidze, 2005). Two words that require highlighting are *compulsory* and *instruction*. These make it mandatory for each school and class teacher to be scheming and teaching physical education as emphasized by the Nziramasanga commission report (1999, p. 362).

We also observed that although learners were encouraged to read on their own, none of the primary schools had a library. There were no text books either. We wondered how quality reading was taking place when teachers are compelled to let the class read alone without books. We also noted that teachers concentrated on the teaching of examinable subjects: English, Shona, Mathematics and Content. This approach did not satisfy the ministry's expectation of producing an all-round pupil.

Views of some stakeholders

Table 3

Views of Pupils, Parents and Teachers on Composite Class Teaching

Stakeholder Group	In Support	Not Decided	Against	Total
Pupils	20 (11.7)	7 (10.6)	21 (25.7)	48
Parents	13 (16.4)	17 (14.7)	37 (35.9)	67
Teachers	8 (12.9)	13 (11.7)	32 (28.4)	53
Total	41 (24%)	37 (22%)	90 (54%)	168 (100%)

N= 168

Table 3 cells have the observed frequency and expected frequency in brackets. The table reveals that the majority (54%) of participants are against the teaching and learning of pupils in composite classes.

A hypothesis test of association was carried out at 5% level of significance. With $v=4$ degrees of freedom, the critical value for $\chi^2=9.488$. The calculated value $\chi^2=11.7$. Since the critical value of $\chi^2=9.488 < \text{calculated value of } \chi^2=11.7$. The null hypothesis was rejected. The study concluded that there was an association between participants' group and participants' views. Pupils' views were almost equally distributed for and against. This could be a result of their youths and limited knowledge of the implications of learning in composite classes.

The majority of parents and teachers are against the composite class mode. Teachers indicated that composite classes were a burden to them. They also believed that composite classes contributed negatively to their teaching resulting in schools' low pass rates. Teachers also stated that there was a critical shortage of self-study learning materials to help them reduce the burden on their part. Teachers were not specially trained to teach composite classes making their work a challenge to them. They indicated that they did not enjoy teaching

composite classes resulting in less job satisfaction. Teachers failed to complete the required syllabus for the combined classes resulting in pupils being inadequately prepared for the examinations. The teachers revealed that they could not deliver lessons for more than one grade in the allocated time. They concentrated on one grade at the expense of the other.

Parents did not support the presence of composite classes in their schools. They indicated that composite classes were impacting negatively on their children's academic performance although no studies were carried out in the district to support the claim. One parent interviewed pointed out that pupils' learning was affected by composite class teaching. They (parents) had no resources to employ extra teachers. As a result, they had to do with whatever learning conditions prevailed against their wishes. They accused their School Development Committee members for being manipulated by school heads into accepting the composite class mode.

Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, the study recommends the following:

- The district education officers for Mentors district can organise staff development workshops on the teaching of composite classes. Emphasis can be placed on the preparation of pupils' self-study material and use of peer tutors.
- Mentors district education officers can make special requests for more student teachers from teachers' colleges to man the extra classes.
- Teachers can write and use pupils' self-study learning materials to help pupils work with minimum supervision. This reduces the burden on the part of the teacher, allowing the teacher to attend pupils with learning difficulties.

- Brighter pupils can be trained to be peer tutors in reading so that they can help their friends during the reading period.
- Teachers can organise their pupils into reading groups of say five pupils per group. Each group must be time tabled to read to the teacher, at least once in two weeks.
- Composite class teachers can be given incentives in recognition of the double effort that they offer to composite classes. These can be funded from school fund raising activities organised by the School Development Committees. Certificates of recognition can also be given to teachers of composite classes during open days.
- Teacher training colleges should include teaching of composite classes in their teacher training curriculum so that the teachers can leave colleges with adequate knowledge on teaching composite classes which exist in the teaching field. These can be offered as option areas of specialisation.
- Given enough financial resources, composite classes should be done away with despite low enrolments. Each school should have a teacher per grade.
- Further research can be carried out to establish the effects of composite class teaching on pupils' performance. Teachers' experiences on the teaching of composite classes can be gathered through qualitative studies. More surveys on the teaching of composite classes are called for to establish the problem prevalence in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The study was motivated by the prevalence of composite classes in Mentors district primary schools against the need for quality teaching at primary school level. It sought classroom management strategies being used and stakeholders'

perceptions towards composite class teaching. The study found that teachers had no specific teaching strategies for composite classes. This gap limits teachers' effectiveness in composite classes. Stakeholders are against the application of composite class teaching at primary school level. They regard primary school learners as tender to be expected to learn in self-supervised situations. To that end, they called for the reduction or end of composite class teaching in Mentors district primary schools.

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