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Primary School Teachers' Colleges' Preparation of Student Teachers for the Teaching of Children's Literature – The Case of Marymount, Masvingo, Mogernter and Bondolfi Teachers' Colleges

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ABSTRACT

The study was an investigation into the primary school teachers' colleges' preparation of student teachers for the teaching of children's literature. It was established that there is no systematic and deliberate preparation of student teachers for the teaching of children's literature despite the general consensus on its importance. The paper recommends the formulation of curriculum for the preparation of student teachers for the teaching of children's literature. This could cascade down to the primary schools curriculum so that children's literature can take its rightful place in the Zimbabwean education system.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Children's literature has in recent years become an established area of study in its own right. According to Collie and Slatter (1987), children's literature is important because it contains a lot of cultural information. This includes information on traditional customs, practices, beliefs and rites. In Zimbabwe the annual national literary awards that are held at the same time as the Zimbabwe International Book Fair have a category for children's literature, an indication of the importance attached to this area in the country. A close look at most of the children's literature in Zimbabwe today shows that it is intended for speakers of the indigenous languages. This makes reading it a rewarding experience for children whose first languages are the indigenous languages, from both a cultural and literary viewpoint. The importance of children's literature can thus never be over-emphasised.

Whitehead (1997:121) says children's early encounters with literature help in keeping them interested in human issues. This view is shared by the Thomas report (1985:24) which echoes the view that the reading of poetry and stories has many important purposes for children including "... making it possible to introduce children, via the poets or authors words, to experiences and feelings that life has not yet presented ...". In other words, the reading of literature will enable children to learn the ability to empathise. Whitehead in Blenkin and Kelly (1987) concludes that books and stories help children ignore immediate context and in this way allow words to create imaginary worlds. Donaldson in Whitehead (1987), and Jalonga (1992), assert that literature enables children to handle abstract and complex ideas and can be of a social as well as an academic nature. Glazer (1986:3) precisely says, "... the regular sharing of literature with children frequently leads to vocabulary growth, increased reading comprehension, and concept development".

There are other pedagogical reasons for the teaching of literature to children. Whitehead (1987, 1992) says the justification for teaching literature includes among others, skills, cultural heritage, and personal development. Pearson (1987), Collie and Slater (1987), Norton (1990) claim that contact with literature develops and extends the individual's skills in writing and reading. This view is further expounded by Glazer (1986), Leu and Kinzer (1987) and Alexander (1988) who all say that well written literature has much to offer the developing individual. Children's language development and induction into literacy can be immensely facilitated, and with much ease, through the use of stories. In Whitehead's (1987) opinion, story and narrative have centrality in early education.

Literature can be taught in conjunction with play. Poetry and drama readily come to mind in this regard. Whitehead (1984) prefers the term 'sharing literature with children' to children reading or being taught literature. She says, "Literature may be understood as a way of playing and several characters are common to the activities. They are other major ways of attempting to make sense of the world" (Whitehead 1994:2). In other words, literature like play helps the child interpret and make sense of her world. For instance, stories and poems are play resources which children may use along with other objects such as toys.

Literature is a novel and yet powerful way of using language. Literature introduces children to those aspects of written language, which the spoken

word cannot teach, for example, permanence, explicit references, and cohesive devices (Whitehead 1987, Jalonga (1992), and Pearsons (1987). Literature has the potential to develop and promote children's interest and attitude towards reading (Leu and Kinzer, 1987). Most children, for one reason or another, find reading boring and teachers can use literature to rekindle interest in reading and possibly change negative attitudes towards reading. Readers who are motivated are likely to engage in independent reading, which is the ultimate goal of any reading instruction. Children are therefore more likely to find reading more interesting if it is literary in nature than if the concepts are purely academic and removed from their experiences.

Early introduction to literature also improves children's reading and linguistic skills. Leu and Kinzer (1987) say the reading of literature can promote reading readiness and can help develop automaticity. In addition to the other merits of literature, Leu and Kinzer (1987) say it also develops children's vocabulary and conceptual, syntactical and discursive knowledge. Literature is the ideal medium for the child because it educates the intellect as well as the imagination. For Hunt (1990) and Glazer (1986), most children's literature is culturally formative, and thus of great importance educationally. Cadzen (1972), White (1984), Chomsky (1984) claim that literature is a major way of stimulating creativity. Early exposure to literature could therefore be one way through which children's creative writing skills could be nurtured. Jalonga (1992:102) explains this further when he says: "Quality literature teaches children to associate pleasure with literacy events. It uses language in surprising and satisfying ways".

Literature also provides a language scaffold since children may return to a book repeatedly and realize a new meaning each time (Jalonga, 1992; Bruner, 1984). Further to this, literature presents children with a model of language use which they can return to often.

Trachtenburg (1990) and Alexander (1988) share Jalonga's assertion that literature can be used to enhance children phonics instruction. Literature has great instructional potential to teach beginning reading. The literature approaches to introducing reading instruction combine whole word and phonics instruction. Literature allows phonics instruction to be introduced in the context of real reading tasks and texts through the use of children's literature.

Research by Cadzen (1972), White (1984), Chomsky (1972) shows that children absorb the language they hear, read and in time use that language as part of their own repertoire. Cunning (1996) is of the opinion that using literature is currently seen as a better way of teaching reading. It is also a way of modeling the writing process. In addition to the intellectual value of literature, there is also the social dimension. For instance, Wells (1981) concludes that books and stories help children to ignore immediate context and allow words to create imaginary worlds. Young children are able to handle abstract and complex ideas through the medium of story and anecdote (Donaldson, 1978). Narrative has centrality in early years of education (Whitehead, 1994).

In multicultural societies such as Zimbabwe the use of literature increases cultural awareness. The learning of literature from diverse cultures and backgrounds enables the child to grow in their understanding of themselves and others. Hence children learn to value literature traditions that come from many diverse cultural backgrounds. This will possibly facilitate the children's understanding of different belief and value systems (Norton, 1990). For Purveys (1993:358), literature is "an expression of, and a lens into cultures".

Literature is the main predictor of early reading success. Wells (1981) in Bloom (1987) found that knowledge of, and interest in, literature was the highest predictor of later success in reading. When children share books with adults they can learn about how books work, and the language of book reading, such as "page" "word" "letter", "lines" etc. Children also begin to recognize through individual words and groups of words that literature is culturally formative and that it "has massive importance educationally, intellectually and socially". It was with this in mind that the researchers sought to find out whether the primary teacher education system in the country was preparing student teachers to handle this delicate area so that the children can also reap the rich rewards. The study sought to establish to what extent student teachers were employing children's literature to enhance instruction.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a survey design. Student teachers and lectures from four primary school teachers' colleges were involved in the exercise.

Two lecturers from the English section of each of the participating colleges were selected using the snowball approach where one lecturer was initially identified from each college and in turn, the initially identified lecturer chose a colleague. The initially identified lecturer would hopefully choose a colleague who was also actively involved in the teaching of English at the college. The idea behind this approach was to get as much information relevant to the study as possible as it would be coming from practitioners directly involved in language and literature teaching. The same was done for student teacher respondents. Lecturers were asked to identify the student teachers they would most prefer to administer the questionnaire to. After this, each student then provided a name until four student teachers from each college had completed the questionnaire. The participating lecturers chose those students who had already been on teaching practice on the basis that these had had a chance to marry theory to practice.

The researchers made follow-up interviews with lecturers in order to get clarification on certain issues. These interviews were conducted immediately after the return of the questionnaire, which had been self-administered. The researchers also analysed the professional studies syllabus, which is essentially a methodology syllabus. These procedures were followed because the researchers felt triangulation would result in accurate data.

FINDINGS FROM STUDENTS

There were 16 student participants from four primary teachers' colleges in Mutare and Masvingo. There was no common technical definition of children's literature by the students. However, 12 of them defined children's literature in terms of length and simplicity of vocabulary. These student teachers defined it as short stories for children. These short stories had to be easy to understand and should have accessible diction or vocabulary for them to be classified as children's literature. 10 participants included nursery rhymes, stories, poetry, picture books and more important, folklore in their definition of children's literature. 'A text such as *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens certainly can't be placed in the category of children's literature', one participant from Masvingo Teachers' College wrote.

On how children's literature should be taught, 15 of the 16 respondents said it should be taught in small doses that pupils could easily remember.

In other words, these respondents believed the best way to teach children's literature was to fragment it into the smallest units possible. This approach according to one respondent from Marymount Teachers' College, "helps pupils to remember content more easily than if they were to be overloaded with too much detail."

All the 16 respondents pointed out that children's literature should be taught using playlets, song and dance, role-play, miming and drama. They indicated that since children have difficulty in visualizing the abstract, it was important for them to be given an opportunity to re-live what they read by acting it out.

8 of the respondents said the teachers could use supplementary readers to teach literature. These student teachers believe literature could be easily mastered by exposing the pupils to a variety of reading activities and interpretations, with the teacher's help. 11 of the respondents said children should read stories, novels, poems and then participate in 'tag' or 'relay narration' where they took turns to narrate the events in a story and the teacher would help the children in summarizing. The teacher would now and again change the narrator and ask each pupil to start where the last one had stopped.

5 of the student teachers said they employed model reading and then they would go over what had been read to ensure all children had understood. Another method that was suggested was free reading of a variety of supplementary books with the teacher assisting pupils in interpreting and playing out the read stories.

14 of the student teachers said they teach literature in the same way they teach comprehension, that is to say, a passage would be read and questions answered by the pupils. These were obviously teachers who consciously or unconsciously equated literature to comprehension.

6 of the respondents believed children's literature could even be taught using the "adult approach" where the teacher would lead the pupils to examine issues such as setting, character and theme but at the level of children. "Children's ability to analyze issues is largely looked down upon. For example, cruelty as a theme can easily be discussed with children", wrote one respondent from Morgenster Teachers' College. On further

probing, it was, however, evident none of the student teachers had actually taught literature in this way.

On whether there was any difference between adult and children's literature, 10 of respondents pointed out that children's literature dealt mostly with folktales and most of the literature usually has happy endings. They pointed out that the other distinction between children and adult literature is that children's literature does not deal with real life situations but rather, deals with the unusual. A surprising difference suggested was that children's literature was largely unstructured since it does not have a specific syllabus as is the case with the adult literature which is more structured. Another difference was that children's literature was mostly short and easy to understand. Student teachers pointed out that children's literature is hierarchical (developmental) in the sense that it increases in difficulty depending on the ages and grades for which it is meant. The respondents said there should be no critical analysis when teaching children's literature since technical literary terms would burden the children and frighten them from literature. "There is absolutely no need for critical analysis when teaching children's literature", wrote one respondent from Masvingo Teachers' College.

On the question of whether the primary school syllabus provided for the teaching of literature, all the student teachers contended that this was not the case. However, 12 of them suggested that literature was provided for in the form of comprehension and in supplementary readers. Literature was usually integrated in English language lessons and it rarely, if ever, was taught as a separate entity. The primary school syllabus did not have separate entry for literature.

The students were asked whether they felt that the teachers' colleges had adequately exposed them to techniques and methods for teaching children's literature. All of them expressed doubt that this had been the case. The 4 who claimed they could teach literature based their confidence on their ability to transfer their own knowledge of, and learning in, 'adult' literature to teaching children's literature. These were understandably all English majors.

In response to the question on whether they felt confident that they would be able to teach children's literature upon completion of their teaching

diplomas, 7 of the respondents said they could teach children's literature but only if they used the current primary school syllabus and that if there was a syllabus change in future, they would not be able to. 3 of the student teachers felt that the teaching of literature to children in the primary school would be well beyond them. Their reasoning was that they had not been adequately exposed to the skills of teaching children's literature. They indicated that the professional studies lecturers in the language section had not touched this area.

This last point was made clearer by the responses all participants gave to the question on whether they had ever studied any children's literature either in school or college. All of those in English and Shona main study areas had encountered mostly 'adult' literature in the form of drama, poetry and prose. Very rarely did lecturers refer to texts written for children in the methods lectures. None of the respondents could readily list any books for children of Zimbabwean or any other origin. The titles the respondents could immediately name were texts available in schools and prescribed supplementary readers. This was an indication of the little attention given to children's literature in the primary school teachers' colleges curriculum. Significantly, those who were not in the language main study areas had not encountered literature set books at all. The majority of these stated that they rarely read books for leisure, most of their reading being for purely academic purposes.

Interestingly all the 16 respondents felt that literature had great value for the teaching of language. "Literature helps to improve children's vocabulary", wrote one respondent from Bondolfi Teachers' College. Besides vocabulary development, 2 participants also said literature helps children to easily identify parts of speech. They added that literature helps the child in developing critical analysis and the ability to discuss issues. For these respondents, literature is a tool by means of which children's minds can be opened, a window through which they can get a good view of the world.

Literature was said to help pupils to read, listen and understand the language better. If pupils are adequately exposed to literature it may result in an improvement in both their written and spoken language. This is because student teachers believed that reading literature exposed children and allowed them to interact with live language.

The final question that the respondents had to answer was on whether they had encountered any problems in the teaching of children literature during their Teaching Practice. 12 of the respondents admitted that they had encountered some problems. The 4 who said they had not faced problems said most children were very eager and excited to learn literature. The excitement was a result of children's predisposition to stories. Most infants actually enjoyed literature and, the stranger the literature, the more they appeared to enjoy it. Most of the infants actually demanded story time in their learning day. Story books provided the greatest pleasure and were easy to teach. Those who said teaching literature to children provided challenges mainly cited the fact that children would have problems in visualizing the many events in the story. This view was held by 12 of the respondents. They claimed that children understood literature better when they were dealing with real objects rather than abstractions. On the other hand, there were teachers who said children who were very intelligent would argue with teachers and in the process, undermine the teacher, making other children lose faith in the teacher.

FINDINGS FROM LECTURERS

Eight lecturers from the four teachers' colleges were asked basically the same questions or variations of the questions which student teachers had been asked. Like the students, lecturers believed literature had great value in that when children study literature, they learn language. It provides moral values, reading skills and it enhances comprehension and language acquisition. Finally, just like the student teachers, the lecturers said if children study quality literature, it would widen their language base.

Asked whether there had been any major developments in the children's literature in terms of growth and quality since independence, all eight lecturers responded in the affirmative. Generally, this was in contrast with the majority of the students' view that there had been little development in children's literature in Zimbabwe since independence. However, the lecturers' responses were qualified. For instance, 3 lecturers believed there has been growth in the amount of fiction books intended for children but this had not taken root in the readership. The bulk of the new literature for children has been in folktales and some prose. 4 lecturers were of the view that, in terms of quality of works, Zimbabwean children's literature had lagged behind others. "Children's literature in Zimbabwe is in danger of

extinction," a lecturer from Marymount Teachers' College. She said this was mainly because children's literature was not being accessed by the intended beneficiaries, rather like a product not getting to its target customers.

To the question on whether the colleges' curriculum had adequate room for the teaching of children's literature, all the lecturers, concurred with the student teachers that college teaching/lecturing schedules did not always provide for the teaching of literature for children. Some had room to teach it in the professional studies syllabus and a number of lecturers were delivered, but all the 8 lecturers expressed doubt on whether student teachers did actually teach it when on Teaching Practice. Few student teachers seemed to realize the overlap between literature and language teaching. Some colleges had a component called 'Writing', where students write stories for chosen grades with matching language activities. All the 8 the lecturers who participated in the study confirmed that no attempt had been made to include children's books in the main study area. This last point was put into context when the lecturers indicated that they themselves had very limited knowledge and experience of children's literature. 2 of them actually indicated that the only children's stories they were familiar with were those they had read in primary school. Encouragingly, all the 8 lecturers expressed interest in pursuing and familiarizing themselves with children's literature. 3 of the lecturers said that in recent years they had read children's literature for leisure and not critically. All the 5 lecturers felt that, on the whole, student teachers were generally not well equipped to teach children's literature since their pre-service education had not empowered them to do so. "The possible reason why the colleges have never emphasized children's literature in the professional studies syllabus is that the primary school syllabus is silent on the teaching of children's literature," said one of the lecturers from Morgenster Teachers' College. One of the 8 lecturers felt that it was only out of enthusiasm and innovation that teachers made use of literature in the teaching of language. This was in agreement with a comment by one of the student teachers that there was no compulsion in the Zimbabwean primary school curriculum for the teaching of children's literature.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The study had two main aims which were, to establish the student teachers' knowledge of, and preparedness to teach, children's literature after their

pre-service training and secondly, to find out whether there was any instruction in the teachers' colleges, in children's literature and to determine whether this instruction adequately prepared the students to handle children's literature. From the interviews with the student teachers and their lecturers and an analysis of teaching schedules and syllabus, it emerged that there was no systematic teaching of children's literature in the primary teachers' colleges. What emerged was that there was indeed the teaching of 'adult' literature and hence the belief among the practitioners that knowledge of adult literature translates to knowledge of children's literature. These findings are at variance with Nyawaranda's (1999) assertions. Nyawaranda (1999) disagrees with the implicit view held by college lecturers that ability to teach adult literature necessary translates to ability to teach children's literature. Nyawaranda (1999:9) says there are frequent inconsistencies between theory and practice whenever teacher education adopts a "front loading" approach in which student teachers are seen as receptacles of pre-packed knowledge. This contradicts the view held by many college students that because they have some knowledge of literature then they would be able to teach literature to primary school children. Nyawaranda (1999:9) believes that "the knowledge a student teacher received in a teacher's college does not to any large extent translate into practice."

The findings from both student teachers and lecturers also bear out other researchers such as Hunt (1990), Len and Kluzer (1987), Cazden (1986), Collie and Slater (1987) and Glazer (1986)'s assertions that the children's literacy texts are formative, important educationally, intellectually and socially. Most respondents said literature stimulates creativity, a view that is also held by Cazden (1972) and Collie and Slater (1987) who asserts that there is a positive correlation between the linguistic development of the children and the amount of reading done by the children. This view is also held by most of the study teachers and their lecturers.

Though some respondents cited works by writers such as Stephen Alumenda, Charles Mungoshi, Wonder Guchu and John Kapuya as evidence of the growth of children's literature in Zimbabwe, there is need to take heed of Ray (1970)'s word of caution to the effect that there is danger that this literature may actually not be read by the intended beneficiaries. This warning is given credence to by the fact that all the 16 students who took

part in the study confirmed they had not given their pupils access to literature except perhaps as supplementary readers. Lecturer's experiences and beliefs also tallied with Ray (1970) as they admitted that in most instances the teaching of children's literature had not been taught specifically.

The results of the survey are consistent with those of Chitando (2005) and Hunt (1990) who found that there were problems in defining literature for children. Most of the respondents had problems giving a definition of children's literature. In their definitions most of the respondents included folktales and easy- to- grasp stories. This does not differ very considerably with what Jalonga (1992) says. She says literature in early childhood education is "a general term that includes stories, songs, rhymes and non-fiction" (Jalonga 1992:163). Like Hunt (1990) and Glazer (1986), Collie and Slater (1987), Len and Kinzer (1987), Jalonga (1992) asserts that literature enhances the child's intellectual, social and imaginative development. The survey found that most teachers' colleges did not have a systematic approach to the teaching of children's literature to their students. It is evident that although there are texts by writers such as Stephen Alumenda, Charles Mungoshi, Wonder Guchu and John Kapuya available on the Zimbabwean market, most student teachers are not aware of them and a real danger exists that most children are not likely to have an informed access to this literature.

Most of the student teachers in the colleges are not exposed to children's literature. This could be a result of the fact that the primary school syllabus does not specify that literature be taught in the primary school. Student teachers are prepared according to current syllabus specifications, which may render them obsolete and invalid in the event of a syllabus change. It is this front- end loading and kit-bequeathing that Nyawaranda (1999) argues against. The teaching of literature could possibly be neglected due to fear that it is abstract and challenging. Another possible reason why children's literature is not systematically taught in the primary teachers' colleges could be that most teachers and lecturers teach that which they themselves were taught and, in the case of lecturers, that which is prescribed in the syllabus. Most have never encountered children's literature. It is evident that though they readily accept the high value of literature, they do not take the genre seriously as an area of study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident from the findings of this study that there is no systematic teaching of children's literature in the teachers' colleges and in the primary schools. Trained teachers therefore leave teachers' colleges without being adequately prepared for the teaching of children's literature. One therefore wonders how they then approach this area which both student and lecturers agree is very important. There also appears to be a gap between the students teachers' and lecturers' beliefs about the value of literature and their actions. While the utility value of literature is not in doubt, it appears not much is being done to make children benefit from deliberate instruction in their literature. The failure to teach the genre may be because teachers and their lecturers generally tend towards the familiar. There appears to have been no deliberate efforts made so far to incorporate children's literature into the mainstream primary school curriculum. This seems to be mainly be a result of the fact that the primary school syllabus does not specifically prescribe the teaching of literature. Since the syllabus is the basis of all teaching, there is need to create room in the Zimbabwean primary school curriculum for the teaching of children's literature. The Curriculum Development Unit in conjunction with the teachers' colleges could be given the task of formulating and implementing the necessary syllabus changes. What is also apparent is the ignorance about children's publications by those who are supposed to be availing these same books to the children. The teachers themselves, starting from their days as trainees in teachers' colleges, need to be exposed to a wide range of texts on children's literature and methods on teaching them. Since literature teaching is a dynamic field, workshops at national level whose deliberations and recommendations could cascade down to individual schools should also be organized if the teaching of this very important subject is to assume its rightful place in the primary school curriculum. As is the case with other subjects, children's literature subject panels could be put in place at national, provincial, district, cluster and school levels to ensure not only uniformity in the way it is taught but also research and possible addition of texts to the ones that are already on the market.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

Student Teachers

- In your view what is children's literature?
.....
.....
- How should it be taught?
.....
.....
- How does children's literature differ if at all from other genres of literature?
.....
.....
- Does the primary school syllabus provide for the teaching of literature in primary schools?
.....
.....
- In your learning at college do you believe you are adequately prepared to teach children's literature? Explain.
.....
.....
- What set books have you studied at college?
.....
.....

- Where any of the set books children's literature?
.....
.....
- Does literature have any value in language teaching? Explain your answer.
.....
.....
- Have you ever studied children's literature at school or in college?
.....
.....
- Do lecturers ever make reference to children's literature in methods lectures?
.....
.....
- Have you encountered problems in teaching fiction to primary school children? Explain your answer.
.....
.....

Lecturers

- Do you think children's literature is of any value in the primary school language teaching? Explain your answer.
.....
.....

- In your opinion how much has children's literature developed in Zimbabwe?

.....
.....

- Does your teaching schedule have room for teaching of children's literature?

.....
.....

- What types of literature set books do you teach?

.....
.....

- Have you ever studied children's literature?

.....
.....

- Do you believe student teachers who leave college are equipped to handle children's literature classes?

.....
.....

- Do teachers need special abilities to teach children's literature?

.....
.....

- Does the primary school syllabus provide/allow the teaching of literature?

.....
.....



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