

Challenges experienced by primary schools in the implementation of subject specialisation in bubu district primary

Francis Ndlovu

Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Education, Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract

The aim of the present study is to investigate the factors that inhibit the implementation of subject specialization in Bubu District primary schools. The population comprised all the 1200 primary school teachers and school heads. The sample was made up of 125 respondents who were randomly selected. The study adopted the descriptive survey design and the questionnaire and interview were employed as the research instruments for collecting data. The study established that among the obstacles that inhibited the successful implementation of subject specialization in Bubu District, there was a shortage of subject specialist teachers, there were no specialist rooms to cater for the different subjects offered by the schools. The study also established that there were positive attitudes by teachers towards subject specialisation. The study recommends that teacher training colleges for primary school teachers should produce teachers who are subject specialists and that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should come up with clear policies to promote subject specialisation in the primary school system.

Keywords: Obstacles, implementation, subject specialisation, primary school, district

1. Introduction

Although there is no research evidence to support it as the best practice, most primary school systems the world over, have stuck to the practice of one teacher teaching all the subjects of the school curriculum to his / her class (Ndawi, 2006) [15]. In Zimbabwe, the primary school teacher is expected to teach all the ten or more subjects of the primary school curriculum that is English, Shona/Ndebele, Mathematics, Environmental Science, Religious Education, Social Studies, Home Economics, Physical Education, Art and Craft, Music and any other minor ones that arise from time to time. As (Ndawi, 2006) [15] observes, many teachers will not have learnt these subjects themselves to Ordinary level; and college courses cannot be adequate for the teacher to master all these subjects. In Zimbabwean primary schools subject specialisation started with the introduction of subjects such as Home Economics, Physical Education, Computers, Music, Agriculture and other subjects where only a few teachers were experts in (Moyo, 2008) [14]. Subject specialisation in Zimbabwe schools started from Grade four upwards and the idea to leave out Grades one to three was that pupils were too young to be taught by different teachers (Nyagura, 2010) [16]. Primary schools are encouraged to implement subject specialisation in order to utilize the teacher expertise that is available within the schools. It is on account of this information that this study set out to investigate the major obstacles that stood on the way of successful implementation of subject specialisation in the Zimbabwean primary school system.

Literature Review

According to Morris (2014) [12], it is difficult to be good at all things; particularly across the broad range of subjects taught in primary schools, and yet we expect one person to instill the basics of these areas, along with breeding a passion and

interest to learn more. A review of relevant literature reveals the increasing demands of the primary school curriculum on the teachers' corpus of knowledge and skills (Ndawi, 2006; Elliot, 2012; Mortimore, 2008; Fullan, 2009) [15, 5, 13, 7]. In the words of Elliot (2012) [5] subject specialisation is a course of study or major at an academic institution or a field of study that a specialist practices in Subject specialisation, therefore, is a teaching method in which a particular teacher specializes in teaching a particular subject only without teaching other subjects (Slabbert, 2009) [18].

Taylor (2006) [19] postulates that the government of Britain undertook studies on subject specialisation in the primary school and revealed that the concept increased parental involvement and decision making, concerning their children's education. Parents' positive attitudes towards the implementation of subject specialisation together with pupils' eagerness to receive the programme made it easy to implement it in most schools in the United Kingdom (Taylor, 2006) [19]. The experience and training of teachers have a bearing on the outcome of subject specialisation. As MacFarlane (2008) [10] pointed out, effective teaching depends on the teacher's knowledge and training on that particular subject.

Effective subject specialisation requires that there must be enough classrooms for pupils and these classrooms should have suitable material for specialized teaching (Perkins, 2007) [17]. Subject specialisation is linked with the availability of facilities such as pupil's books and relevant equipment and learning materials (Moyo, 2008) [14]. Lack of relevant teaching and learning resources were identified as one of the factors affecting successful implementation of subject specialisation (Moyo, 2008) [14]. As Fuller (2005) [8] posits, lack of equipment and resources lead to poor performance by both the teacher and the pupils. Every subject of the curriculum requires textbooks as a supportive tool to learning and

shortages tend to affect pupils' learning abilities. Francis (2011) ^[6] laments that the shortage of textbooks in some African schools is so critical such that there is only one book for the teacher.

As Moyo (2008) ^[14] states, most specialist subject areas require specific equipment and facilities and every school should have a specialist room. Subject specialist trained personnel affect subject specialisation. As Macfarlane (2008) ^[10] argues, the personality, talent and the ability of the teacher play an important role in the selection of methods of teaching in specialisation; and effective teaching depends on the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter to be taught. Thornton (2011) postulates that the main advantage of specialist (or semi-specialist) teaching is that the subject specialist brings a high level of knowledge to their teaching, and it is the lack of such subject knowledge which is the main weakness of the generalist class teacher.

In Zimbabwe a study conducted by Ndawi (2006) ^[15] on the feasibility of subject specialisation in primary schools revealed that subject specialisation promotes better teaching, the majority of the pupils, teachers, school heads and teachers in charge preferred the approach to the traditional one, most of the parents who saw their children involved in the specialisation approach supported the approach and there was some small improvement of pupil performance as shown by their attainment in tests. The participant teachers and school heads in Ndawi (2006) ^[15]'s study cited a number of advantages that they had realized in trying to implement the specialisation approach which included that:

- Most noted that the labour of preparation and planning was reduced, as the teacher prepared basically the same lesson for all classes, creating more time for other things.
 - Teachers worked harder as they competed with other teachers on the same pupils.
 - The pupils enjoyed the variety of exposure to different teachers and showed more motivation.
 - Some heads found the system easier to supervise.
- However, some authorities have found problems with subject specialisation in the primary school. In his study, Ndawi (2006) ^[15] discovered the major problems associated with subject specialisation which includes that:
- Those teachers in the language areas tended to complain of a bigger marking load and a lot of work to record in the record books.
 - Some teachers were worried that the programme did not allow the teacher to "spill over" into the time for the next lesson if pupils had not finished the work, though this inflexibility was commended by others as ensuring that each subject got its due time.
 - Teacher-pupil relationship was reduced and teachers could not familiarize with their pupils adequately. However, some cited the advantage that a pupil did not suffer total disadvantage if he/she did not like a particular teacher or when a teacher did not like him / her.
 - Some heads complained about noise during the teachers' change-over classes after end of a period.
 - Problems of teacher transfers, student teachers, inadequate materials, hot seating and lack of remediation arrangements were also cited as making subject specialisation difficult to manage.

Theoretical evidence from literature reveals that although subject specialisation is a feasible alternative to the traditional

generalistic approach to teaching in the primary school, its implementation faces a number of serious challenges which need to be overcome before it can be rolled out on a permanent basis.

Statement of the problem

The traditional belief that one teacher can successfully teach all the eleven or more subjects to a group of forty or more pupils in the primary school is being challenged through the introduction of subject specialisation which is working very well in the secondary school system in Zimbabwe. However, whether subject specialisation will work equally well in the primary system is not yet clear.

Purpose of the study

The study sought to establish the challenges that were encountered by primary schools as they attempted to implement subject specialisation in order to come up with practical suggestions to improve the situation on the ground.

Research Questions

1. What are teachers' attitudes towards subject specialisation in the primary school?
2. Are there adequate experienced and qualified teachers to promote subject specialisation?
3. Can subject specialisation improve examination results?
4. What problems are associated with subject specialisation in the primary school and how could they be averted?

Significance of the study

The study hoped to reveal the major obstacles associated with the implementation of subject specialisation in the primary school system and come up with suggestions that would help educational planners in formulating policies that will lead to the effective implementation of subject specialisation.

Limitations of the study

The first limitation has to do with the descriptive method used in the study. As Ary and Razaviah (2010) ^[2] posit, the descriptive method lacks predictive power since the research may discover and describe "what is" and unable to predict what "would be". In view of the small size of the sample the findings of the study therefore will have limited generalisability.

Delimitation of the study

The study confined itself to investigating the obstacles that hinder the effective implementation of subject specialisation using a sample of 125 randomly selected teachers within Bubi District primary schools. Views from heads of schools, education inspectors, parents and pupils were outside the purview of this study.

Methodology

The study employed the quantitative paradigm. The quantitative methodology was found useful because it is statistics driven and can provide a lot of information (Bell, 2013) ^[3]. It is also relatively easier to compile the data onto a chart or graph because of the numbers that are made available. As Cohen and Manion (2011) ^[4] state, another advantage of quantitative research is that the research can be conducted on a large scale and give a lot more information as

far as value is concerned. However, one major weakness of the quantitative methodology is that numbers change often (Anderson, 2012) [1]. So if research is conducted on a statistical level, then it would have to be conducted much more frequently to help balance out the numbers (Bell, 2013) [3]. The use of the survey research design enabled the researchers to gather widespread perceptions of the respondents on the studied phenomenon (Anderson, 2011). The study employed random sampling to come up with a sample of 250 teachers since they are the ones at the centre of implementation in the classroom. From the list of 88 schools obtained from the district office, the researchers randomly picked 50 of the schools and sent 5 questionnaires to the heads of schools who were asked to give any of their grade 4 to 7 teachers randomly. The merit of random sampling is the ease of assembling the sample and it is also considered a fair way of selecting a sample from a given population since every member is given equal opportunity of being selected (Kumar, 2008) [9]. The researchers used a questionnaire and an interview to collect data from the respondents. The researchers distributed the questionnaires to the selected schools and collected them after four weeks through the heads of the schools.

Findings and Discussion

The study set out to investigate the obstacles to the implementation of subject specialisation in the primary school system in Zimbabwe. This section is presented in two parts; namely, presentation of data and discussion thereof.

Presentation of data

Table 1: Composition of respondents by sex (N=250).

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	60	48
Female	65	52
Totals	125	100

Table 1 above shows that there were more females (52%) than males (48%). The significance of this information is that it proves accurate observations by Makoni (2011) [11] that there are more female teachers in Zimbabwe’s primary schools than males.

Table 2: Composition of respondents by professional qualification (N=250).

Professional Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate in Education	19	15
Diploma in Education	94	75
Bachelor of Education	6	5
Untrained	6	5
Totals	125	100

The information above (Table 2) shows that the majority of respondents (75%) were holders of the Diploma in Education qualification, 15% were holders of the Certificate in Education professional qualification and 5% held the Bachelor of Education Degree qualification and another 5% were untrained.

Table 3: Composition of respondents by years of experience (N=250).

Experience in years	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 5	38	30
6 – 10	58	46
11 – 15	22	18
16 and above	6	6
Totals	125	100

The information on Table 3 shows that 76% of the respondents have less than ten years of work experience and 24% more than ten years of work experience. Work experience plays a critical role in helping teachers become experts in various subjects areas.

Table 4: Responses to the question: “Are you fully aware of what subject specialisation in the primary school involves?” (N=250).

Response categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	119	95
No	2	2
Not sure	4	3
Totals	125	100

The information on Table 4 above reveals that the majority of respondents (95%) understand fully the concept of subject specialisation in the primary school. Only a few indicated that they were not aware of the meaning of subject specialisation in the primary school and these could be the untrained teachers as reflected on Table 2 above.

Table 5: Responses to the question: “Do you feel that subject specialisation should be seriously pursued in the primary school system?” (N=250).

Responses Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	19	15
Strongly Agree	96	77
Disagree	4	3
Strongly Disagree	5	4
Not sure	1	1
Totals	125	100

Table 5 above shows that the majority of respondents (92%) had a positive attitude towards subject specialisation in the primary school system. The trend reveals that teachers are willing to implement subject specialisation and therefore, more support by the school authorities could yield good results.

Table 6: Responses to the statement: “Subject specialisation can improve examination results by pupils” (N=250).

Responses Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	118	94
No	5	4
Not sure	3	2
Totals	125	100

The information on Table 6 reveals that most of the respondents (94%) believed that subject specialisation can help primary schools improve pass rates. This confirms that teachers have positive attitudes towards subject specialisation.

The researchers conducted interviews with ten teachers from two schools. The first question from the interview schedule wanted to find out from the respondents what they thought were the major challenges confronting subject specialisation in their schools. Most participants indicated that: most teachers had not done any specialisation at teacher training colleges; classrooms were not adequate; time was wasted during change over from one subject to the other. One participant retorted that *“You can not successfully implement subject specialisation without specialist teachers and specialist rooms”*. Participants also indicated that heads were not prepared to change from the current model to the subject specialisation model.

The second question sought to find out from the participants how they thought the challenges confronting the introduction of special education could be resolved. The majority of the participants indicated that the syllabi at teacher training colleges should be based on subject specialisation; the parents associations should prioritise specialist rooms when constructing classrooms in the primary schools; heads should be staff developed so as to appreciate the merits of subject specialisation. One participant for example said *“my head is not interested in this model in the primary school, he says that it is relevant in the secondary school setup where pupils are mature and capable of interacting with more than one teacher per day.”*

Discussion

All the teachers in this study were in possession of the general teacher qualifications without any specific depth in any subject areas as this is the curriculum that the primary teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe currently offers. Primary school teachers' colleges were designed to produce generalists who have bit and pieces of knowledge in a multiplicity of subject areas. As Morris (2014)^[12] observes, it is difficult to be good at all things particularly across the broad range of subjects taught in primary schools, and yet we expect one person to instill the basics of these areas along with breeding a passion and interest to learn more.

The findings of the study also reveal that teachers generally have a positive attitude towards subject specialisation. They indicated that subject specialisation in the primary school system was likely to improve the performance of pupils in public examinations. This finding tallies with findings by Ndawi (2006)^[15] who states that subject specialisation promotes better teaching; the labour of preparation and planning was reduced as the teacher prepared basically the same lesson for all classes, creating more time for other things; teachers worked harder as they competed with other teachers on the same pupils and pupils enjoyed the variety of exposure to different teachers and showed more motivation. Thornton (2011) corroborates this information when he postulates that the main advantage of specialist (or semi-specialist) teaching is that the subject specialist brings a high level of subject knowledge to their teaching and it is the lack of such subject knowledge which is the main weakness of the generalist class teacher.

The study also revealed that all the primary schools did not have specialist rooms as they were designed for the generalist model of education. Effective subject specialisation requires that there must be enough classrooms for pupils and these classrooms should have suitable material for specialized

teaching (Perkins, 2007)^[17]. Moyo (2008)^[14] add that most specialist subject areas require specific equipment and facilities and every school should have a specialist room. Most of the teachers believed that heads of their schools were not supportive of the subject specialisation in the primary school system. Most heads were said to believe that subject specialisation was not suitable for the small children in the primary school and was only relevant for pupils at secondary schools. The fears by heads towards specialist education in the primary school system tally with findings by Ndawi (2006)^[15] who discovered that heads complained about noise during the teachers' change-over classes after end of period as well as problems of teacher transfers, student teachers, inadequate materials, hot seating and lack of remediation arrangements.

Conclusions

From this research it has emerged that teachers have positive attitudes towards subject specialisation in the primary school system. Some of the merits of subject specialisation include reduced labour of preparation and planning as the teacher prepared basically the same lesson for all classes and creating more time for other activities. Teachers worked harder as they competed with other teachers on the same pupils and pupils enjoyed the variety of exposure to different teachers and showed more motivation. However, it is currently difficult to implement subject specialisation in the primary school system because primary schools do not have specialist rooms and suitable material for specialized teaching. Teachers were trained to be generalist and thus, cannot effectively implement subject specialisation. Heads of schools were not interested in the implementation of subject specialisation in the primary school system and therefore, could not provide the necessary support to promote this model of teaching.

Recommendations

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

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should promote subject specialisation in Zimbabwe's primary schools as it has many advantages over the current model of teaching obtaining in the primary schools and teachers appear to be willing to implement it as they are aware of its merits.
- Teacher training colleges for primary school teachers should be recruited on subject specialisation and their college syllabii should be centred on subject specialisation.
- School Development Committees and Associations should invest in the provision of adequate specialist rooms to effectively implement the model of teaching.
- Staff development sessions should be conducted for heads of schools in order to conscientise them on the merits of subject specialisation in the primary schools.

References

1. Anderson C. Research in education. London: D.P. Publications. 2012.
2. Ary DJ, Razaviah A. Introduction to research in education. London: Routledge. 2010.
3. Bell J. Doing your research methods. Buckingham: Open University. 2013.

4. Cohen L, Manion L. Research methods in education. London: Routledge. 2011.
5. Elliot A. Specialisation in theology. London: EAITE. 2012.
6. Francis TR. Subject specialisation in schools. London: The Open University. 2011.
7. Fullan M. The challenge of change: Start school improvement now. New York: Corwin. 2009.
8. Fuller TC. The comparative advantage of subject specialisation. *Education Quarterly*. 2005; 49(3):65-79.
9. Kumar FS. Research in educational settings. London: University of London. 2008.
10. Macfarlane AH. Discipline, democracy and diversity. Wellington: New Zealand. Council for Educational Research. 2008.
11. Makoni C. Gender representation in Hwange schools. Harare: ZOU. 2011.
12. Morris E. Should our primary schools teachers be subject specialists? Canberra: Canberra News. 2014.
13. Mortimore P. Time for bold experiments. New York: Longman. 2008.
14. Moyo NP. Problems in the teaching of practical subjects. Harare: Teachers Forum. 2008.
15. Ndawi OP. Complexities of teaching child centred approaches. London: Falmer Press. 2006.
16. Nyagura LM. Models of teaching. *Zimbabwe Journal of Education*. 2010; 5(1):17-25.
17. Perkins P. Specialisation in the primary schools: Merits and demerits. *Small Group Research*. 2007; 20(7):120-133.
18. Slabbert B. Subject specialisation. *International Journal of Educational Research*. 2009; 11(4):620-634.
19. Taylor A. Subject specialisation at elementary school level. *Educational Research*. 2006; 15(6):55-62.