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Perceptions of Primary School Teachers in Masvingo District in Zimbabwe on the Meaning and Enhancement of Effective Classroom Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to investigate the perceptions of primary school teachers on the meaning of effective classroom teaching and how to enhance it. A descriptive survey research design was used. Eighty three (83) primary school teachers (40 male and 43 female) from ten (10) randomly selected schools in and around Masvingo urban participated in the study. A questionnaire for the school teachers which sought to determine the indicators of effective classroom teaching and an observation schedule which sought the prevalence of these indicators in primary school lessons were used as research instruments. The teachers were also asked to through the questionnaire to suggest how effective teaching would be enhanced. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to present, analyze and discuss collected data. The major findings of the study were that while the teachers seem to know what constitutes effective classroom teaching, there is little evidence of this kind of teaching in practice. It seems that the teachers need meaningful material and professional support if they are to be effective classroom practitioners.

THE CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

It is reasonable to say that teachers should be competent in the skills and knowledge required for effective subject teaching, classroom management and pupil assessment. The meaning of teacher quality and the 'good' teacher is, however, controversial and subject to change at different historical moments (Troman, 1996). This means that what constitutes an effective teacher will depend on the convictions of those judging the work of that teacher and these convictions differ from person to person. A study by Hall and associates (1982) found that the personal

qualities of a teacher were in many cases the decisive factor in their effectiveness. The personal qualities of a teacher could include warmth towards pupils, understanding the needs of pupils and relating well with the class. Troman [1996] on the other hand claims that teacher quality is now defined in terms of the technical competences as opposed to personal qualities. Technical competences would include technical skills related to the art of teaching such as the ability to scheme and plan as well as to make and use teaching and learning aids. According to the Department of Education and Science [DES] in the United Kingdom [1983] the good primary school teacher would be a subject specialist who has a sound preparation in that subject and has the professional skills needed to teach it to the children of different ages, abilities, aptitudes and backgrounds. This is the pedagogic role of the teacher which, however, shows a clear shift from a generalist primary school teacher to a specialist primary school teacher. The same paper goes on to say that the same teachers would need skills which are necessary for the effective performance of their role outside the classroom, in the social and corporate life of the school, and in relationships with parents and the community. Clearly, this is a very expanded role of the teacher, well beyond the pedagogic role.

The expanded role of the teacher over the years has fuelled debate on what effective teaching really means. The expanded role includes teacher competences in the classroom [the pedagogic role] which includes planning and teaching lessons well, pupil assessment and using the assessment results to improve teaching; the managerial role which includes classroom management, managing time and resources, supervising other colleagues and the new public relations role where the teacher has to work cooperatively with colleagues at the school level and the community outside the school. And so, one would ask: In which role should the teacher demonstrate competence? It would be unfair to expect the teacher to be equally competent in all these roles. Hayes [1994] in Troman [1996] found some teachers who were reluctant to accept managerial responsibilities viewing them as an extra burden that would reduce their effectiveness with their classes. Hence an observer who thinks that managerial skills are important would consider such teachers ineffective.

The debate about what constitutes good teaching is also caused by what people take to be the meaning of learning. To some people, learning is the acquisition of the established knowledge of the subject through exposition by the teacher while others take learning to be the construction of knowledge [constructivist theory and practice]. And so, the meaning of good teaching would differ from one perspective to another. Also, ideas such as 'the teacher as a researcher' [Stenhouse, 1975] and 'reflective teaching' [Pollard, 1997] contribute towards the growing, expanded and controversial role of the teacher even in the classroom setting itself i.e. in the teacher's pedagogic role. According to Stenhouse effective teachers must research on their practices and come up with alternative ways of doing things that work in their peculiar situations. Pollard argues that effective teachers must reflect on what they will have done with their classes in order to identify areas that need to be improved on.

And so, the definition of the good teacher is not uncontested [Troman, 1996]. It is against this background of controversies surrounding the exact meaning of effective classroom teaching that this research was undertaken.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The major focus of this study was to determine the perceptions of primary school teachers on the meaning of effective classroom teaching and how to enhance it. Specifically, the researchers wanted to address the following research sub-problems: To find out

- what primary school teachers consider to be important indicators of effective classroom teaching
- the extent to which the identified indicators of effective teaching are exhibited in the primary school lessons
- what primary school teachers think are the factors that would promote or hinder effective classroom teaching.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Teacher educators in colleges of education and departments of education at universities, school teachers and school heads and other relevant stakeholders should benefit from this study. Important indicators of effective classroom teaching that are found to be lacking in teachers could be emphasized during both pre-service and in-service training of teachers. We also believe that as teachers think over the importance of these indicators as they attempt to complete the questionnaire, they will think seriously about lesson preparation, planning and presentation as well as about evaluation procedures they use with their classes and this alone could lead to an improvement in their classroom effectiveness. Ways of overcoming barriers to effective classroom teaching may be worked out once these barriers are known.

THE STUDY

The research design is a combination of a descriptive survey and observational study [Borg and Gall, 1989]. The study sought and described the indicators of effective classroom teaching from the point of view of primary school teachers. The extent to which these indicators were exhibited by the primary school teachers was found by observing live classroom lessons. Factors that could hinder effective teaching and hence ways of enhancing it were also sought from the teachers.

A sample of eighty three (83) primary school teachers (40 male and 43 females) was chosen from a conveniently selected sample of ten (10) schools in and around Masvingo urban. A questionnaire for the school teachers which sought indicators of effective classroom teaching and factors that could hinder effective teaching and how to minimise these and an observation schedule which sought the prevalence of these indicators in primary school lessons were used as research instruments.

The teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that given indicators of effective teaching adapted from Armstrong and Savage [1998] and Pollard [1997] are important. These indicators concentrated on teacher behaviour and performance in the classroom. The respondents were also asked to come up with their own indicators of effective teaching. The questionnaire required the respondents to identify and explain, briefly, factors that could hinder effective classroom teaching. The researchers observed primary school lessons in various subjects in order to find out the extent to which the identified indicators of effective teaching were exhibited by the teachers and pupils. The researchers also looked for indicators related to pupil behaviour and performance. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used to analyze and discuss the collected data. Qualitative techniques were used to describe the major events that took place during the lessons while quantitative methods were used to record the frequency or percentage of teachers identifying given indicators of effective classroom teaching as important.

THE RESULTS

Through a questionnaire, teachers were asked to show the extent to which they agreed that practices that we gave them were important indicators of effective classroom teaching. Their responses were weighted using the Likert scale as follows: strongly agree, 4 points; agree, 3 points; disagree, 2 points and strongly disagree, 1 point. Percentages of the weighted points were calculated and percentages of those who strongly agreed and agreed were combined and taken as positive responses while percentages of those who disagreed and strongly disagreed were also combined and taken as negative responses. Initially, on the questionnaire itself the indicators were presented separately and at random. However, for purposes of data presentation, analysis and discussion, the indicators were grouped into broad areas of focus or themes. The results of that survey are shown in the Table below.

Table 1: Teachers' responses on given indicators of effective classroom teaching

Indicators by theme	Teachers' responses	
	Positive [%] Negative[%]	
Teachers' professional competence		
Adequate mastery of subject matter	99.1	0.9
Achieving high pupil academic performance	90.6	9.5
Following guidelines in curriculum documents	98.0	2.0
Motivating and stimulating pupils to learn	98.9	1.2
Making use of assessment results to improve teaching	98.0	2.0
Managing pupil behaviour in class	91.8	8.2
x	96.1	3.9
Teachers' personal qualities		
Warm and understanding	97.4	2.6
Being organised, business like	95.3	4.7
x	96.4	3.6
Creative innovative teaching		
Identifying and using varied assessment techniques	99.3	0.6
Experimenting with a number of ideas and approaches	98.1	1.9
Using a variety of teaching methods	96.9	3.1
Explaining teaching goals at the beginning of the lesson	85.5	14.5
Directing instructions towards the achievement of varied goals	83.0	17.1
Teaching for diversity rather than for conformity	95.6	4.4
x	93.1	6.9

Allowing for active learning			
Allowing active participation and free expression		98.4	1.6
Encouraging pupils to initiate own learning	x	92.4 95.4	7.6 4.6
Catering for individual learner differences			
Catering for all ability ranges and interests		96.3	3.7
Accommodating pupils' cultural diversity	x	97.9 97.1	2.1 2.9
Challenging learners to produce their best			
Providing learners with challenging activities and tasks	x	95.1 4.9	4.9 4.9

X = theme average

In each of the given themes 83% or more of the teachers agreed that these were important indicators of effective classroom teaching. In 17 out of 19 (89.5%) of these indicators, more than 90% of the teachers agreed with the indicator. On average, more than 93% of the teachers agreed that every one of the six themes is an important indicator of effective classroom teaching. It was clear that the teachers are in strong agreement with the given indicators of effective teaching.

Participants were asked to list any other indicators of effective teaching besides those identified by the researchers. Their responses were categorized according to themes as follows:

Effective teaching methods (31% of the participants). Participants here advocated for use of a variety of teaching methods such as games, drama and poetry; teaching the complex in simple terms; use of

interesting methods and use of a variety of relevant media including the use of the local environment as a teaching-learning resource.

Creating a free and active environment (18.8%). This would allow for active learner participation and involvement, use of discovery learning and the hands-on-approach, appeal to all senses and allow pupils to explore new ideas.

Being sensitive to and catering for individual learner differences (17.7%). This meant being sensitivity to learner needs, problems, behaviours, culture, interests, current cognitive operational and language level and prior knowledge.

Desirable teacher qualities (14.6%). The identified qualities were dedication, commitment and competence, i.e. the ability to interpret curriculum documents such as the syllabus well.

Other indicators identified by 1 or 2 participants only included completing all topics in the syllabus, relating well with pupils and being approachable.

The participants seemed quite clear that effective teaching methods including the use of a variety of relevant media, creating a free and active learning environment and being sensitive to and catering for individual differences are indicators of effective classroom teaching. Although the participants identified desirable teacher qualities as an indicator of effective teaching, we feel that the participants wanted to convey the message that these teacher qualities could result in effective teaching.

All the above 'other indicators' from the teachers are really not significantly different from our own list of indicators. A significant number (25%) of the participants did not offer any other indicators but simply left the question blank. To us, this is a clear indication that these participants are in agreement with us on what constitutes effective classroom teaching.

Our own observations of classroom practices by some of these teachers revealed the following: little variety in the teaching methods used; the majority of the teachers neither teach creatively nor allow for creativity in their lessons; and there was little, if any, meaningful use of the discovery approach to teaching. The usual lesson pattern was: question and answer session to revise the previous lesson or introduce the new one, followed by group work, followed by question and answer session to reinforce the lesson and then followed by individual written work. Some lessons were taught without a single meaningful teaching and learning aid. The most common aids were flash cards and work cards. The teachers almost always taught the whole class moving with those who followed the lesson and leaving the rest behind, clearly not catering for individual learning differences.

The participants were asked to list any factors that could act as barriers to effective teaching. The responses are indicated below:

Lack of teaching-learning resources (37.3% of the participants). This refers to teachers' resource books, pupils' textbooks, infrastructure, furniture, equipment and stationery for pupils.

Teacher-related barriers (30.3%). The barriers cited here included demotivated teachers (as a result of poor remuneration, no incentives, being overworked and lack of appreciation of the work done by teachers) and incompetent teachers (as a result of poor mastery of subject matter, inability to interpret the curriculum documents, use of ineffective methods and employment of untrained teachers).

Pupil- related barriers (13.0%) The identified barriers were poor socio-economic background, parents' reluctance to monitor school work given to pupils and negative attitudes to education.

Barriers related to the school curriculum (7.6%). The participants cited such barriers as a too restrictive and prescriptive curriculum (that is a curriculum that does not give much autonomy to the teacher), school

heads' high-handedness, too much supervision, an examination oriented curriculum and the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction.

Other barriers identified by 1 or 2 participants only included political interference, resistance from and negative attitudes of the community, too many innovations brought into the education system, failure to identify children with special learning problems and non-involvement of teachers in curriculum planning.

The major barriers identified by the teachers, therefore, are lack of teaching-learning resources, de-motivated teachers, the pupils' socio-economic and educational backgrounds and a school curriculum that is both restrictive and prescriptive.

The teachers were asked to suggest what could be done and by whom to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. According to 91.3% of these teachers, the major solutions to problems emanating from the barriers to effective classroom teaching lies in supporting the teachers by providing them with teaching-learning resources, improving the teachers' working conditions, mounting staff development and in-service programmes and providing regular and effective supervision (government, school heads and local communities were identified as agencies responsible for this). Other solutions identified by one or two participants included the need for teachers to be resourceful and autonomous.

DISCUSSION

The indicators associated with the teacher's professional competence were rated highly (by 96.1% of the participants on average). This is quite understandable. A teacher with little or no mastery of the subject matter to be taught, who cannot motivate or stimulate his pupils to learn, who cannot follow guidelines given in the curriculum documents such as the national syllabus or the teachers' resource books, who cannot use results from formative evaluation or who cannot manage pupil behaviour in class is unlikely to be effective. However, it is important to make the following pertinent observations:

- primary school teachers handling ten (10) or more different subjects are unlikely to satisfactorily master the subject matter of all concepts in all subjects they teach.
- a significant minority of the teachers (9.5%) did not think that achieving high academic pupil performance was an important indicator of effective classroom teaching. In an examination oriented education system as is in this country where success in life could depend on good examination results, this reaction from the teachers seems strange. We, however, seem to infer from this that these teachers were implying that there are other desirable learning outcomes besides academic excellence. These would include excellence in sporting activities, inculcation of desirable values and attitudes. In other words, these teachers may have been interested in the development of the total person—a pupil with knowledge, skills and values in many areas. The teachers may also be implying that effective teaching is not the only factor that influences pupil performance in tests and examinations. The socio-economic background of the pupils, for example, is known to influence their academic performance (Child, 1981 and Beihler and Snowman, 1993).
- a significant minority of the teachers (8.2%) did not think that managing pupil behaviour in the classroom was an important indicator of effective classroom teaching. We do not think that these teachers were advocating for chaos in the classroom since this would certainly be counter productive. We think that they were advocating for free classrooms where pupils would not be unduly restricted in their activities and behaviour as long as they were educationally productive.

Creative and innovative teaching was rated very highly by 93.1% of the teachers, on average. Creativity refers to coming up with different but viable ways of teaching and learning while innovativeness refers to the ability to come up with new but viable ways of teaching and learning.

These are obviously desirable indicators of good teaching. We, however, make the following observations:

- a significant minority of the teachers (17.1%) did not think that directing instruction towards the achievement of many different goals in a lesson is an important indicator of effective classroom teaching. Armstrong and Savage (1996) suggest that because learners differ in their skills, knowledge and attitudes they have and need, teachers must come up with large numbers of different kinds of educational goals in order to cater for these learners' individual differences. The teachers in this survey might have thought that such a scenario would cause confusion in the lesson or that it was not practical to achieve several objectives in a lesson or that it would 'spoil' their chances of achieving the main objective of the lesson.
- a significant minority of the teachers (14.5%) did not think that explaining teaching goals to the learners at the beginning of a lesson was an important indicator of effective teaching. They felt so despite research evidence which seems to suggest that when pupils know what it is that they should achieve in a lesson, they become more focused (Beihler and Snowman, 1993 and Armstrong and Savage 1996). These teachers might have felt that by explaining the purpose of the lesson at its onset, they would take the 'thunder' out of the lesson, the element of discovery.
- creative and innovative teaching is also not simple. Creative learning will develop where it is encouraged. Very often teachers discourage it by demanding conformity because conformity does not spring any unknown, unfamiliar and uncomfortable surprises in a lesson. Creative and divergent pupils often respond to questions and problems in 'unorthodox and unsettling ways and give the impression that they are uncooperative and disruptive' (Beihler and Snowman, 1993p224-225).

On average, 95.4% of the teachers supported active learning also known as discovery learning. Generally, this refers to a situation where pupils are led and supported by their teachers to discover information for themselves through interacting with a variety of relevant learning materials. Its main features, according to Cohen and Manion (1985) include the teacher acting as a guide, a facilitator to educational experience; active pupil participation and teaching not confined to the classroom base. Farrant (1980 p216) refers to it as 'getting children to become partners in learning'. The method is very important since 'conceptions that children arrive at on their own are more meaningful than those proposed by others' (Bruner, 1983 in Biehler and Snowman 1993: 429). Discovery learning requires a lot of resources and a lot of time. With limited resources in the schools and with the teachers rushing to complete the syllabus in preparation for national examinations in an examination driven education system, with overworked, de-motivated teachers, the discovery approach may neither be feasible nor desirable. Active participation in lessons often involves experimental work which in turn may involve trial and error. Very few schools (teachers, pupils, school heads, parents) would entertain experimental work when there is an examination to be written at the end of the year. Taba (1962) says that given the choice between good teaching and good examination results, parents, teachers and pupils would opt for good examination results.

On average, 97.1% of the teachers supported the idea of catering for individual learner differences. Cohen and Manion (1985) refer to this as individualization of instruction. The authors go on to say that individualization is 'based on the recognition of the fact that not all children can be expected to learn at the same rate' (p124). This is because 'students of any age or culture differ from one another in various intellectual and psychomotor abilities and skills... in interests and motives and in personal styles of thought and work during learning These differences, in turn, appear directly related to differences in the students' learning progress (Snow, 1988p 1029 in Beihler and Snowman, 1993). The basic aim of individualization is to educationally reach and teach each and every learner in the class. But

this is not easy especially with the characteristic large classes at primary school level in Zimbabwe.

The research findings also show some worrying contradictions. For example, while 98% of the teachers felt that following the guidelines provided in curriculum documents is an important indicator of effective classroom teaching, the same percentage of teachers (98.1%) felt that being creative and experimenting with new ideas and practices was an important indicator. However, it would seem impossible for the same teachers to take curriculum from the centre as a prescription while at the same time claiming to be autonomous and creative. Is one position a reality while the other is a wish?

Our own observations of classroom practices by some these teachers revealed that the teachers exhibited very few, if any, of the important indicators of effective teaching that the same teachers had identified. Clearly it is a question of the teacher knowing is appropriate but not doing it.

From all these observations, we conclude that while teachers know what constitutes effective classroom teaching, there is very little evidence of this in practice. The responses of these teachers in this research may have been influenced by their theoretical knowledge of what good teaching is rather than their own practice. The responses could also be a result of what McMillan and Schumacher (1981) call 'social desirability' which they describe as the tendency of a research respondent to respond to items in a manner that will make the respondent look knowledgeable and good. Several reasons could be advanced for this lack of effective teaching in the lessons observed. The Department of Education and Science [DES (1992)] identify too many curriculum reforms demanding too much in terms of time and different skills from teachers as a possible barrier to effective classroom teaching. Campbell et al (1992) and Alexander (1994) in Troman (1996) call this the sheer unmanageability of such a wide curriculum. We have seen the introduction of several curriculum innovations in Zimbabwe in recent years, such as HIV and AIDS Education, essay type examinations questions, Better

Environmental Science Teaching Programme, etc. The teachers identified a number of barriers to effective classroom teaching with which we concur. For example, limited or no teaching-learning resources, a too restrictive curriculum (lack of autonomy), the background of pupils, incompetence among the teachers, lack of support and pressure of examinations. In addition we offer further explanations as follows:

- it is now a well known fact that teachers in Zimbabwe are generally de-motivated by the poor conditions of service (poor salaries, over-worked with large classes and a congested timetable). As such they may lack the zeal to think of innovative, 'interesting' and 'varied methods of teaching' and they are too exhausted at the end of the day to make these 'varied and relevant' teaching media.
- teachers in Zimbabwean primary schools are generalists, lacking the expertise required to teach some subjects or some topics in some subjects effectively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the teachers seem to know what constitutes effective classroom teaching, there is very little evidence of this kind of teaching in practice. The teachers seem to be overwhelmed with the barriers to effective teaching to the extent that they just do what works. We seem to be confronted with the biblical situation where 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (Mark 14:38b).

The teachers have identified a possible solution to this state of affairs. They need support, both material support (teaching and learning resources and conducive or attractive conditions of service) and academic/professional support through regular and meaningful supervision and staff development programmes. We agree with them for we seem to sense a high positive correlation between the effectiveness of a teacher and the motivational level of the teacher. Happy and

supported teachers are likely to be more effective than unhappy and unsupported teachers. We, therefore, make the following recommendations which were adapted from DES (1992) that could improve classroom teaching:

- subject specialization would minimize the problem of incompetent teachers in terms of both subject mastery and delivery. Some primary schools in Zimbabwe have subject specialists in such areas as Music, Physical Education and Computer Studies. Specialisation could be extended to other or even all subjects.
- collaborative subject strength of the staff where members of staff work as teams in different subject areas. In Zimbabwe we already have subject committees that need to be strengthened and empowered to come up with ideas on effective teaching in those subject areas.
- continuous training in the form of refresher courses, staff development and in-service courses not just to be refreshed but also to be kept abreast of new developments in the subject area.

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