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Teachers' Perceptions towards Physical Education as an Academic Subject in Zambia's Primary Schools: A Case Study of Kombaniya Primary School, Mansa District

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Abstract

This article is an extract of one of the objectives from the dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment for the award of the Degree of Master of Education in Primary Education at the University of Zambia. The drive for this study emanated from the fact that recognition of practical subjects in the Zambian Primary School Curriculum by the Government had made all primary schools to offer Physical Education (PE) compulsory as a pillar to foster educational, health and personal development of learners, (MOESVTEE, 2013). Despite the Government's directive of ensuring that the teaching of PE in Zambian primary schools is made mandatory, PE has not been recognized as one of the core subjects (Mutiti, 2011) ^[13]. An unanswered question was, how do teachers perceive PE as a teaching subject in primary schools? This study was therefore, undertaken to ascertain teachers' perceptions of PE as an academic subject in primary schools, Mansa District, Luapula Province, Zambia.

A case study design adopting a qualitative approach was employed. Data was gathered through focus group discussions (for the learners), semi-structured interviews (for teachers and administrators) and lesson observations. The sample comprised of 49 participants. Purposive sampling and simple random sampling procedures were used to select respondents. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. The study found that despite having PE as a compulsory subject in school, teachers had a negative view about it. The subject was neglected, looked down upon, regarded as time for learners to play and have fun. Some teachers and administrators saw the subject as play or sport that took time away from academic subjects. Based on the study findings, the study concluded that the perception of teachers towards PE as a subject was negative. Teachers and school administrators saw PE as sports and a subject that took time away from learners' academic subjects. On the basis of the findings, the study recommended that the Ministry in charge of education should monitor and ensure that PE and other practical subjects are taught in Zambia's primary schools.

Keywords: Perception, Academic subject, Physical Education

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Physical Education (PE) as a science of human movement dates back to the origin of mankind. From time immemorial and until today PE forms an element of life (MacHenry, 1993). Mwanakatwe (1965) ^[14] states that PE was introduced in Zambian schools as one of the academic disciplines or subjects taught in Primary Schools during the colonial period. The study on the history of education reveals that Physical Education has always been present but regarded with varying degrees of importance. Physical Education like other disciplines of study (Siedentop, 1991) ^[20] is planned for the achievement of a wide variety of goals among others include; health, cognitive development, interpersonal relationships and academic performance improvements.

Mwanakatwe adds that PE was an old subject in Zambia embodied in the traditional education. Thus traditional education was essentially practical training, which was designed to provide good upbringing of the individual member of a given group to live a useful and happy life in society. The description of P.E. by Mwanakatwe points out that PE is aimed at the development of the physical, emotional, social and intellectual capabilities of citizens. Similarly, McHenry (1993) indicates that, PE recognizes the physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions of human movement and emphasizes the contribution of physical activity to the promotion of individual and group wellbeing. It is stated that the ways in which people use this ability is related to other aspects of their functioning as whole persons. It is also well established that adequate physical activity conducted during Physical Education lessons is not only essential for a child's health, but is also critical for the child's ability to learn.

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Moreover, Physical Education has so long been perceived by many societies as restricted in sports, and that its importance is to satisfy the play and recreational drives of man and it appears that the popular opinion about PE according to Kakuwa (2005) ^[7] evolved from this context and it is regularly referred to as “*ifyakutoloka toloka*” which means ‘sports’, and often reduced to ‘*votaba-tabab*’ meaning ‘jogging.’ Hardman (2008) ^[6] indicates that, PE continues to be a marginalized subject in school curricula worldwide. In an international survey, which investigated other African nations he discovered that, the status of PE was low and the subject was in grave danger of being sidelined. This is because the perception of PE as a subject generally is said to be negative. Mutiti (2011) ^[13] states that in many Zambian schools PE class time is used as a time to take a break from serious class work. Therefore, PE teachers feel they have to continually provide justification for the existence of their subject and to plead for actual control of the time they are allocated to. It is against this background that this study was established to ascertain teachers’ perception towards PE in primary schools.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The recognition of practical subjects as important subjects in the Zambian Primary School Curriculum by the Government has made all primary schools to offer PE compulsory as a pillar to foster educational, health and personal development of learners, (MOESVTEE, 2013). Despite the Government’s directive of ensuring that the teaching of PE in Zambian primary schools is made mandatory, the subject has not been recognized as one of the core subject (Mutiti 2011) ^[13]. Such a situation created a knowledge gap. An unanswered question was, how did teachers perceive PE as a teaching subject in primary schools?

1.3 Significance of the Study

At a time when there was a paradox of government directive of teaching PE as a compulsory subject on one hand and the subject not being recognized in schools on the other, a study that sought to explore the perception of teachers towards PE as a compulsory subject becomes significant. The research was significant in that it may help to sensitise teachers, school administrators and curriculum developers on the actual perception posed on Physical Education in the Zambian primary school system. In academia, it will help stimulate debate which may lead researchers to inquire into why Physical Education is neglected as a subject in the primary school curriculum in Zambia.

1.4 Study Site

The study was conducted at Kombaniya Primary school. This being a case study one site was adequate. The site was chosen because it had specialised Physical Education (PE) teachers who were trained and willing to teach the subject at primary school level.

1.5 Literature Review

Physical Education like other disciplines of study (Siedentop, 1991) ^[20] is planned for the achievement of a wide variety of goals. In any educational setting, achievement is the ultimate goal, once a program is achieving important results it can be expanded and become important. Achievement serves as a feedback mechanism to the development of educational programmes.

Kirchner and Fishburne (1995) ^[8] outlines that, Physical Education is the part of the educational process that

contributes to the physical, emotional, social and mental development of learners through the medium of physical activity. Physical Education is that part of the educational experience which provides learners with the opportunity to become aware of and engage in physical activity that is whole bodied, intrinsically valuable and personally meaningful within the context of the learners’ social and environmental setting. In an attempt to describe Physical education, Pangrazi (2007) ^[17] states that it is a learning process that focuses on increasing knowledge and affecting attitudes and behaviours related to physical activities including exercise, sports, games, dance, aquatic games and outdoor activities.

Department of Education (1995) asserts that physical education helps to prepare a learner for classroom instruction while Chan (1998) ^[2] maintains that physical activities (PA) employed in PE make learners healthier mentally and socially. While PE and sports are acclaimed as having immense benefits for young people as well as adults, Kilimbai (1991) ^[9] showed that, despite the cultural and educational significance of Physical Education and Sports as a field of inquiry in schools, it is characterized more by neglect than by attention and Rathedi (1997) ^[18] asserts that in some African primary schools, the status of Physical Education remained questionable due to the fact that the subject was non-examinable. Musangeya *et al.* (2000) ^[12] further adds that in schools where Physical Education was rated lowly and still at its infant stage, teachers had negative attitudes towards teaching it. Negative attitudes arose when teachers were unaware of subject matter, pedagogical knowledge and responsibilities of implementing the subject.

Shehu (2001) ^[19] also added that Physical Education had for so long been perceived by many societies as restricted to sports, and that its importance was to satisfy the play and recreational drives of man. Green (2003) ^[4] revealed that, making PE another academic subject creates problems of another kind, as it must retain its aspect of enjoyment. From the above explanation it can be deduced that PE is perceived as a subject that is for fun and enjoyment only, as a result this research intended to ascertain teachers’ perception of PE as an academic subject. It appeared that the popular opinion about PE according to Kakuwa (2005) ^[7] evolved from this context and it is regularly referred to a “*ifyakutolok toloka*” which means ‘sports’, and often reduced to ‘*votaba-tabab*’ meaning ‘jogging.’

Mahar, (2006) indicated that the way Physical Education was timetabled affected how learners learned. Previous literature had shown that Physical Education was easily overlooked in many schools due to time constraints and the desire for extra teaching time in other subjects. This problem was negated in schools because they adhered to a rigid timetable where the subject was expected to be taught by a specialist PE teacher. Literature shows that, despite the cultural and educational significance of Physical Education and Sports as a field of inquiry in Zambia, it was characterized more by neglect than by attention (Mutiti, 2011) ^[13].

Hardman (2008) ^[6] reported that, PE continued to be a marginalized subject in school curricula worldwide. In an international survey, which investigated other African nations he discovered that, the status of PE was low and the subject was in grave danger of being sidelined. Groves and Welsh (2010) ^[5] also revealed that, some teachers have the perception that replacing cognitive learning with physical learning could have a detrimental effect on a learner’s cognitive development.

Mutiti (2011) ^[13] stated that in many Zambian schools, PE class time was used as a time to take a break from serious class work. Therefore, PE teachers felt they had to continually provide justification for the existence of their subject and to plead for actual control of the time they were allocated to. PE as a school subject has not been recognized as one of the core subject. It has been neglected, misunderstood, seen as of little importance and regarded as inferior when compared to other subjects in the school curriculum. This was also affirmed by the then District Commissioner Rebecca Mukuka's speech (<http://ww.lusakatimes.com>) where she urged schools in Zambia to incorporate physical education in the school curriculum like any other subject.

The importance attached to practical subjects by Government that they be taught as compulsory subjects in primary schools prompted the researcher to conduct a research in order to ascertain teachers' perceptions towards PE as an academic discipline. Reviewed literature so far does not fill the knowledge gap about the teachers' perception towards PE as an academic discipline in Primary schools of Mansa District. This knowledge gap became the motivating factor to conducting this study.

2. Methodology

This study took a qualitative methodology and using qualitative methods to collect data.

2.1 Research Design

Since the study sought to use a qualitative approach to have in-depth understanding of teachers' perception towards PE as an academic subject in one unit, a case study design was chosen. Gosh (2003) defines a case study as a method of collecting information about an individual, a family and an institution or a group of persons that can know precisely the factors and causes of a practical phenomenon. McMillan (2001) ^[10] defines a qualitative approach as a collection and analysis of non-numerical data for the purpose of gaining insights into a phenomenon of interest.

2.2 Population

This study comprised of the head teacher, Education standards officers from Mansa District Education office, senior teachers, teachers and all pupils at Kombaniya Primary school.

2.3 Sample Size

The sample comprised of 49 respondents of which 40 were grade 7 learners, 20 girls and 20 boys, 5 teachers and 4 administrators. Table 1 provides details in terms of gender of the sample.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

No	Categories	Male	Female	Total	%
1.	Learners	20	20	40	81.6
2.	Teachers	2	3	5	10.2
3	Administrators	3	1	4	8.2
	Total	25	24	49	100

2.4 Sampling Procedure

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling procedures because interest was in the representativeness of the sample and that all pupils had an equal chance of being part of the sample. Thus purposive sampling technique was used to select a school for the study, specialist teachers of PE, a class teacher for a grade seven class and administrators. The inclusion factor for this sample

was that it was believed it had the required characteristics to provide information for this study. Simple random sampling procedure was used to select learners as it gave them equal chance to be part of the study. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from teachers and administrators while focus group discussions and observations were used to collect qualitative data from learners. The forty learners were subjected to practical PE for 95 minutes each day for a period of 13 weeks. Within the three months of practical PE, learners were given some tests in Mathematics, Science and English. The aim of the tests was to assess their academic performance in Mathematics, Science and English.

2.5 Instruments and procedures for data collection

Due to the nature of the study, three instruments were used to collect data. These included semi-structured interviews guides, observations and focus group discussion guides and Documents were analysed in order to verify truth of the data collected. The use of both observations and document analysis were helpful to verify information collected from in-depth interviews. This type of triangulation helped to ensure validity of the respondent's responses. Interviews and focus group discussions involving ten pupils per group were also held on the agreed days at the school. Lastly observations of lessons were conducted throughout the term at the school. The process took three months. Voice recorder was used to record the interviews and focus group discussions.

The teachers and Administrators were subjected to interviews while pupils were subjected to focus group discussions where each group comprised of ten (10) pupils per discussion. Although this technique was time consuming, it was effective in that it helped to obtain in-depth descriptive information. The researcher made sure that only one specialised PE teacher, the same pupils and teaching and learning materials were used throughout PE lessons while other lessons were conducted by a Class teacher.

3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thus themes categorization and narrations were made. Major themes were drawn from interviews with respondents. Description of each theme was done, analysed and interpreted critically and objectively.

Ethical issues were considered by obtaining informed consent from teachers, administrators and parents of children. In addition, identity of respondents was kept anonymous.

3.1 Findings and Discussion

The study revealed that all the three types of respondents (learners, teachers and administrators) acknowledged that the subject PE was taught. It was a component under a learning area called Creative Technology Studies (CTS), as a result it did not stand alone as a subject on the time-table. Furthermore, it was found that despite having CTS as a compulsory subject, the time allocated to the learning area was not adequate considering that it consisted of five subjects. To this effect one teacher said;

Time allocated for CTS is not enough to teach all the five teaching areas or subjects. As a result, the component of PE suffers most as it is not taught at all. I have said this because there is only one book used for CTS with all the five components. The order of teaching follows the sequence of the learning areas. Home Economics comes first, as a result, I teach it first. It is followed with sports activities under PE. However, the content of PE is so brief that it finishes within

one academic term (three months). As a result, other two academic terms are used to teach other study areas.

The findings of the study are in line with a study conducted by Ogundare (2000) ^[15] on the role of Physical Education in the total development of the child which revealed that time was a scarce resource in many schools, and teachers of different subjects competed for the resources. In such competition, unless monitoring was done, subjects that suffer marginalisation like PE were given the least consideration.

The study further revealed that teacher attitudes towards Physical Education as an academic subject was negative. Time allocated to PE was used to relax by both teachers and pupils as there was nothing more to do than recess and play time. Some teachers pointed out that PE had no future because it was not an examinable subject. Teachers regarded PE as a worthless subject which should be replaced by core subjects like Mathematics and English. Similarly, interviews with teachers showed that teachers had a low opinion of Physical Education and regarded it as a waste of time for academic subjects. The low opinion of PE by teachers was also alluded to by Rathedi (1997) ^[18] who found that in some African primary schools, the status of Physical Education was questionable due to the fact that the subject was non-examinable. Musangeya *et al.* (2000) ^[12] further adds that in schools where Physical Education was rated lowly, teachers had negative attitudes towards teaching it. Negative attitudes arose when teachers were unaware of subject matter, pedagogical knowledge and responsibilities of implementing the subject.

Furthermore, the data from interviews and focus group discussions revealed that the low status of Physical Education among other primary school subjects negatively influenced teacher perceptions towards its teaching. Many respondents associated Physical Education with play and leisure in school. Similarly, the majority of the interviewees remarked that the teaching of Physical Education was worthless. These findings are consistent with Amusa *et al.*, (1999) ^[1] who pointed out that negative remarks came from teachers with negative attitudes and who felt Physical Education should be replaced by core subjects like Science, Mathematics and English.

An analysis of these results is that despite teachers seeing the importance of learners participating in physical education for their mental and physical health, to them, physical education implied sport, which they took as a mere recreation programme for leisure. This perception of PE as a recreational programme for leisure clearly reveals a significant gap between the intended and the implemented curriculum. Though most of the teachers had their mind stuck in sports to mean physical education, at least they understood its recreative function. Similarly, the Department of Education (1995) ^[3] asserted that physical education helped to prepare a learner for classroom instruction. Chan (1998) ^[2] maintained that physical activities employed in PE contributed mental and social health of learners. Most educational stakeholders did not see PE as one subject that could contribute to the physical well-being of learners, as a result, the curriculum was watered down with topics that could only last for one academic term (three months). Such perceptions results in not supporting human resource development in PE which turns also to have inadequate trained teachers for the subject.

Further, this study established that the majority of primary school teachers viewed Physical Education as only involving the physical and not the intellectual development of the child and this resulted in negative perception of the subject by teacher. It also came to light that the fixed preoccupation of

Physical Education among teachers is that it is recreational in nature and in turn prevents the actualization of its educative value. Thus the findings seem to imply that when teachers fail to understand the value and benefits of a subject, negative attitudes which hamper its teaching develop. Another key issue revealed in the findings of this study was that Physical Education was still not given its true identity in the primary school curriculum and was still looked down upon; hence this contributed to negative teacher attitudes resulting in its unsuccessful implementation. In general, teachers had more negatives than positive opinions on PE compared to other subjects. This is not a health situation for the country and schools in particular. Amidst cries of poor academic performance of learners by stake holders, we argue that if PE was given ample time it could be one of the solutions.

The study also examined how far PE teachers and the school administrators could make a difference between PE and Sports. In general, the majority of the respondents showed inability to differentiate between Physical Education and sports. This corroborate with Talbot (1997) ^[21] who maintained that PE was inevitably a struggle, a contest of and for competing definitions about what was to count as worthwhile knowledge, what the body, the individual, school and society are and ought to be.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the study concludes that the perception of teachers and administrators towards PE as a subject was negative. Teachers perceived Physical Education as for recreation and not as an academic discipline. On the basis of these findings, the study recommends that the Ministry in charge of education should monitor and ensure that PE and other practical subjects are taught in Zambia's primary schools. In addition, in order to address the problem of negative perception, teachers and other education providers need sensitization about what PE can contribute to the development of learners.

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