Research Article

An Investigation into the Causes of Low Pass Rate at Grade Seven Final Examinations in Mudzi District in Mashonaland East Province

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Abstract
The aim of the present study was to investigate the causes of low pass rates at Grade seven final examinations in Mudzi District primary schools. The sample comprised all the primary school teachers in the district. The sample was made up of 120 teachers selected from the 24 randomly selected schools. The study adopted the descriptive survey design. All the data was collected through a questionnaire which was largely made up of close-ended questions and one open-ended one. The study revealed that the quality of the teaching staff has a huge bearing on the performance of pupils at Grade seven final examinations. Large class sizes also negatively impacted upon the performance of pupils. The study also revealed that heads of schools were paying little attention to the supervision of teachers in order to provide instructional guidance for effective teaching by teachers. The study recommends that the District Education Office should prioritize the deployment of qualified teachers to disadvantaged districts so that pupils from these areas cannot also benefit from the expertise of qualified teachers.

KeyWords: Causes, primary schools, grade seven, pass rate, final examinations, district

Introduction
Mudzi district is one of the nine rural districts found in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe. The information collected from the Provincial Director in the Mashonaland East Provincial Office indicate that the average pass rate of Mudzi district in Grade Seven examinations during the six year period spanning from 2007 to 2012 was 12.99% placing the district at the anchor of the performance log in the Province (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education). Grade seven results in Zimbabwe are obtained after 7 years of primary education and are used to determine the quality of secondary school that a pupil will join (Muranda 2012). When pupils fail Grade seven examinations it disadvantages them when they look for Form one places as most schools only admit candidates who passed these examinations (Nyagura and Reece 1990). Parents of children who fail public examinations go through untold torture and stress when their children who spent many years in the primary school cannot secure places in good secondary schools (Chikowera, 2012). It is on account of this information that this study sought to investigate the cause of low pass rates at Grade seven final examinations in Mudzi District.

Literature Review
Ezewu (2003) and Maketa (2005) in their studies of problems of a rural school child agree that parents of low socio-economic status seem not to value education of their children. On the other hand Fuller (2006) state that even if low socio-economic status families are worried about their children’s poor performance, the majority of them are not always able to assist their children due to illiteracy. Rosen (2007) sees parents’ involvement in the education of their children as crucial to the academic achievement by the pupils and further argues that the community and the teachers should be seen working together as partners in order to achieve the school goals. Chewedza et al. (2012) posit that parental involvement in giving instructional help and supervision to the learners at home increases the teacher’s effectiveness.

According to Yara (2009) another important variable that determines the success of pupils in public examinations and educational performance in general is the teachers’ qualification, experience and commitment. There is a strong link between qualification, experience, commitment and effectiveness. As Stiggins (1999) argues, a teacher with attributes stated above is likely to give
maximum help to children for them to produce good results. Mufanechiya et al. (2012) postulate that low pupil performance is largely due to teacher’s knowledge, skills and attitude. A teacher is expected to lead learners and help them overcome various learning difficulties and if the teacher is lacking in various pedagogic expectations and demands, the end results become disastrous (Mbunga, 2012).

Mangena (2006) asserts that, fundamental to the learning of all subjects besides vernacular languages in the Zimbabwean curriculum, is the mastery of English language. All subjects with the exception of vernacular languages are taught and examined in English which is a second language to all candidates in the rural schools in Zimbabwe who sit for Grade seven examinations (Mareva, 2011). As Maketa (2005) states, communication in the classroom is very important and if it is hampered, no learning is will take place. Most of the rural school children come from homes with no English reading materials which can probably help them acquire and master the language (Mangena, 2006). As Maketa (2005) observes, most if not all children examined at Grade seven in rural areas do not speak English language at their homes; they only come across the language at school through teachers whose competence in the language is suspect and through books which require good readers and most of them are not. As a result of this situation, there is a high possibility that the bulk of the children are bound to fail public examinations due to the language barrier (Nkosana, 2010).

Mufanechiya et al. (2012) argue that, being a rural school teacher in Zimbabwe [and probably in most developing countries], is difficult as every societal malfunctioning affects their work in the classroom especially poverty. There are so many mitigating factors that one has to contend with daily in the execution of duty to produce quality outcomes. According to Mufanechiya et al. (2012) poverty has become more acute and widespread especially in rural communities due to the dollarized economy leading to many parents finding it difficult to afford school fees for their children. Katanda (2010) further observes that poor pupils’ performance due to lack of books and other teaching learning resources, low morale among teachers as a result of poor salaries and lack of attraction and retention of qualified teachers because of amenities in rural areas led to poor results. As Nyagura (1991) postulates, most rural district primary schools cater for the economically and socially disadvantaged communities who cannot afford to meet the basic educational facilities and resources hence oldest pupils, poor teacher accommodation, high teacher-pupil, heavy teaching loads and poorly educated parents.

Verspoor (2006) says that, to make matters worse, these schools [rural] show gross management deficiencies with very low levels of planning, invisible and unstructured management styles and ineffective implementation of educational policies and the sum total of these challenges has seen quality as a process compromised with low levels of teacher-pupil interaction, low levels of pupils participation and little of pupil engagement in the learning process. The schools are also characterized by low capacity utilization of available resources resulting in poor results leading to a reputation crisis and to what Jansen (1995) calls how general public opinion of the school and a dented image.

Verspoor (2006) sees staff development programmes for teachers as pivotal to their effectiveness and efficiency. As Marave (2011) argues, staff development helps teachers to improve their instructional competencies and their capacity to curriculum delivery personnel, the problem of high failure rate or low pass rate may be minimized. Through staff development programmes for the Grade seven teachers the individual teacher gains knowledge and skills which when applied in the classroom, could assist pupils and improve their performance. According to Jones (1995) it should be understood that quality of education and school results take place in the classroom and a number of factors come into play, that is, competent, motivated teachers and schools that strive to provide an environment conducive to learning. Lipton (2007) states that research findings have shown that when teachers are satisfied with their job, their confidence to make a positive impact is enhanced.

Statement of the problem

Education is one of the main foundations for the child’s development. Failure at school is a serious concern among children, and their parents as well as the schools. Grade seven results determine the quality of the secondary school that a child will join for their form one. These results are also used to rank schools and districts in order of performance.

Purpose of the study

The study sought to investigate the causes of low pass rate at grade seven final examinations in order to come up with practical suggestions to address these causes of low pass rate.

Research Questions

1. Do schools have adequate teaching and learning resources?
2. What qualifications do most teachers possess in the schools?
3. What is the proficiency of children in the English language?
4. Are parents contributing effectively towards the learning of their children?
5. Do heads carry-out supervision to guide teachers?

Significance of the study

The study hoped to expose the causes of high failure rate by Grade seven pupils so as to add a voice to the already existing concerns about this phenomenon so that more urgency is applied to address this situation. It is hoped that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education may implement some of the suggestions put forward by this research to augment its own well intentioned efforts to improve the situation.

Limitations of the study

In view of the small size of the sample the findings of the study are likely to have limited generalisability. The other limitation has to do with the descriptive method that was used in this study. According to Kumar (2008), the descriptive method lacks predictive power; the research may discover and describe “what is” but is unable to predict “what would be”. The respondents may also give false responses thereby affecting the validity of the findings. The other limitation has to do with self-reporting. This study was about...
poor results at Grade seven examinations of which teachers are also part of the problem, and are reporting about themselves. This brings is what Hoskin (2012) terms introspective ability, which implies that even if a participant is trying to be honest, they may lack the introspective ability to provide an accurate response to a question.

Delimitation of the study
The study confined itself to the causes of low pass rate at Grade seven examinations in Mudzi District in Mashonaland East Province using a sample of 120 teachers made up of 53% males and 47% females. Only teachers’ views were solicited for and those from heads of schools, education officers, parents and children were outside the purview of the study.

Method
The study employed the quantitative methodology which was found useful because of its reliance on statistics and therefore its capacity to provide a lot of information (Leedy, 2005). As Cohen and Manion (2011) advise, quantitative research can be conducted on a large scale and give a lot more information as far as value is concerned. The study settled for the survey research design. The use of the survey research design enabled the researchers to gather widespread views of the researchers to gather wide spread views of the respondents on the studied phenomenon (Anderson, 2012). The study employed random sampling to arrive at a sample of 24 primary schools and each school provided 5 teachers for the study who were also randomly selected. The questionnaire was used for collecting data from the respondents. Both close-ended questions and open-ended questions were used to solicit information from the respondents. The researchers sought permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to conduct the study and as granted before the questionnaires were distributed. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of all the data they provided. The questionnaires were collected after a week by the researchers which maximized on rate of returns. Non-returns, as Phillips and Pugh (2011) observe, introduce a bias in as much as they are likely to differ in many ways from respondents thereby adversely affecting reliability and validity of the findings. Data gathered through the questionnaire produced descriptive statistics around the variables and these statistics were computed and inferential implications from them derived and analyzed.

Results and Discussion
The study set out to investigate the causes of low pass rate at Grade seven examinations in Zimbabwean rural primary schools. This section is presented in two parts; namely presentation of data and discussion.

Table 1: Composition of respondents by sex (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 show that 53% of the respondents were male and 47% female. This data is considered to be statistically significant in that it confirms that most rural schools in Zimbabwe have more male than female teachers (Makoni, 2011).

Table 2: Composition of respondents by teaching experience (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience in years</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 – 5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 10</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – 15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and above</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information on table 2 above shows that 88% of the respondents have been in the education system for less than ten years with 38% of them having served for less than five years implying that they are less experienced in the game of teaching.

Table 3: Composition of respondents by professional qualifications (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional qualifications</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate in Education</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma in Education</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untrained</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 above shows that 55% of the respondents indicated that each pupil in their class had a textbook, 41% indicated that two pupils shared a textbook and 1% and 3% stated that 3 pupils and 4 pupils shared a single textbook respectively.

Table 5: Teacher-pupil ration in the schools (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratio</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 : 40</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information on table 5 above shows that 87% of the respondents indicated that their classes had more than 40 pupils which is the stipulated teacher-pupil ratio in the primary schools.

Table 6: Responses to the questions: “Do your pupils understand the English Language very well” (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 6 above shows all the respondents (100%) stated that their pupils did not understand the English language which is used in all the subjects in the curriculum except vernacular.

Table 7: Responses to the statement: “I am satisfied with the quality of guidance I get from my head of school as I teach pupils” (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information on table 7 reveals that the majority of the respondents (85%) indicated that they did not receive adequate guidance from their heads.

Table 8: Responses to the statement: “Parents participate fully in the learning of their children” (N=120).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the respondents (100%) were not happy with the participation of parents in the learning of their children.

The questionnaire had an open-ended question that bolstered data from the close-ended questions. The question wanted to find out what respondents thought contributed to the low pass rate of Grade seven pupils at their schools. The most common responses in order of popularity are as follows:

- Heavy workloads on teachers (100%)
- Lack of commitment by pupils (85%)
- Lack of motivation by teachers (85%)
- Failure by parents to provide basic school needs like pens, pencils, exercise books, uniforms and revision books (84%)
- Lack of experience by Grade seven teachers (83%)
- Some teachers along the way not playing their role effectively (78%) leaving just grade seven teachers to do the donkey work in a short period of time
- Pupils not allowed to carry textbooks home (74%)

A number of significant factors were found to be the causes of low pass rate at grade seven examinations in Mudzi District. These causes fall within the school and teacher factors, parental support as well as pupil characteristics.

Teaching and learning materials were found to be inadequate across the schools. Although in most of the schools each pupil was allocated a textbook, they were not allowed to take these books for use at home for further studies. The majority of teachers are inexperienced and in some cases have no professional qualification. As Yara (2009) argues, teachers qualifications, experience and commitment determines the success of pupils in public examinations and educational performance in general. Teachers also were not happy about their workloads. Most of the schools had very large class sizes well beyond the stipulated teacher-pupil ratio which made it very difficult for teachers to give adequate individual attention to pupils.

In most of the schools there was lack of guidance of teachers by their school heads. Heads were said to be engaging in other peripheral activities away from the core business of the school, which is teaching pupils. Verspoor (2006) states that to make matters worse, these schools (rural) show gross management deficiencies with very low levels of planning, invisible and unstructured management styles and ineffective implementation of educational policies and the sum total of these challenges has seen quality as a
process compromised with low levels of teacher-pupil interacting low levels of pupil participation and little of pupil engagement in the learning process.

The study also showed that most of the teachers lacked motivation to work hard to produce high pass rates. Teacher motivation is a very critical factor in the provision of quality education. There are many variables that made it difficult for teachers to enjoy working in the rural schools. As Nyagura (1991) postulates, most rural district primary schools cater for the economically and socially disadvantaged communities who cannot afford to meet the basic educational facilities and resources hence schools are often characterized by drop outs, oldest pupils, poor teacher accommodation, high teacher-pupil ration, heavy teaching loads and poorly educated parents.

Teachers also lack the necessary experience at Grade seven. This is because most of the teachers have been in the system for less than ten years and some are even untrained. For a teacher to produce high pass rates at Grade seven they should have taught at this level for quite some time to the pupils. The other issue raised by the study is that the Grade seven teachers blamed their workmates taking the lower grades for accused of not effectively teaching pupils because most of the pupils appeared to lack basic knowledge which they should have covered at lower levels. As Mufanechiya et al. (2012) play their roles effectively and not to expect the Grade seven teacher to do everything and they add that a teacher is expected to lead learners and help them overcome various learning activities and if the teacher is lacking in various pedagogic expectations and demands, the end results become disastrous (Mufanechiya et al., 2012).

Parents are not effectively participating in the education of their children. Parents play a critical role in the education of their children through provision of basic school needs like pens, pencils, exercise books, uniforms and revision textbooks which the school may not provide. Parents should also consult teachers to find out about the progress their children are making with their school work. Parents should also help children with homework and make sure that their children have time to do it properly under conducive conditions. As Katanda (2010) argues, parental involvement in giving instructional help and supervision to the learners at home increases the teacher’s effectiveness. The community and the teachers should be seen working together as partners in order to achieve the school goals (Katanda, 2010).

Teachers also revealed that most of their pupils lacked commitment to school work. The pupils did not do their homework, some came to school without pens or pencils, others were always absent without good cause and yet others came late on an almost daily basis thereby losing out on early subjects. As Ets ey (2005) postulate, lateness and absenteeism came out as two of the major problems in most rural schools. Pupils in these schools were often late and absent from school when compared with urban school’s pupils. The effect of lateness and absenteeism and irregular school attendance is that material that is taught was difficult to understand when studying on one’s own, continued missing of classes also results in loss of content and knowledge with the consequence being low academic performance (Ets ey, 2005).

All the pupils in the schools under study did not fully understand English language since it is their second language. Pupils in the schools used the local language (Shona) among themselves in the classroom unlike most pupils in urban schools who can interact with each other in English. As Mangena (2006) states, the prevalence of the use of the local language means that they would lack a lot of vocabulary in English which would be needed to understand teachers’ lessons and textbooks they read in all the subjects except the vernacular subject and this ultimately affect their academic performance.

Conclusion

Given the background of the above findings the researchers make the following conclusions: -
• Teaching and learning materials are generally inadequate in the schools for effective teaching and learning.
• Heads of schools were not adequately guiding teachers for effective quality teaching and learning.
• Most teachers are demotivated to perform at optimum level due to poor conditions of service.
• Most of the teachers are inexperienced and under qualified to provide the necessary academic guidance for pupils to perform well at public examinations.
• Parents are not effectively participating in the education of their children.
• Pupils themselves lack the commitment and inner drive to vigorously pursue their school work.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the researchers make the following recommendations:
• The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should engage donor agencies in order to assist with the provision of learning materials and facilities for pupils in rural schools.
• Heads of schools should devote the bulk of their time on guiding teachers to perform effectively on academic work.
• Conditions of service for rural teachers should be given priority by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and some of retention allowance should be paid to teachers who choose to work in remote areas of the country.
• District, circuits and clusters should be capacitated to hold staff development sessions for Grade seven teachers where resources persons from the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), experienced Grade seven teachers from other districts as well as publishers of books share their experiences with these teachers.
The heads of schools should motivate parents to participate meaningfully in the education of their children through the use of the local leadership as well as the School Development Committee. The schools may also introduce adult lessons so as to bring more parents nearer to education which may help conscientise them about the value of involvement in the education of their children.

Heads of schools should provide conducive school climates so that pupils enjoy being at school. Schools can also source donations for uniforms and fees for the most needy of their pupils. Teachers should act as good role models so that pupils may wish to continue with their education to become like their teachers.

References

Publishing Company.