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**QUALITY CONCERNS IN BASIC PRIMARY
EDUCATION IN TWO RURAL DISTRICTS OF
ZIMBABWE: AN INTERROGATION OF PERCEPTIONS
OF CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS.**

Bornface Chenjerai Chisaka and Oliver Mavundutse

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Abstract

Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has been priding itself of a high literacy rate among its population, and has been producing what has been termed high quality products in the form of teachers, doctors, nurses, among others, who are in high demand in Africa and beyond. This has been largely due to what Harrison as cited in Doherty(1994) calls the massification of education in the post-colonial era, which saw all young people of school going age accessing primary education. But the question that comes to mind is, "to what extent can mass education provide quality education? Or is it a question of elite education being <written a little larger>" as Neave(1985) and Harrison(1994) say?

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A non-governmental organisation, Save the Children Norway-Zimbabwe(SCNZ), has developed an interest to promote and enhance basic quality education in two rural districts of Zimbabwe, Bikita(in Masvingo Province) and Rushinga(in Mashonaland Central Province). To this effect, the authors were engaged to carry out a study in the two districts in 2003/2004. The project was: Needs Assessment Study on Access to Basic Quality Education in Zimbabwe: The case for Bikita and Rushinga Districts.

This presentation is based on that study project and a review of literature on the debate on quality education in general.

Introduction

The post-colonial education policy in Zimbabwe has to be examined against the background of its colonial predecessor, which was based on racial discrimination, whereby the majority Africans were exposed to inferior education, while the minority whites had superior education(Mutumbuka, 1982). This explains the policy of massification of education in the post-colonial era. This policy was based on four(4) objectives as follows:

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1. to create an education process that evenly distributes resources among learners;
2. to create an education process that evenly distributes learning opportunities among learners;
3. to provide a curriculum that teaches the one-ness of citizens and not their division;
4. to provide an education system without social stratification. (Chisaka, 2000; Mutumbuka, 1982).

In these objectives, the emphasis is on equitability in distribution of resources and learning opportunities, as well as abolishing racial and class distinctions. The issue of quality is not directly raised in these objectives, but is subsumed in the intentions of creating equitable opportunities for all learners. However, in the 1990's onwards, the issue of quality in education has been topical. Among organisations that have been concerned about the quality of education in Zimbabwe, particularly primary education, is the SCNZ.

The quality debate in education

The debate on quality education has been on for some time , and there appears to be no consensus on what quality education entails.

However, consensus seems to be on the fact that quality education exists, because, although “you can’t- define- it –but –you –know –it –when –you –see –it”(Doherty, 1994: 7).

Woodhouse(2000) defines quality education as that education that prepares the learner for meaningful existence in life. Singh(2000) agrees, when he characterises quality education as that which prepares the learner for economic productivity, which is “some measure of social equality and democracy in the modern world”(page 5).

Doherty(1994: 10) submits that,

... quality educational experience should deliver some good value, or value of goodness, which is susceptible to measurement ... in the end it is those who use the service who can tell whether it is of high quality or not. If it meets their wants and needs, it is a quality service, if it does not, it is not

Teichler(2000: 37), however, sees quality education in terms of its outputs and outcomes. He argues that:

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... Output measures are those directly addressing the intended results, i.e. in the case of the educational function of ... education, competencies acquired at the moment of successful completion of a course of study ... Outcomes measures are measures of desired or likely impacts beyond the mere output, for example, status, work assignment job satisfaction, service to society, etc.

In the context of outcomes, Teichler agrees with Woodhouse(2000) and Singh(2000), but he then goes on to add the output component as an essential ingredient to the measurement of quality education.

Barnett as cited in Doherty(1994), identifies four contexts in which quality education is conceptualised. These are as follows:

1. quality education as measured in its ability to produce learners who will succeed in the world of work(a conception that agrees with Nyerere's idea of education for self-reliance: Ruhumbika, 1974).
2. quality education measured against its ability to develop research skills in learners (this, however would not be quite appropriate for primary school products).

3. quality education measured against the ability of the schooling system to absorb high numbers of learners while at the same time being able to achieve high qualification or completion rates of learners(i.e. massification of education with high success rates at minimum costs).

4. quality education measured against its ability to absorb and accommodate learners from disadvantaged social groups so that their opportunities for better lives are enhanced.

According to Barnett(1994), all the four measures of quality treat learners as inputs(when they enrol) and as outputs(when they come out of the school system). But Barnett also argues that it is equally important to look at the educational process itself, i.e. what goes on in the “black box” of the educational process itself, i.e. the quality of the learners’ experiences or quality of learning itself.

In summary, quality education, with reference to primary education, would entail the following attributes:

1.the ability of the primary school system to produce learners with knowledge and skills either to proceed to a higher level of

education such as secondary school, or to succeed in the world of work.

2. quality education with reference to the ability of the primary schooling system to absorb high numbers of learners while at the same time being able to achieve high pass or completion rates.

3. quality education measured against its ability to absorb and accommodate learners from disadvantaged social groups so that their opportunities for better lives are enhanced.

The question is, does the primary schooling system meet the three measurements of quality, above?

It was the probing views of this question and the myriad views (above) about what constitutes quality education, and in particular, Save the Children Norway-Zimbabwe's interest in promoting quality education in primary schools in Zimbabwe, that motivated this study. The Methodology used was interpretive ethnography of the qualitative paradigm, which assisted in the verification of perceptions of teachers, learners, with regard to the meanings they attach to the concept and practice of quality education.

Objectives of the study

In respect of this presentation, the objectives were to assess the perceptions of teachers and learners on the subject of quality primary education and the strategies to achieve its realisation through the didactical processes in two districts of Zimbabwe, namely, Bikita and Rushinga.

Population and sample

Since this was a qualitative study, the researchers heeded Wolcott's (1987) advice to work with a small population of three (3) primary schools in Rushinga District and four (4) primary schools in Bikita District. We had to take four schools to work with in Bikita, because it is a bigger District than Rushinga.

At each of these schools, a minimum of ten (10) teachers, including their heads and deputies, participated in interviews, focus group discussions and lesson observations. As is customary to qualitative research, purposive sampling was used, targeting participants who are rich informants because of their direct involvement in the didactical processes (Vakalisa, 1995). In addition to the teachers and their heads, ten (10) learners in Grades 5 to 7, from each of the schools, were sampled for focus group discussions, because we deemed these mature enough to be able to articulate their feelings.

Data collection methods and how they were used

As is customary to the qualitative research paradigm, we as the researchers were the main instruments of data collection (Borman, 1986; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We used interviews, focus group discussions, analysis of schemes of work and lesson observations to collect the data of our study.

In ethnographic studies, interviews or focus group discussions are important for collecting data for the following reasons:

1. it is through interviews or focus group discussions that critical background information on participants is accessed. This information is useful for validating the source of data and ensuring its trustworthiness.

2. it is through ethnographic interviews or focus group discussions that the researcher can access information which is in the form of intentions and feelings.

(Chisaka, 2002; Nyawaranda, 1998; Yin, 1986).

In this study, formal interviews and focus group discussions were used, and these were audio-tape-recorded. Focus group discussions were held with teachers and learners.

The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted between 7 July and 6 August 2003, and between 16 September and 9 October 2003 in both Bikita and Rushinga. The following broad questions were posed to the teacher participants:

1. How do you define quality primary education?
2. What are the factors that impact on the realisation of quality primary education, and why is this so?
3. How have you ensured the realisation of quality primary education in your school/classroom/district?

For learners, they were asked the following questions (which were also translated into Chishona and answered in Chishona, for and by those learners who had difficulties with the English language):

1. In your opinion, what do you consider to be quality education?
2. How do you identify quality teaching and learning?
3. Are there any factors that interfere with the achievement of quality education in your case?

Lesson Observations:

Lesson observations were conducted in four schools in each of the two districts.

Analysis and interpretation of data

In qualitative research, analysis and interpretation are distinguished as follows:

In analysis, key and critical factors as well as relationships within and among data phenomena, are methodically and carefully identified, selected and isolated. Or as Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill(1997: 388) put it, the “ability to break down your data and clarify the nature of the component parts and the relationship between them.” In interpretation however, the researcher seeks to give meaning to his/her data(Wolcott, 1994; Chisaka and Vakalisa, 2003). Or as Bassey(2000: 44) puts it, interpretation “is a search for deep perspectives on particular events and for theoretical insights. It may offer possibilities, but no certainties as to the outcome of future events.”

Analysis

In this study, analysis of data was done in two stages, that is during the collection of data, cross-checking the recurrent themes that

were emerging, and after completion of the fieldwork. Interview and focus group discussion data were compared and contrasted with lesson observations data.

Interpretation

In our interpretation of data, we examined, compared and contrasted data from interviews, focus group discussions and lesson observations we made, and endeavoured to read the meaning of perceptions of stakeholders on the subject of quality education.

Findings and discussion

The presentation of data was done in the form of identifying the emerging themes and discussing these in detail.

Themes emerging from teachers' perceptions

Five themes emerged from the perceptions of quality education by heads of schools and their teachers in both interviews and focus group discussions. These were as follows.

1. Marketability of the final product as a good indicator of quality education.

2. Acquisition of academic knowledge and practical skills.
3. Need for teaching/learning resources to enhance quality.
4. Need to enhance teaching skills to ensure a quality product.
5. Teacher preparation and skills as a factor in quality education.

Marketability of final product

In some schools in Rushinga District, some participants felt that quality education would be reflected by the marketability of school leavers. The following statement would substantiate this perception.

*... quality education (means) producing a child who will be easily marketable in terms of occupation, job market...
(Chomutukutu, Rushinga Teacher).*

Acquisition of Academic knowledge and Practical skills

This perception appeared to be shared by the majority of teacher participants.

... quality education (means) equipping learners with more than academic knowledge, i.e. education that equips the learner with practical skills such as cutting and designing, sewing, knitting, agricultural skills (better methods of

farming and knowledge on crop rotation). (Bowora School, Bikita).

...quality education was closely related to quality teaching, which means equipping children with necessary skills such as building... (Nebarwe School, Bikita).

Teacher Preparation, Skills, and teaching/learning resources.

Teacher preparation skills also emerged as a theme in the focus-group discussions. The following excerpts demonstrate this perception. Quality education is defined as:

... that which involves the preparation of materials that the teacher is going to use in the classroom, provision of suitable information to the learner and teaching that is accompanied by modern methods.... (Bowora – Bikita)

(Quality education is)... a product of quality teaching which is noted in the end by the results produced because teaching (is) about results... (Rushinga Primary School).

... quality education was closely related to quality teaching which meant equipping children with necessary skills...that is accompanied by relevant materials and

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aids...teaching that seeks feedback through exercises and tests. (Nebawe – Bikita).

(Quality education is highly influenced by the initial inputs which included)... teachers, resources such as furniture, textbooks and provision of appropriate infrastructure... it is that) education which when one passes through, they end up being self reliant, someone who can solve social, economic and moral problems, people who can be employers....(Bikita).

Themes Emerging from Learners' perceptions

Learners from both Bikita and Rushinga had their own perceptions of quality education, which they articulated in either their local language, Chishona, or in English(for those who were confident enough to respond in this language). Three themes emerged from learners' perceptions. These were:

- 1.Education that gives you a bright future in life
- 2.Education that enables one to be a self-reliant adult
- 3.Education that makes one competitive to reach the next level of academia.

At Rushinga Primary school, one learner summarised the perceptions of his fellow learners as follows.

...dzidzo inovudzamu, idzidzo inokupa ramangwana rakanaka(quality education is that education that gives one a bright future). (Grade 7 pupil).

At Chomutukutu Primary school(Rushinga), another learner summarised his peers' perceptions as follows.

... quality education is the kind of education that should enable you to become an independent adult after having(acquired) a variety of practical skills in building, sewing, agriculture.... (Grade 5 pupil).

At Katoni Primary school(Bikita), another learner's contribution was that:

... kudzidza kunoita kuti ukwanise kukwikwidza uchiwana nzvimbo kuzvikoro zvakanaka kusekondari(education that equips you with the capacity to compete and enrol with reputable secondary schools). (Grade 6 pupil).

Learners' perceptions were that, generally, quality education is that which enables the learner to proceed to the next level, uninterrupted, and one that equips learners with survival skills in adult life (for self reliance).

Themes Emerging from Lesson Observations and Analysis of Schemes of Work

These were as follows:

1. Inadequacy of charts and other teaching/learning media in lessons.
2. General shortage of textbooks.
3. Tendency to teach without preparations and plans.
4. Classes too large for effective instruction.
5. Prevalence of the lecture method or drilling.
6. Poor conditions of classrooms – walls and windows.

Inadequacy of charts and other teaching/learning media.

In three of the four schools where lessons were observed by the researchers in Bikita,

“The classroom had very few charts...” (Dungu Primary School)

"The wall was bare. No charts ... aids corner had very limited plastic containing, e.g. empty scuds"

(Bowora Primary School).

In two of the four schools in Rushinga, the following were our observations.

"Classroom almost bare.... There were only 7 wall charts."(Chomutukutu Pri. School: Grade 7; this was also true in the case of Grades 2, 3, 5 and 6).

"... there are railings on the walls, but there was not even a single chart on the walls. The classroom is completely bare."(Rushinga Primary School: Grade 5).

General Shortage of Textbooks.

The shortages were observed in Grades 6's and 7's at Rushinga and Chomutukutu Primary Schools in Rushinga District, and in Grades 1's, 5's and 6's at Mativore and Bowora Primary Schools in Bikita District. However, in interviews with teacher and learner participants, it was indicated that this was the case in all Grades at both schools.

Tendency to teach without plans or preparation.

“Though the lesson was taught, there was little evidence of preparedness. The teacher constantly referred to the textbook.”(Grade 6 : Bowora, Bikita) .

“There is no evidence of planning in the Plan Book in today’s planned work.” (Composite class: Grades 1 & 2: Mungezi Primary School, Bikita).

Classes too large for effective instruction.

In Rushinga District, some classes had between 56 and 75 pupils each. One class, Grade 6, at Rushinga Primary School, had 82 pupils.

Prevalence of Drilling or Lecture methods.

In the lessons observed in Rushinga District Schools, no learner-centred methods were used. Teachers generally, recapped their previous lessons, defined key words, and demonstrated by way of examples on chalkboards. Most lessons progressed by way of question and answer, and no effort was made to effectively engage children in active learning. This was also the case in a

number of lessons observed in the participating Bikita District Schools.

Poor conditions of classrooms.

In both Bikita's and Rushinga's schools' classrooms, the researchers and participants were confronted with poor conditions of classrooms, which were characterised by potholes on floors, broken windows, wall railings which were too old and broken, among other poor conditions.

The following are some of the observations by researchers and participants:

"It(classroom) has cracked floors....The classroom door is dangerously hanging on one hinge, making it very unsafe for children. There are also broken window panes." (Grade 3 classroom: Rushinga Primary School).

"The roofing sheets have several holes...windows on the southern side do not have window panes. The floor has cracks and potholes." (Grade 1 classroom: Dungu Primary School, Bikita).

Analysis and interpretation of results of focus group discussions.

From these Focus Group Discussions, various perceptions emerge.

These are as follows:

1. Perceptions of quality in terms of outcomes as reflected in the end product, a marketable product.
2. Perceptions of quality in terms of inputs channelled in the education process.
3. Perceptions of quality in terms of processes, which include quality of teaching itself.
4. Perceptions of quality in terms of ethical values attached to behaviours and attitudes of teacher and learner stakeholders.
5. Perceptions of quality in terms of the living standards and working conditions of teacher stakeholders.

Perceptions of quality in terms of Outcomes

In the context of this study, what we are faced with are the intended goals of education, which translate to statements of what is expected (Jacobs, Gawe & Vakalisa, 2000). Basically, the majority of teachers, learners, education officers and parents, were agreed that their perception of quality education was that type of education

that would make the learner self-reliant or marketable on leaving school. Their contributions seem to suggest that these intentions are not being realised because of lack of resources and will - power by key stakeholders.

This perception of quality education however, sounds limited since it does not take into account a wide range of values, skills and knowledge that makes a complete, viable and versatile human being. It is particularly worrying because it is a perception held by the majority of participants in this study and supported by some perceptions found in the literature we reviewed (Doherty, 1994; Fourie, 2000; Teichler, 2000). Can we not talk of quality education in terms of its ability to transform a learner into a person with different values, different perceptions, and different skills of handling day to day issues, from what he/she was at entry into the educational process or experiences?

Perceptions of quality in terms of ethical values, inputs and processes

It was gratifying to observe that although in the minority, perceptions of quality in terms of inputs and processes were held by some of the participants who included education officers and teachers.

The perceptions of some participants that quality education should be measured by its ability to produce a complete human being socially, emotionally and physically, implies that these participants did not only look at education's ability to prepare learners for work or job experiences. They were also looking at how the individual would turn out to be after interacting with educational experiences, with reference to social values of tolerance and co-operation.

Interestingly, there was a perception, both among teachers and learners, that the standard of life of the teachers would have an impact on quality education.

With reference to the objectives of the post-colonial era in Zimbabwe, the Government's concern seems to be that, it didn't see any distinction between quality and mass education. Distribution of equal resources and opportunities to all learners, providing a curriculum that promoted the one-ness of citizens, and an education system that was not stratified, all appear to have been assumed to have the capacity to provide quality.

However, the perceptions of stakeholders in this study did not address the relationship between the massification of education and quality issues. This may imply that the stakeholders could believe

that quality could still be achieved within the context of mass education as long as all necessary inputs are channelled into the education system.

Analysis and interpretation of the results of lesson observations.

Sizes of classes and the tendency to use lecture/drilling methods.

The prevalence of large class sizes were mainly witnessed in Rushinga schools, but Bikita has its own share of this problem, although this was to a lesser extent. This could explain the dominance of the lecture methods or drilling as an instructional strategy in the participating schools. Where group work was employed, the groups were too large for any effective and meaningful individual participation in lessons of 30 minute durations. The "massification" of primary education in this instance, therefore tended to have a negative effect on quality in the sense that individual learners fail to receive due assistance and attention by their teachers.

Inadequacy of teaching/learning media and shortages of textbooks.

At primary school level, especially at the infant level, learning can only be effective with the use or manipulation of concrete objects. The latter would facilitate effective acquisition of skills and concepts. The fact that these were grossly inadequate in the classrooms where our observations took place, means that lessons were largely abstract and made acquisition of skills and concepts difficult for these young learners.

The same goes for the shortage of textbooks, which support both the theoretical and practical learning processes. In a situation where 50 learners share 10 to 15 textbooks, it is difficult for each and every learner to access a textbook. And yet it is essential for effective learning to take place that all learners read these books to reinforce what would have been taught by the teacher after exiting the classroom lesson.

Teaching without plans or adequate preparation.

It certainly cannot be an overstatement to say that good teaching starts with good preparation and planning. The absence of some

schemes or lesson plans in some of the observed lessons, left the researchers wondering what the teachers' aims and objectives of teaching, were. It became even more complex when it came to the teaching of composite classes. This was the case at Mungezi Primary school in Bikita, in a class made up of Grades 1 and 2. The teacher did not have a plan, and worse still, was unable to make a distinction between the two Grades in the work given. The two Grades were treated as if they were at the same level.

Poor conditions of classrooms

This study revealed that many classrooms in both Bikita and Rushinga Districts, were in a poor state. Many of them needed repainting, several window panes were broken or had never been fitted, floors were cracked or had potholes or both, and some walls were cracking as well. Some roofing sheets had holes.

We want to believe that quality is also associated with beautiful environments. How do you realise quality in environments like those described above. What concepts of neatness, good maintenance of one's environment and security would learners acquire in such a scenario? Would such learners learn and acquire the correct concepts?

Conclusion

This study seems to suggest that, (1) there is no consensus on what constitutes quality education among stakeholders; (2) there are mainly five perceptions about quality education, i.e. outcomes measurement, inputs measurement, processes measurement, ethical values measurement, and stakeholder working conditions measurement; (3) there is a definite need for all stakeholders to have a holistic view of quality education, particularly in the Zimbabwean education, in order for the nation to have a common vision. This common vision would likely enhance possibilities for a curriculum practice that would create harmony in goals of the educational enterprise; (4) if resources such as textbooks, good and well maintained classrooms, sizes of classes, well prepared lessons and learner-centred teaching strategies, have an impact on quality education, then in the two districts where this study was conducted, that quality would be far from being achieved, given the inadequacy of these resources.

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