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Causes of Poor Performance of Pupils at Ordinary Level Public Examinations in Zimbabwean Rural Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Chimanimani District in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study set out to investigate the major causes of high failure rate in Chimanimani District Secondary Schools. The population constituted of the 710 secondary school teachers in the district. A total of 200 respondents was selected using random sampling. These were made up of 110 females and 90 male teachers. The research instrument used was the questionnaire which had both close-ended and open-ended questions. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret data. The study revealed that teachers attributed pupils' high failure rate to lack of materials and equipment for teaching, inadequate supervision, teacher incompetency among others. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should embark on a massive infrastructural development to provide adequate classrooms and specialist rooms for rural secondary schools. Teachers should be adequately motivated so as to boost their moral and parents should be encouraged to support the learning of their children.
Keywords: Pupils, Ordinary Level, rural secondary schools, teachers, public examinations, poor performance.

INTRODUCTION

The Ordinary Level Examinations constitute a very significant component of Zimbabwe's education process as they determine the future employment prospects of the learners [1]. It is the Ordinary Level Certificate that determines who proceeds to Advanced Level and who join tertiary education institutions like teacher training colleges, nursing schools and others [2]. It is therefore, not surprising that parents, teachers, students and government and other stakeholders attack greater significance to the Ordinary Level examinations. However, in spite of the importance of the Ordinary Level to Zimbabwe's education system the tendency of high failure rate particularly in rural secondary schools is a great cause for concern [3]. Whilst the national average pass rate at 'O' Level since 1998 stands at 14.5%, the average of most rural districts is 4, 2% [4]. This means that most of the pupils at the rural secondary schools go there to prepare for failure after four years, a very painful reality indeed [5]. Many reasons have been put forward to explain this high failure rate by a number of experts and stakeholders. This study seeks to find out how the teachers who are at the core of this high failure rate perceive this phenomenon. Thus, the study set out to investigate the causes of perennial poor results at rural secondary schools from the teachers' point of view.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) a student is considered to have passed 'O' Level if they obtain C grade or better in at least five subjects [6]. Students who pass four or less subjects cannot proceed to Advanced Level; neither can they join tertiary institutions for professional training [7]. A number of rural secondary schools fail to produce a single student with a full certificate. For example, in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe in 2010, out of a total of 70 secondary schools, 19 recorded a 0% pass rate and the highest concentration of schools with 0% pass rate was Kwekwe Rural District, Mberengwa, Gokwe North and Gokwe South [8]. Bennell and Ncube [9] state that the decline in performance of both sexes in the rural areas has been explained by the deteriorating quality of provision. Adell [10] argues that poor performance at rural high schools is an international problem that has been linked to the low socio-economic background of the learners. Munn [11] argues that the school environment might also be the source of poor performance if learner support materials are not adequate. The arguments concerning lack of facilities and resources in rural based schools are always raised where there is serious under performance at these schools [12]. As Ralenala [13] observes, rural schools often serve disadvantaged learners who are from families that are not educationally supportive.

According to Saiduddin [14], education is one of the most important aspects of human resource development; hence, poor school performance does not only result in learners having low self-esteem but also causes significant stress to the parents. According to Lipton [15] rural people is the main source of their own difficulties by rapid population growth. However, Okafor [16] believes that lack of equitable distribution of social amenities within urban and rural areas is the main reason for poor performance of pupils from rural secondary schools. Yet another dimension to this debate is brought to the fore by Harris [17] who attributes poor performance of rural secondary pupils to lack of parental support. There is a correlation between parental support in homework activities and the performance of pupils. Students with parental support in homework achieved better than those without parental support even if those without parental support had a higher intelligence quotient [17]. Cooper [18] also found that there was a positive correlation between high achievement and quality time spent on home work.

On the other hand, Timothy [19] found that the amount of instructional time affected learner performance and ignoring this fact results in less informative accountability systems and lost opportunities for learning outcomes. Vundla [29] states that the major causes of high failure rate in South African rural secondary schools include shortage of well trained teachers, inadequate teaching facilities, lack of funds to purchase necessary equipment, poor quality textbooks, large classes, poorly motivated teachers, lack of laboratories and libraries, poorly coordinated supervisory activities, interference of the school system by politicians, incessant transfers of teachers, automatic promotion of pupils, and lack of proper classrooms. Avital [20] also discovered that attitude of rural pupils towards the school and its benefits negatively contributed towards their commitment to school work. A study by Ndebele [1] in Plumtree district in western Zimbabwe found that most secondary pupils thought that it was better to cross either the Botswana or South African borders to come back in a few months driving good cars than concentrating on their education. This kind of negative attitude minimises concentration and commitment to academic work [1]. Burmaster [21] found that where pupils had no reason to be at school, they frequently absented themselves from lessons to do other things they thought would help them in life, like income generating activities.

Statement of the problem

The study sought to investigate the factors that contribute to causes of high failure rate of pupils from rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Most of the schools in rural districts of Zimbabwe perform far below the national average in some cases failing to produce just one candidate with a full certificate. There is need therefore, to find out from the teachers what they think are the real causes of this unpalatable situation.

Purpose of the study

The study sought to explore the causes of poor performance of pupils in schools of Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent do supervisors in rural secondary schools provide adequate instructional leadership for their teachers?
2. How does the lack of educational facilities affect performance of pupils in Ordinary Examinations?
3. How do teacher factors contribute towards the failure of pupils in rural secondary schools?
4. What are the attitudes of pupils of rural secondary schools towards education?
5. Of what significance is the role of parental support towards performance of pupils at Ordinary Level by their pupils?

Significance of the study

The importance of this study stems from the fact that if causes of students' poor performance at Ordinary level examinations in the rural secondary schools, is revealed solutions to ameliorate these causes will be proffered. The study also envisages to sensitive major stakeholders in the school system about the need to improve teaching and learning conditions in rural secondary schools.

Limitations of the study

In view of the small size of the sample and sub-samples used the findings of the study would have limited generalizability. The other limitation relates to the descriptive method that was employed in this study [22]. According to Bogdan and Taylor the descriptive method lacks predictive power. The research may discover and describe "what is" but is unable to predict "what would be" [23]. The other limitation is that respondents may give false responses thereby affecting the validity of the findings. The weakness could be mitigated through the use of triangulation of methods which this study employed in the form of close-ended questions and open-ended questions.

Delimitation of the study

The researchers delimited the investigation to establishing the causes of the poor performance of rural secondary school's pupils at Ordinary level in Chimanimani District in Eastern Zimbabwe. Views from 200 teachers taking Ordinary level classes were used in the research. Perceptions from stakeholders like pupils, heads of schools, parents, Education Inspectors

and other key stakeholders were outside the purview of this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used the quantitative methodology and made use of a survey research design. According to Anderson [24] the descriptive survey method looks with intense accuracy at the phenomenon of the moment and them describes precisely what the researcher sees. The questionnaire was the major instrument for collecting data. As Bell [25] observes, the questionnaire increases reliability as an instrument of gathering data because of its greater impersonality. The population consisted of 710 secondary school teachers from Chimanimani District in Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe. The sample consisted of 200 teachers of which 110 were female and 90 male.

Data Collection and analysis

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire, which was largely made up of close-ended questions and a few open-ended questions. All respondents were given the questionnaires by the researchers at their schools. The researchers also personally collected the questionnaires to increase on the rate of return of the instruments. Non-returns according to Phillips and Pugh [30] introduce a bias in as much as they are likely to differ from respondents in many ways, thereby adversely affecting reliability and validity of the findings. Data collected from the questionnaires produced descriptive statistics around the variables under study. These statistics were computed and inferential implications from them deduced and recorded.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study set out to investigate the causes of poor performance of pupils from rural secondary schools at Ordinary Level in Zimbabwe. This section is presented in two parts, namely, presentation of data and then discussion of the same data. Data presentation is in two parts: characteristics of respondents and data on perceptions of teachers on causes of poor performance of pupils from Chimanimani rural secondary schools at Ordinary Level examinations.

Presentation of data

Table-1: Composition of sample by gender (N=200)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	90	45
Female	110	55
Total	200	100

As table 1 reveals, 55% of the respondents were female and 45% were male. This is generally a fair distribution of respondents in the survey as the variance between the two sexes is not very significant.

Table 2: Composition of sample by professional qualifications (N=200)

Professional qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate in Education	4	2
Diploma in Education	100	50
Bachelor in Education	24	12
Non-teaching degree	40	20
Masters degree	6	3
Untrained	12	13
Total	200	100

Table 2 above shows that the majority of the respondents (67%) had professional qualifications. However, a significant number of the respondents (20%) had non-teaching degrees and another 13% were Advanced Level Certificate holders.

Table 3: Composition of sample by teaching experience (N=200)

Years	Frequency	Percentage
1-2	30	15
3-5	58	29
6-10	86	43
10-15	20	10
20 and above	6	3
Total	200	100

The table above, Table 3, shows that the majority of respondents had less than ten years of teaching experience (87%). Those who had over ten years of teaching experience constituted 13% of the respondents.

Table 4: Responses on the statement: "Textbooks and other related equipment are adequate in my subject(s) area(s)" (n=200)

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agreed	20	10
Agree	22	11
Disagree	50	25
Strongly Disagree	100	50
Not Sure	8	4
Total	200	100

The information on table 4 above shows that respondents in the majority of cases indicated that their subject areas did not have adequate textbooks and other related equipment to augment textbooks. These constituted 75% of the respondents. Those who felt that textbooks and other equipment were adequate constituted 21%, whilst 4% were not sure about the textbook situation.

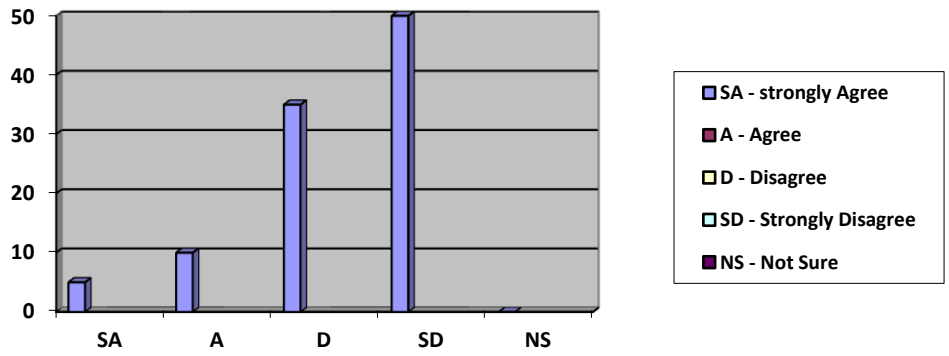

Fig-1: Responses to the statement: "Supervision by the head of Department and Head of School helps to guide me to be an effective teacher" (N=200)

As figure 1 reveals, 85% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their school based supervisors (HOD and Head) helped to guide them to become more effective as teachers. Those who agreed with the statement were 15% of the respondents.

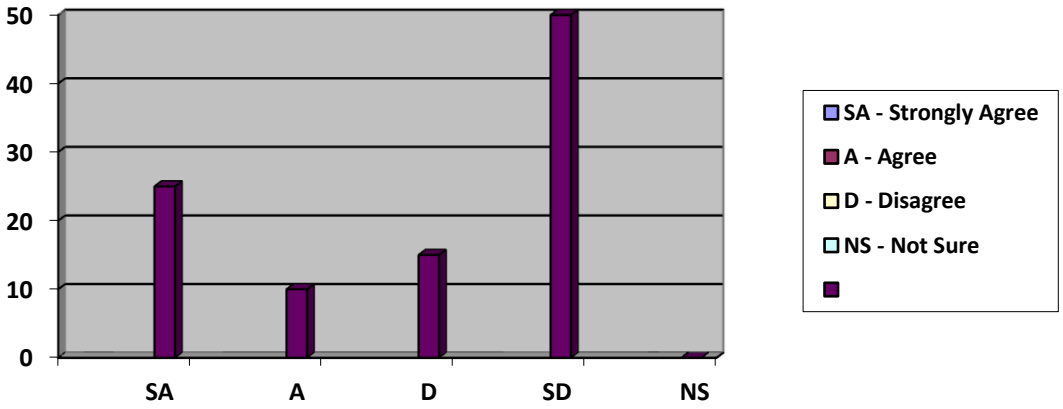

Fig-2: Responses to the statement: "I can confidently handle all topics in my subject areas" (N=200)

The information on figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents, 65% indicated that they were not confident with presenting all topics in their subject areas. Those who thought they could handle all topics confidently constituted 35%. Although a significant number of respondents held professional qualifications, it was discovered that most of them were deployed to teach subject areas they were not specialists in.

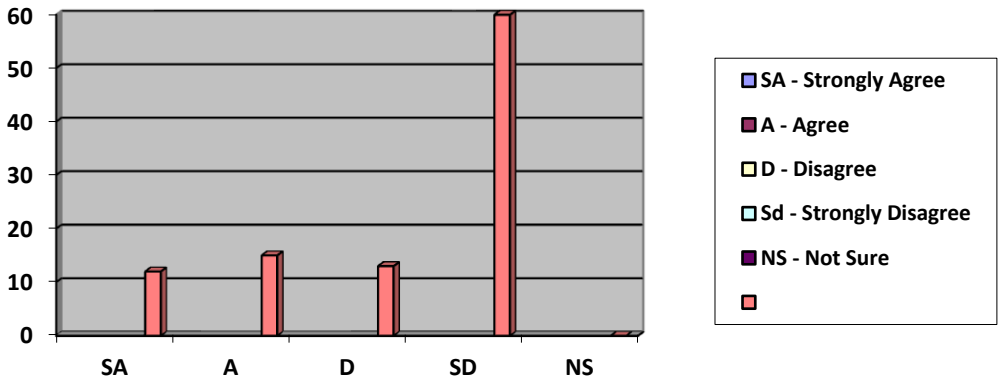

Fig-3: Responses to the statement: "Parents of my pupils support their children with their school work including homework" (N=200)

As figure 3 shows**,** the majority of respondents (73%) indicated that parents of their pupils did not support their children with their school work. Those who felt that their parents supported their children constituted 27% of the respondents.

Table 5: Responses to the statement: "Poor attendance of pupils affects my plans in the areas I teach" (N=200)

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agreed	110	55
Agree	52	26
Disagree	14	7
Strongly Disagree	24	12
Not Sure	0	0
Total	**200**	**100**

The information on table 5 above shows that the majority of the respondents (81%) agreed with the statement that absenteeism by pupils affected their teaching plans. Those who disagreed with the statement constituted 19% of the respondents.

The questionnaire had two open-ended questions which bolstered data from the close-ended questions. The first question sought to find out from respondents how big their classes were in terms of pupil population. The majority of respondents indicated that their classes ranged between 45 and 55 pupils for the Form 3 and Form 4 classes. A few respondents indicated that their classes ranged between 30 and 40 pupils per class.

The second question sought to find out whether given an option of another more lucrative job they would leave teaching. The vast majority indicated that they would leave their current job. In extension the majority indicated that they would even leave their school for a school that had better conditions than their current one.

DISCUSSION

The information from this study revealed that the majority of respondents were in possession of lower level professional qualifications of Certificate and Diploma in Education. This means that they possess relatively shallow content for their subject areas compared to those with degrees in their areas of specialisation. This result tallies with findings from Vundla [29] who discovered that the reason why pupils in rural secondary schools fail included largely a shortage of trained teachers among other causes. Properly qualified teachers as Timothy [19] argues, tend to increase the amount of instructional time for learners and this positively affects their performance.

Findings also reveal that the majority of respondents indicated that their subject areas did not have adequate equipment and textbooks. Textbooks and other teaching/learning equipment are significant for high performance of pupils as Vundla [29] discovered that the high failure rate in South African rural secondary schools was caused by inadequate teaching facilities, lack of funds to purchase necessary equipment and poor quality textbooks.

The study also revealed that most respondents felt that their school based supervisors were not doing enough in terms of guiding them to become professionally effective as teachers. Supervision is key to the professional development of teachers. As Miles [26] states, effective leaders visit classrooms to discover what is happening in classrooms. They collect data through formal observations and instruments and use that data to help teachers with their teaching methodology.

The information from the study revealed that most respondents were not confident with presenting some of the topics in their subject areas. This is because most of them were deployed to teach subject areas they had not trained for. For example, a teacher who had specialised in Geography or History at a teacher training college, would find him/herself asked to teach Mathematics or Science for example because of shortages in these areas.

The findings also reveal that the majority of teachers in the study felt that parents of their pupils did not support their children on their school work particularly on home work. This tallies with Bush's [27] observation that home background and community values can mar or make effective learning. Ralenda [13] corroborates Bush [27] observation when he argues that rural schools often serve disadvantaged learners who are from families that are not educationally supportive.

Evidence from the study also reveals that the vast majority of respondents indicated that there was rampant absenteeism by their pupils. Avital [20] argues that attitude of rural pupils towards the school and its benefits negatively contribute towards their commitment to school work. Burmaster [21] found that where pupils had no reason to be at school, they frequently absented themselves from lessons to do other things they thought would help them in life. According to Umameh [28] there is need for genuine attitudinal change as it may bring about interest and positive attitudes towards the school work.

The study also reveals that the majority of respondents indicated that class sizes in their schools were relatively high. The majority were teaching Ordinary Level classes with above 40 pupils yet the stipulated class size is 30. This affects the teacher-pupil

ratio which determines the quality time a teacher spends with his/her pupils. The larger the class, the less time the teacher spends with individual children, thereby affecting their learning [27].

Most teachers also indicated that given the opportunity of a greener pasture emerging they would not hesitate to leave their job. The majority also indicated that they would also quickly transfer to a better school if a vacancy arose at that school. This finding tallies with observations by Vundla [29] who found that one of the major causes of high failure in rural secondary schools was the incessant transfers of teachers to escape from poor conditions of service.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the background of the above findings, the researchers make the following conclusions:

- Most of the teachers under study are in possession of lower level professional qualifications that provide them with the barest minimum survival skills in the classrooms.
- Most of the schools do not have adequate and relevant textbooks and equipment necessary for effective teaching and learning.
- The supervision process in the schools is not adequate to promote the professional growth of teachers so as to enhance the performance of pupils.
- Most of the teachers lacked confidence in delivery of lessons in some subject areas because they were allocated to teach areas they were not specialists in.
- Parents were not providing adequate support for their children on school based activities particularly on homework.
- Most students did not take learning time seriously as they frequently absented themselves from school without good reasons.
- Class sizes in the schools in rural areas were quite way above the stipulated class enrolments thereby compromising the quality of education received by the pupils.
- Most teachers were willing to transfer to better schools particularly in urban areas or any other schools with better conditions of services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of the study, the researcher would like to make some recommendations.

- The Ministry of Education should encourage teachers who possess the Certificate in Education and Diploma in Education qualifications to upgrade their qualifications by joining universities to obtain degrees. Teachers should have adequate content on the various subjects they teach so as to easily simplify it for their students. There should be regular staff development sessions for those without teaching qualifications.
- Schools should prioritise the acquisition of relevant textbooks and equipment in their budgets so that every pupil has access to a textbook even to take home for homework.
- School based supervisors should hold properly planned supervision sessions for the professional growth of teachers. Heads, Deputy Heads and Heads of Departments ought to continuously guide the teachers during the teaching / learning process.
- Teachers should be allocated subject areas they specialised in so as for them to properly guide pupils instead of asking them to teach areas they did at Ordinary or Advanced level and passed with C grades. This lowers the quality of teaching standards in the schools. If a teacher specialised to teach History and Geography, they should teach these two and not other subjects like Science or Ndebele.
- Schools through the School Development Committees should encourage parents to provide support to their children on their school work.
- Heads of schools, teachers and parents together should not tolerate absenteeism by pupils as it costs them a lot of learning time thereby affecting their performance negatively.
- Schools should adhere to the stipulated class sizes in order to promote high quality contact between the teachers and individual pupils.
- The government should work towards improvement of conditions of service for teachers serving in rural areas so that there is teacher stability which will promote the necessary experience required for guiding pupils, particularly for public examinations.

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