

# SUBJECT SPECIALISATION AT PRIMARY SCHOOL: A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN THE ZIMBABWEAN EDUCATION SYSTEM.

Wellington Samkange

Zimbabwe Open University: Faculty of Arts and Education, Department of Educational Studies. P.O Box MP1119, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe.

## Abstract

The education system in Zimbabwe has been characterised by teacher education programmes that are different for secondary school teachers and primary school teachers. Whilst both categories of student teachers study theory of education, the major differences are in specialisation and generalisation. The primary school teacher in addition to the theories of education, studies applied education during which the student teacher has to learn to teach all the subjects found in the primary school curriculum in Zimbabwe. In addition to that, they also study a Main Subject. On the other hand, the secondary school student teacher had to specialise in the teaching of two subjects that are offered in the secondary school curriculum. In practice, primary school teachers are in charge of the whole class, teaching all subjects, whereas secondary school teachers would come and deliver their lesson and leave soon after their time. The arrangement in some primary schools has since changed. Some primary schools are now following the subject specialisation system, which for all along had been a preserve for the secondary school. The study was therefore prompted by this new development in primary schools. The purpose of the study was to assess the attitudes and perceptions of pupils, teachers and parents towards subject specialisation at primary school. The study used the qualitative research methodology and the case study design. Two primary schools which have adopted the subject specialisation system were conveniently selected. Interviews and open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data. The study found that there was mixed views on the role of subject specialisation at primary school. The major stance being that at primary school children need a motherly and fatherly care and this can only be provided when one person is in charge of the class throughout the day. While the academic performance of the teachers and pupils had relatively improved, the guidance and counselling role had been compromised in the schools. The study concludes by making recommendations to the Ministry of Secondary and Primary Education.

Key words: Subject specialisation; Primary school; Curriculum; Education system; Teacher Education.

# 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Primary education in Africa has witnessed major reforms in different areas. There have also been attempts to transform education in line with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that relate to education. These goals aim to address issues of quality, equality and equity in education. The MDGs also aim at addressing major issues of poverty, health and



development. It is not by coincidence that at least two of the eight MGDs are concerned with issues related to education. For example, MGD number 2 is stated as: Achieve universal primary education and MGD 3 is stated as: Promote gender equality and empower women (http://www.unfoundation.org/what-we-do/issues/mdgs.html). The two MGDs had the target of ensuring that children complete a full course of primary education regardless of gender and that gender inequality is eliminated in both primary and secondary schools. It is envisaged that such targets should have been met by 2015. In order to assess the implementation process there are dates that are set to monitor indicators for the achievement of the stated goals. Such targets include the need to ensure that boys and girls anywhere in the world should be able to complete the full course of primary education. It is estimated that more than 75 million children of school going age were not at school and the most affected children are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\_Primary\_Education). According to the United Nations, there have been improvements in attempts to achieve universal primary education. For example, by 2010 enrolment at primary school in developing regions was at 90%, an improvement from 82% at the launch of the MDGs in 1999 (http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/education.shtml) This signifies an improvement of 8%. However, despite this improvement the number of children still out of school is about 57 million and the most affected is the girl child (ibid).

Whilst there have been great strides in meeting the targets of MDG 2 and MDG3, there are a number of challenges that make it difficult to meet the targets of both goals by 2015. Some of the major challenges are related to the drop-out rate at primary that remains relatively high. On the same note, problems of illiteracy remain very common among youths. There is also the observed link between poverty and illiteracy. The EFA Global Monitoring Report also indicates that for those children who are at primary school or have passed through primary school, 40% of them had not mastered the basic Mathematics concepts and basic reading skills (http://efareport.wordpress.com/2014/01/29/4067/). This raises a number of concerns about our aim to meet the target of ensuring that all children attend and complete primary education. One concern is the quality of education that the children are exposed to and the other is the quality of teachers that are expected to assist the children throughout their learning. There are a number of factors that contribute to quality education or lack of it. These include the quality of teachers produced by universities and teachers' colleges, the learning conditions and provision of resources to support learning. Other problems that negatively impact on the aim to achieve universal primary education have much to do with the economic status of the parents. At times poverty has limited the participation of children from poor backgrounds from advancing to the highest level of both primary and secondary school.

There are improvements in several countries in the developing world where there have been movements from the traditional mode of training teachers. Much emphasis in teacher education has been on the training duration. As such, in Zimbawe for example, there have been changes from 2 year training to 3 or 4 years training period. Emphasis has also been on the number of terms trainee teachers have to spend on teaching practice and the terms they spend resident at college. In Zimbabwe, the commonly adopted mode of training primary school teachers in teachers' colleges is the 2-5-2 mode. This model of teacher's training stands for two terms at college, five terms out on teaching practice and another two terms at college before the student teacher. For the primary school teacher trainee, there has not been much in terms of preparing the teachers for the subject specialization. The curriculum at teachers' colleges that train primary school teachers are required to take up at list one Main Subject that they specialise in. In a number of cases the Main Subject is not related to some of the subjects that are offered at primary school, in Zimbabwe.

# 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In view of the concerns for quality education, subject specialization has been perceived as contributing to quality in education. It has been argued that specialisation at primary school has given the teacher a strong subject-matter background in a particular subject area which then makes the teacher an expert in that particular subject area. In cases



where there is no specialisation at training, and a curriculum that has remained predominantly generalised the major problem is: How is subject specialisation being implemented at primary school in Zimbabwe?

### **Research questions**

In order to find answers to the main research question the study was guided by the following sub-questions:

- > Did teachers specialise in the subjects they are teaching?
- > Has there been improvement in children's performance since the introduction of specialisation at primary school?
- > How do different stakeholders view subject specialisation at primary school?
- > What are the major challenges associated with subject specialisation at primary school?

#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to assess the extent to which subject specialisation has been implemented at primary school in Zimbabwe. The study also aims to identify some of the challenges associated with subject specialisation at primary school.

#### **Review of related literature**

The introduction of subject specialisation is a very common phenomenon within the secondary system in Zimbabwe. With concerns for quality education on the increase each day, innovations and reforms have extended subject specialization to include primary schools. The concept of subject specialisation is a new phenomenon in the education system. In the past only subjects like Carpentry and Home Economics had specialist teachers at primary school, and with time this was phased out. The paper now discusses the concept subject specialisation and the discourse surrounding the concept.

#### **Subject specialisation: the concept**

Opportunityculture.org views subject specialisation as a model to reach every student with excellent teachers. This is done by allowing teachers to teach their best subjects, whilst others cover other duties which may be considered of lesser importance in the development of the student. These two scenarios are most likely to bring conflict within teachers unless there is a clear criterion on who takes the core subjects and who takes the lesser subjects. In any cases there would be very few teachers who would be willing to teach subjects that are considered of lesser importance. This arrangement in a way may have a negative impact on organisational relations. Subject specialisation for a teacher is expected to provide a strong subject-matter in a particular subject.

The introduction of subject specialisation at primary school is a new development in the Zimbabwe education system. At primary school, the trend in Zimbabwe has been specialisation in terms of the levels, rather than in specific subjects. These have been the infant level covering grades one up to three and the junior level covering grades four up to seven. At the end, the teacher was provided with department related specialisation, but remained a generalist in terms of subject coverage. The introduction of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) curriculum has created a third level at primary school, though in reality ECD covers ages 3-8 years. Specialisation in terms of the ECD level and the junior level (general primary) is now provided for in the training of teachers at teachers' colleges.



## Theoretical framework for specialisation

The philosophy behind subject specialisation is derived from the Theory of Scientific Management as advocated by Frederick W. Taylor and Max Weber. They advocated for a hierarchical structure in organisations, division of labour, rules to control the behaviour of members, impersonal relations and career orientation. Subject specialisation is therefore based on the principle of division of labour. The idea of subject specialisation allows teachers to focus on one or two subjects. They are able to reach a wide range of pupils in their subject area. As noted by Kapfunde (2000), at school level subject specialisation provides an opportunity for a teacher to specialise in doing that single task which ensures efficiency in production. In this regard subject specialisation is credited with improving quality of education and efficiency in education production. Specialisation entails breaking each job into smaller tasks that are manageable. Since subject specialisation in education fits well into one of the principles of the Scientific Management Theory as postulated by Taylor and others, subject specialisation also aims at improving education production. According to Kasher (2005) specialisation involves intentional narrowing of practice which contributes to competent delivery of service in education. The focus of both Kapfunde (2000) and Kasher (2005) on specialisation is on the improvement of teaching and learning.

As noted above subject specialisation at primary school is some form of division of labour. As such, it is envisaged to increase education production as each teacher can concentrate on what he/she is good at. This helps the teacher to develop expertise in the area of focus. Specialisation in education is expected to improve efficiency, output and outcome. If that is the case specialisation in education is expected to increase both teacher and pupil performances. This should then contribute to high pass rates as indicators of high output in schools.

Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) raise very important arguments about the role of subject specialisation in schools. For them subject specialisation improves performance of the teacher, school and pupil. This comes about as subject specialisation gives the teacher a strong grounding in the area of specialisation. Such grounding makes the teacher relevant, effective, and efficient as the teacher becomes knowledgeable in the subject area and an expert on subject matter. If this argument holds true, we should therefore expect an improvement in the performance and quality of the passes in primary schools that have adopted the specialisation model when compare with those that still follow the generalist model in Zimbabwe primary schools.

On a similar note, Pine (2012) made interesting observations about education systems in China and the United States of America. She noted that elementary schools in China have subject specialists. These do not only specialise on the subject but how to teach the same subject matter. On the other hand, Pine (2012) noted that in the United States of America elementary school teachers are generalists. The notable disadvantages of the Chinese model were that relations between the teacher and the pupil are impersonal. This may be detrimental to the development of young children. The system does not allow the teacher time to know and understand their children. Dealing with young children goes beyond the call of duty. The teacher has to find time to study strengths, weaknesses and needs of the children. According to Pine (2012) the American system of education provides for this. As such, the system is able to provide for such, which contributes to the total development of the child.

The primary school stage, like all levels of development is very critical in the development of the child. It should be handled with great care. Nash, Stock and Harper (1990) identify five developmental stages that are common with most psychologists. These are the infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence and adulthood stages. All the stages are characterised by domains that contribute to development and change in the individual. Such developmental domains include the physical developmental domains, cognitive developmental domain, and psychosocial development domains. The development of the different domains is the responsibility of the family, community and the school. The middle childhood stage mostly covers children between the ages of 6- 12 years. These are the primary school going ages. At this stage, apart from assisting children acquire knowledge and skills, which may be catered for through subject specialisation, the children have to be helped to develop moral values and to grow in social relationships. In line with



psychodynamic theories which focus on how an individual develops a personality, the role of the teacher goes beyond teaching. The teacher has to nurture the child at primary school level. The major question is therefore, whether subject specialisation can provide for such nurturing.

In an effort to develop a personality within the child at primary school, subject specialisation at primary school may put the child in a dilemma. It is difficult for the primary school pupil to adopt the behaviours of the different teachers who come with different subjects as models. As noted by Jowawa (2012) pupils have problems with emulating the different teachers who come to them with different subjects. At the same time the different subject teachers are most likely to compete for space and time which may confuse the children.

# **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study used the qualitative research methodology. The methodology had the advantages of gathering the views and opinions of teachers and school heads from two primary schools that had introduced subject specialisation. Although the sample was small, qualitative research provided for in-depth study of cases identified and studied. Yin (2003) posits that a research design is the logic that links the data to be collected to the conclusions to be drawn from the study's initial questions. This concurs with Bless and Higson-Smith (1995), as they define research design as a programme to guide the researcher in collecting, analyzing and interpreting observed facts. There are at list two salient issues about a research design that emerge. These are its role in guiding in the collection of data and secondly, the extent to which it guides the conclusions that are made at the end.

The study used the case study design. Case studies provide in-depth studies of specific units and have the advantages of using a range of methods which include interview, questionnaires, focus groups, observation and document analysis (David and Sutton, 2011). As noted by Yin (2009), the use of a case study design had the added advantage of being used to explain an event, describe and explore phenomenon. The study used two data collection methods. These were an openended questionnaire and interviews. The study focused on the views and observations of teachers and school heads at two primary schools, one in Chegutu Education District in Mashonaland West and the other one in Mufakose District in Harare, Zimbabwe. The primary school and accessibility to the researcher. The study selected on the basis of them implementing specialisation at primary school and accessibility to the researcher. The study selected one church-related school and one government primary school. From these two sites, ten primary school teachers, and two primary school heads became respondents. The teachers were selected on the basis of them being subject specialists at their schools. At both schools, subject specialisation was done at grades six and seven. Data was analysed through coding. Coding involved coming up with keywords, themes and phrases that are related to the key text.

The use of a case study enabled the researcher to examine a specific phenomenon, thus specialisation at primary school, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how things are in the two primary schools that had implemented specialisation. At the same time, the study of two schools enabled the researcher to gather rich, detailed data in an authentic setting, as it is holistic and supports the idea that much of what we know about human behaviour is best understood as lived experiences in the social context (Willis, 2007).

# Data presentation and discussion

The study presents the bio-data of the two school heads and ten primary school teachers who responded to the openended questionnaires and interviews. The second section of data presentation and discussion focused on the responses from the school heads and teachers who were involved with the implementation of subject specialisation.

Of the two school heads in the study, one was 54 years of age and the other one was 48 years of age. This demonstrates that the two school heads were mature and experienced in educational management. There had been in the teaching field for 23 years and 29 years. Such experience is important in the allocation of classes and distribution of resources, and in



educational management and administration in general. As for the teachers who participated in the study, the youngest was 27 years and the oldest was 50 years old.

On qualifications, the school heads both had degree qualifications. The female head had a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development degree and the male head had a Master of Education in Educational Management degree. The two were well qualified for their positions, as their responsibilities involve educational planning. Such planning if it is effective can have a major impact on individual teacher and school productivity (Kapfunde, 2000). As for the ten teachers who responded to the study, six (60%) of the teachers had a Diploma in Education as the highest qualification, one (10%) had a Certificate in Education as the highest qualification, two (20%) had a Bachelor of Education as their highest qualification and one (10%) had a Masters in Education. Qualifications are very important in education as they define one's level of bias and specialisation.

The second part of the discussion and analysis of data focused on the responses to the open-ended questionnaires and interview questions by both school heads and teachers. As noted earlier, these were teachers who were subject specialists in their respective schools. The essence of the study was not a comparative study of the two primary schools, but to get a feel of what was happening in the two cases studied, and if lessons could be learnt from them. There are number of themes that emerged from the responses by the school heads and the teachers.

# The Policy and Regulations guiding subject specialisation

Subject specialisation has been practised mainly in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. At primary school, teachers have been generalists. The introduction of subject specialisation at primary school required authorisation from the Ministry of primary and secondary education, and policy change on the part of government. Such change should focus not only on the teaching aspect, but the teacher education programme that had to produce specialist teachers at primary school. There appeared to be a dearth of literature in terms of circulars and policy documents that authorised the introduction of subject specialisation at primary school. It is important to take not of the various stakeholders in the new development. There is need to consider the role of teachers' colleges in the new paradigm. Are they to continue training primary school teachers in all the primary school curriculum subjects? Alternatively, there may be need to adopt the secondary school training institutions approach in which student teachers specialise in the teaching of two subjects.

Whilst there was no clear evidence in terms of the policy documents that introduced subject specialisation at primary school, the two school heads agreed that there was a Director's circular to that effect, though both could not locate it. They noted that for a primary school to embark on subject specialisation at primary school, the school head had to apply to the Ministry of Education so as to be granted such permission at the same time be allocated the corresponding teaching staff that meets the requirements of subject specialisation. Among other things they noted that the main thrust of the policy document was the number of written exercises and the number of hours that the specialist teacher had to work. In that regard, not much was said in terms of teacher preparation for the new development.

# **Determinants for teacher selection**

The two school heads noted that their teachers specialised in teaching subjects at grade six and grade seven. One of the school heads noted that the subjects the teachers taught at school were determined by the subjects the teachers specialised in whilst they were at college or university. This alone as a basis for allocating subjects at primary school may be misleading. Some of the subjects that are offered by teachers' colleges as Main Subjects are not offered at primary school. As indicated by some teachers, they majored in African Studies, History, and Geography, and these are subjects that are not in the primary school curriculum. At the same time in some instances, there was a mismatch between the subjects teachers majored in at college and the subjects they were teaching at school. For example, six (60%) noted that they were teaching subjects like Mathematics, Shona, Ndebele, Environmental Science, and English and yet they had not



specialised in these at college. In that regard, some of the teachers were specialist in subjects, not by training, but experience. The other school head indicated that the selection of a teacher to teach specific subjects was based on the knowledge of the subject. In other words, the choice is made by the school head based on the supervision that he/she has done to determine the teachers' competencies in the subject areas offered at primary school. In this case such decisions demonstrate the purpose of supervision in education, which includes supervision for decision making purposes as a general leadership role and as a management function within the school production system (Wiles and Bondi, 1996) (Alfonso, Firth, and Neville, 1981). At the end, the school head uses his/her discretion to allocate subjects and classes which is one of his/her major functions as a manager. As a manager a school head has to play a combination of roles which include interpersonal roles, informational roles and decisional roles. Among the decisional roles that a school head has to execute is the resource allocation roles. The allocation of resources includes both human and material resources.

## Subject specialisation and pupils' performance

Primary education has specific objectives. These at times differ from country to country. Such objectives include an improvement in access to education, relevance of the curriculum needs of the child, equality of access, inclusive education, and recognition of children's rights among other objectives. There are various arguments pertaining to the purpose of primary education and indeed schooling as a whole. If we were to focus on John Dewey's argument for schooling, we could then view primary school education as providing children an opportunity to live pragmatically and immediately in their current environment. There are at least two key issues that can be considered as relevant in our present day understanding of education. These are the intended beneficiaries of the education system and how they benefit. What stands out in Dewey's philosophy and the way he explains the purpose of education and schooling is the relevance of what we teach children and how this helps them in their day to day life. In other words, education is of little value if it does help us to address the problems confronting us every day, thus the emphasis on pragmatism. Such pragmatism is promoted through independence of the individual. An aspect that deserves attention is Dewey's reference to the current environment. Whilst it might have been easy during his time to define 'current environment', this is not the case today. There has been advancement in technology to such an extent that the world has become a global village. In that respect, the world has become the 'current environment'. Adler (1982) on the other hand, gives three objectives for education. These are that education has to develop citizenship within children. It also has to contribute to the personal growth of the individual and preparation for occupation in life.

There are different views on the purpose of education; however, the need for measurement of the achievement of the objectives cannot be overemphasized. There is need to measure performance of the education system in relation to the set objectives. Types of performance measures include outcome measures, intermediate outcome measures, output measures, process measures and input measures. Within this context, outcome measures involve assessing performance of pupils in terms of examination performance. In this regard, the school heads were asked to indicate their grade seven percentage pass rates. The pass rates in the grade 7 examinations for the schools from 2009 to 2013 were given as 33%, 48%, 55%, 62%, and 62.5% for the church-related primary school in Chegutu. The pass rates for the government school in Mufakose were 45%, 50%, 55%, 62%, and 65% for the same years 2009 to 2013. Both schools embarked on subject specialisation as from 2010. The results for both primary schools show that there had been some improvements in the performance of the grade seven pupils in public examinations However, it should be noted that there are many factors that contribute to improvement in performance at school level. In this case, a change from generalised teaching to subject specialisation could be one of the contributory factors to an improvement in educational output.

On a similar note, teachers have varied responses to how subject specialisation has affected such areas as discipline, syllabus interpretation, teacher performance and motivation. There was a comparison between a generalist and a specialist. One of the teachers noted that pupils became more disciplined with generalist teachers as a generalist spent more time with the pupils. This promoted the development of personal relations as the teacher would also focus on the behaviour and morale development of the pupils. Such views were founded on the understanding that relations between



teachers and pupils at primary school level are that of mother- child or father-child relationship. Apart from teaching, teachers have to play a pastoral role. The pastoral role involves providing guidance and counselling, maintenance of discipline and providing spiritual guidance (Capel, Leask, and Turner, 1996). The area of teaching especially young children is multifaceted. It goes beyond the teacher playing an academic role only, which subject specialisation seems to promote. Another respondent noted that pupils behave differently when they meet different teachers. The teacher went on to say that pupils for example, are punctual for lessons when they know that a teacher is particular about punctuality and do the opposite when the other teacher is not punctual. This appears to support observations by Jowawa (2012) who noted that primary school pupils need their teachers as models but children at a tender age have challenges emulating different behaviours from different people. In that regard, specialisation at primary school level can compromise children's social development. Within this context, it can be argued that impersonal relations as presented by Weber do not work well with specialisation at primary schools considering the ages of the pupils. This appears to support Pine (2012) who noted that the Chinese model of specialisation at primary school compromised the social development of children, whereas the generalist model as implemented in the United States of America gives the teacher the time to focus on all aspects of the development of the child.

Other responses that emerged noted that in some instances teacher-pupil relations had actually widened as a result of specialisation. However, other teachers in the study noted that specialisation had improved the discipline at their schools as several teachers will be monitoring the same pupils and this has resulted in discipline improving greatly. It was also noted that when it comes to generalist, a pupil's failure in one subject may have a negative effect on the other subject while specialisation gives the true performance in different subject areas as different teachers view pupils differently.

## Challenges associated with subject specialisation

Apart from the problems associated with the classes under specialisation, the school heads and teachers noted that there was lack of maturity on the part of pupils. Pupils in most of the cases had problems with adjusting to the demands from different teachers at grade 6 and 7. The other challenge highlighted by school heads and some of the teachers indicated that some of the specialist teachers lacked the knowledge and skills to teach the subjects they were allocated. Lack of knowledge on the part of the teacher could be blamed on the school head's supervision and allocation of subjects. This may not be surprising, as noted earlier; there was no definite criterion for appointing teachers to teach specific subjects. In that regard personal preference and bias cannot be ruled out.

# 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the data presented and discussed above the following conclusions and recommendations could be made:

- When it came to allocation of subjects to specialist teachers, experience and performance took precedents over areas of specialisation at college. It was also noted that some of subjects that teachers did whilst they were at teachers' college were not offered in the primary school curriculum.
- > There had been notable improvement in the pass rate at grade seven in the two schools. There appeared to be a positive correlation between the improvement in performance and the introduction of subject specialisation.
- The findings were not very conclusive in terms of how specialisation had contributed to improvement in the quality of education in the two schools. Different respondents viewed subject specialisation differently. Some noted that it had impacted positively on teacher performance, teacher motivation and pupil performance, as teachers now had time to interpret the syllabus. At the same time, others noted that subject specialisation had impacted negatively on teacher pupil relationships.



- The major challenges related to subject specialisation at primary school are related to the degree of specialisation that is offered at teachers' colleges and expectations at school. It is important that teachers specialise in at least two subjects at teachers' college. They will then teach these subjects in the schools.
- There are some challenges associated with the implementation of subject specialisation at primary school. Responses indicated that in subject specialisation at primary school at times compromised discipline among pupils, as subject specialists did not play the pastoral role played by generalists. Other challenges involved lack of maturity of primary school pupils to handle such a demanding schedule as exerted by organisation and arrangements of subject specialisation. In some cases there was lack of knowledge of the subject specialist by the subject the teacher is supposed to teach.
- On the basis of lessons that can be drawn from the above, the subject specialisation model needs revisiting considering the multifaceted process of teaching, as the pastoral role of teaching is at times neglected.
- Considering the pastoral roles that primary school teachers have to play in view of the young age of the pupils, there is need for further studies using a different methodology to establish the impact of subject specialisation at national level.

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