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A STUDY ON THE ATTITUDES OF AFRICAN PARENTS IN MASVINGO DISTRICT TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL CHANGES INTRODUCED INTO ZIMBABWE'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS SINCE INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract

This article presents results of a research on the attitudes of African parents in Masvingo District towards educational changes introduced into Zimbabwe's secondary schools since independence, with the ultimate aim of identifying areas that are felt to need improvement. The study covered the period from 1995 to 1996.

The sample (N=600), which ranged over a wide area of the district, was considered representative of the views of the district population at large. The research design, because of the nature of the topic, was of a survey type. Data collection methods included Likert-type questionnaire, supplemented by interviews. The data were analysed using the Likert Scale analysis procedures which are described in this article. Thus, the research methodology used approaches similar to those of other attitudinal studies elsewhere, notably Clignet and Foster (1966) in the then Ivory Coast.

Overall, the study established that the majority of the respondents were in favour of the current education system. About seventy-two percent of the respondents felt that the secondary school education system has changed for the better. Mass education, the establishment of many secondary schools, the automatic promotion of pupils into secondary schools, Education With

Production, equal emphasis of practical and academic subjects, and education for self-reliance were approved of. There was almost a similar number of respondents on the introduction of Zim-Science, with 48.3% of the respondents showing a favourable attitude towards the introduction and 51.7% showing an unfavourable attitude. The attempt to localise examinations was not approved of by the majority of parents. Those interviewed expressed the view that this might lower academic standards.

Background and Rationale of Study

With the advent of independence in 1980, a number of changes were introduced into the Zimbabwean education system. One system of education was created in order to redress 'mistakes' of the past. There was the introduction of mass education, the establishment of many secondary schools, the introduction of automatic promotion, Zim-Science, Education With Production among many other changes. This study was therefore conducted to assess the acceptability or otherwise of the changes introduced into the Zimbabwe education system.

Many educationists such as Clignet and Foster (1966), D'Aeth (1975) have emphasised the importance of parental attitudes in any education system. Research studies such as those by Fishbein (1975) have demonstrated that the attitudes society has towards education have a serious psychological effect on pupils. The child's efforts to learn are influenced by such factors as the value attached to education by society, which eventually determines the type of material and psychological support given to the child.

Rejecki (1982) contends that attitudes are such an important area because they influence so much of our personal and social lives. He suggests that attitudes. For him, attitudes include beliefs, convictions, desires, feelings, hopes, judgments, opinions, sentiments, and wishes people have on specific issues. Thus, the study of attitudes is important because there is a general belief that human behaviour and actions are influenced by our attitudes, whereby attitudes are seen as the cause, and behaviour as the effect. Further research evidence is required to determine how closely attitudes and

behaviour are related. Nevertheless, even if the relationship was weak under some circumstances, that too would be a matter of considerable interest in understanding behaviour.

Since attitudes include feelings, beliefs, convictions, and opinions that people have, it implies that, attitudes affect the way an individual perceives, judges, interprets, and reacts to issues. In this study, it was held that parents have attitudes which affect the way they perceive, value and judge the changes that have been introduced into Zimbabwe's education system since independence. It was therefore the writer's primary concern that how parents feel should greatly affect what goes on in schools despite the often raised contention that some parents are ignorant of the type of education that is good for their children. This becomes particularly important in view of the fact that changes that have been introduced into the secondary school education system have far reaching implications for to both pupils and parents who are the sponsors of the education of their children. Kellaway (1976) studied 'education for living' in Britain and argued that the education given by any society should be in keeping with the views and way of life of that particular society. This shows that education should be a means by which people realise their hopes and ambitions so that they find contentment with the education being offered. Hence, this study is indeed justified since it focuses on the acceptability of the changes introduced into the system.

Methodology

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with a random sample of 100 parents to:

- (i) test the relevance, suitability, precision, validity, and reliability of questionnaire items; and
- (ii) tidy up research procedures.

Some items were found to either produce a narrow range of responses, to be too vague in content or to operate at the wrong level of intimacy for their purposes. Such items were reworded and piloted again to see if the rewording had not introduced new difficulties or biases.

In all, the research procedure for the pilot study provided a basis for the research procedure of the main study.

Reliability

Since the Likert scale was used, reliability of items was obtained by scoring all items and adding scale values of each item to get the total attitude score for each respondent. On the basis of these total scores, scripts were arranged in rank order. The whole group was divided into 25% highest scores and 25% lowest scores. Counting four and five as positive scores, proportions of the positive scores were used as though they were correct answers in an attainment test. An upper and lower analysis of the difference between the proportions of positive scores in the upper and lower groups was done. The process was repeated by counting one and two as negative scores. Only items with H-L values of 20% or more were accepted.

This ensured that all the items measured one thing (unidimensional) and were therefore valid.

Sample

The size of the sample was 600 ($N=600$). To ensure systematic manipulation of the independent variables, that is, sex and place of residence, this sample comprised 300 males and 300 females, 300 being urban residents and 300 rural residents. Identification of respondents was through the reputational approach, that is, approaching key figures for direction. This was essential since the questionnaire was in both English and Shona.

Research Design

The survey design was used in this study. According to Van Dalen (1979) surveys, which may be descriptive or explanatory, do not only have the advantage of being used on relatively large samples, but also allow the

collection of detailed descriptions of existing phenomena with the intent of employing the data to justify current conditions and practices or to make more intelligent plans to improve them. To this effect, it was the purpose of this study to examine the attitudes of parents towards the current Zimbabwean secondary school education system with the aim of identifying areas that are felt to need improvement.

A total of 600 questionnaires were delivered to the respondents by the researcher. In most cases, respondents were required to give reasons for their answers. The second stage involved follow-up interviews with 100 parents. This was intended to probe into subtle issues which the researcher felt could not be revealed through the questionnaire.

Scoring

The Likert-type scale used Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Undecided (U); Disagree (D); and Strongly Disagree (SD). Scoring the Likert scale required the following:

Table I
Scoring the Likert Scale

	SA	A	U	D	SD
Positive Statement	5	4	3	2	1
Negative Statement	1	2	3	4	5

This means that statements were first classified into positive and negative. Positive statements were then scored five for Strongly Agree down to one for "strongly disagree" and negative statements were scored one for "strongly agree" up to five for "strongly disagree".

Item scores for each respondent were next added up to obtain a total score. Since the questionnaire had 14 items, there was a maximum possible score of 70 (5 x 14) and a necessary minimum score of 14 (1 x 14). To see whether the respondents' attitudes were positive or negative, a score above the midway of the maximum possible score ($70 \div 2 = 35$) was regarded positive while scores below that were regarded negative. The neutral point (Undecided) was not included for purposes of analysis in order to make the results directional (Fishbein, 1975).

Since in this study high scores meant a favourable attitude towards the changes introduced and low scores meant unfavourable attitudes, it means that overall, if there are more high scale scores than low scale scores, we can conclude that the majority of African parents appreciate the changes.

In this study, the researcher hypothesised that there is no relationship between attitudes towards the changes introduced and (i) gender (ii) place of residence (i.e. urban or rural). In order to see whether these independent variables affected the respondents' attitudes, crosstabs were used to compute the percentage attitude for each independent variable.

The formula: % attitudes for females =

$$\frac{\text{Total scores for all respondents}}{\text{total scores for all respondents}} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

$$\text{Cramer's } V \quad \chi^2$$

$$\frac{N(K-1)}{N(K-1)}$$

was the statistic used to determine the relationship between the independent variable (attitude) and the dependent variables (gender and place of residence).

Data Presentation and Discussion

Since the data involved were relatively massive, they were transferred to coding sheets and key-punched for analysis. The responses are summarised below:

Total No. of low scale scores (14 - 35) = 246 (41%)

Total No. of high scale scores (36 - 70) = 354 (50%)

As shown above, the total number of low scale scores (256) is less than the total number of high scale scores (354). Since the total number of low scale scores is less than the total of high scale scores, it means that the majority of the respondents were in favour of the changes that have been introduced in Zimbabwe's secondary school education system.

The 14 questionnaire items were themselves taken to be rating scales and as such, were analysed individually.

Table 2

Number and Percentage of Respondents Showing Favourable or Unfavourable Attitudes Towards Each of the 14 Questionnaire Items

Item	No. & % With Favourable Attitude	No. & % With Unfavourable Attitude
1. It was a good idea to establish many secondary schools after independence.	353 (58.8)	247 (41.2)
2. The government policy of mass education is a sound one.	391 (65.2)	208 (34.8)
3. Automatic promotion of pupils into secondary schools must be continued.	425 (70.8)	175 (29.2)

Item	No. & % With Favourable Attitude	No. & % With Unfavourable Attitude
4. Pupils who go into secondary schools should be screened.	201 (33.5)	399 (66.5)
5. Education With Production helps pupils acquire useful skills.	355 (59.2)	245 (40.8)
6. Practical subjects should receive more emphasis than academic ones.	362 (60.3)	238 (39.7)
7. Academic subjects should receive more emphasis than practical ones.	189 (31.5)	411 (68.5)
8. There should be equal emphasis on both practical and academic subjects.	360 (60)	240 (40)
9. Worthwhile education is that which prepares pupils for self reliance.	378 (63)	222 (37)
10. Worthwhile education is that which prepares pupils for passing exams.	415 (69.2)	185 (30.8)
11. The introduction of Zim-Science into secondary school was a good idea.	290 (48.3)	310 (51.7)
12. The localisation of 'O' level examinations is strongly disapproved.	218 (36.3)	328 (63.7)
13. Pupils who did 'O' level before independence are more useful to society than their post- independence counterparts.	297 (49.5)	303 (50.5)
14. Since independence, the secondary school education system has changed for the better.	434 (72.3)	166 (27.7)

In each case, respondents were requested to provide reasons for their answers.

As already mentioned, in order to see whether the attitudes of respondents were in any way influenced by the independent variables (gender and residence) crosstabs were used and Cramer's V computed.

Table 3
Crosstab of Gender by Attitude (N=600)

Gender	N	% Attitude
Males	300	35.62
Females	300	64.38
Total	600	100

Cramer's V = 0.514

From the table, it is clear that females had a higher attitude percentage (64.38) than males (35.62). This means that females had a more favourable attitude towards the changes than males.

Since Cramer's V equals 0.514, it means that there is a moderate positive relationship between gender and attitude towards the changes that have been introduced. Hence, gender affected the respondents' attitudes towards the changes. Most of the men interviewed expressed the view that the present education system has resulted in high failure rates because it allows academically unsuited pupils to do secondary education. They argued that many pupils pursue an education system neither benefits them nor society.

Table 4
Crosstab of Place of Residence by Attitudes (N = 600)

Place of Residence	N	% Attitude
Urban	300	49.9
Rural	300	51.1
Total	600	100

Cramer's V = 0.016

Table 4 shows that the difference in the attitude percentage of urban and rural residents was very small. This means that both urban and rural residents share similar attitudes towards the changes introduced into Zimbabwe's secondary school education system since independence.

Since Cramer's V equals 0.016, it means that there is a very weak positive relationship between place of residence and attitudes. Basically, this means that there is no relationship between the dependent variable (attitude) and the independent variable (residence). Hence, we can conclude that there is no difference in the attitudes of urban and rural residents towards the educational changes that were introduced.

From the analysis of the individual items, it was clear that parents were against the localisation of 'O' level examinations because it was seen as an attempt to lower academic standards. Mass education, the establishment of many secondary schools, the automatic promotion of pupils into secondary schools, the introduction of Zim-Science and of Education With Production, as well as placing equal emphasis on practical and academic subjects were accepted by the majority of parents.

It must, however, be noted that although most of the changes introduced were accepted, many parents who were interviewed expressed a lot of concern over the current secondary school education system. For example, many

parents interviewed expressed the view that mass education has created serious problems such as lack of materials, high teacher-pupil ratios, poor staffing, and hot seating - all resulting in high failure rate yet education has become very expensive to both parents and the government. They argued that much is spent on education yet the returns are very little, pupils do not benefit from their schooling. Shame, humiliation, and frustration are themes prevalent among many school leavers. It is clear that many parents see education as a major avenue to social and economic mobility - hence, it is valued instrumentally rather than intrinsically. This would explain why, despite accepting many of the changes introduced, 69,2% of the respondents felt that worthwhile education is one that prepares children for passing examinations. Zindi (1987) expressed the same sentiments when he argued that something was wrong with Zimbabwe's education system since the pass rate continued to decline year, after year without any action being taken.

This failure has serious psychological effects, it can distort children's self-concepts and in the end, they can become real failures in nearly every sphere of life. This perhaps points to the need for a differentiated curriculum in Zimbabwe's secondary schools. It is perhaps for this reason that 60.3% of the respondents were in favour of a curriculum that stresses practical subjects so that less able pupils gain useful skills. Thus, parents have expectations of what children learn.

Conclusion

Many parents showed favourable attitudes towards most of the changes introduced into the Zimbabwean secondary school education system. This in itself is a good index for Zimbabwe's education system because attitudes that society has towards an education system have serious effects in terms of material and psychological support given to pupils. One hopes that the government, as indicated by recent press reports (e.g. *The Herald*, 15 June 1997) will review the present education system, especially in terms of pass rate, and make it more in line with the aspirations of society, lest society develops negative attitudes and passes them on to pupils. The child's efforts

to learn are greatly influenced by the value attached to education by society. Hence, there is need to ensure that the type of education offered is supported by society if children are to put effort into their school work.

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