PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF TEACHERS ON FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to determine what the factors affecting quality. The study was basically qualitative. Personal accounts of teachers were sought yielding qualitative data. The research employed the descriptive survey design. In this study, a sample of 263 teachers from four districts of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe was chosen using the convenience sampling technique. The study found out that departmental members were clear about the vision towards which they were working at, had a reasonable understanding of what excellence entailed and hailed the department for teamwork. However, they insisted that the need for staff growth, matching resources, research culture, communication, tutorial package, incentives and proper assessment management are prerequisites for departmental excellence in open and distance learning. The study among others recommended that the idea of excellence be pursued, backed by resources, training, incentives and a research culture.

Keywords: Schools; Quality; teamwork, tutorial package and research culture

BACKGROUND

Over the past few years, there has been a significant growth in quality initiatives aimed towards improving service delivery at institutional, national, regional and global levels. At independence in 1980, the Zimbabwe government adopted campaign style strategies to institute educational reforms in the country. Enrolments rose by leaps and bounds (Zvobgo, 1985). The 1980 education for all policy saw a rapid expansion of secondary and primary schools.

The impact of the large expansion was felt in higher education in 1984 and 1986 as the students who had begun secondary education in 1980 then completed their ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels (Zindi, 2006). The growing mass education cascaded into colleges, polytechnics and universities, resulting in a mismatch between number of school leavers and number of places in higher education institutions. The government reacted by appointing the Nziramasanga Commission in 1999. The commission was tasked with the mandate to find ways of addressing among other things the quality of educational provision in Zimbabwe.
Quality is very hard to define. Taking the lexical meaning of the word quality as a basis, this term is used to describe the most immediate perception of the composition of an object (Aristotle). In this case, those who speak of quality, refer to the composition of something, whereby it is typical for it to be compared to something else.

The origins of quality management are usually ascribed to Japan’s search for quality improvements in the 1950s and its success in moulding ideas on quality into a coherent operative philosophy (Clegg, Ibarra-Colado and Rodriquez, 1999). Much of the increased awareness of the importance of quality in the west has been associated with Crosby’s ‘doing it right first time’ and Peters’ customer orientation and leadership as being central to the quality improvement process (Kelemen, 1999). Ever since, public and institutional stakeholders seeking accountability have advocated for quality in all their daily undertakings and Zimbabwe schools were not an exception.

In pursuit of quality, agencies such as European Network of quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher education (INQAAHE) and the South African Quality Assurance Agency are some of the notable agencies that work together and share information about quality standards. The Zimbabwe government went further to establish a quality assurance department.

The Zimbabwe education system has undergone two decades of educational reforms. These reforms are not peculiar to Zimbabwe. They are part of a much wider reform and restructuring of education systems the world over (Davies and West-Burnham 1997). Further, Hammer and Chumpy in Davies and West-Burnham (1997) say that what is happening in education is only a reflection of changes in the wider global economy driven by three forces. These are customers, competition and change.

- Customers

The mass market was developed in 1950s. During this time, customers were glad to receive any product. This has since changed from ‘any’ product to a ‘quality product’ This is any indication that schools as service providers must gear themselves for a quality product if they do not want to suffer tissue rejection. It is now a requirement that school business has to be conducted with the customer in mind. Under pressure from well-informed customers, schools have no choice but to aim for improved service delivery.

- Competition

Intensified competition has swept through companies and has also not spared schools, forcing them to re-assess their situation.

Factors that may Contribute to Quality in Schools

A number of factors may contribute to quality. Some of these are discussed below.

Bradford and Cohen (1984) stress the importance for managers to know how to tap subordinate talents excite them about the mission and build effective teams. They
suggest that managers must learn to have impact without exerting total control, to be helpful without having all the answers, to get involved without demanding centrality, to be powerful without needing to dominate and to act responsibly without squeezing others out. For schools with a mission to provide quality service, this may be the doctor’s prescription. The antidote to this according to McIlroy (2003) is to instil a spirit of excitement and a determination to persevere even when apparent setbacks occur.

As an academic department, the department of education needs to develop a culture for excellence based on the notion of delivering excellent services to its clients. This culture needs to be a more participative and open culture where everyone can contribute. It needs to be creative, challenging and supportive. It needs to embrace modern ways of working through teams and networks rather than through hierarchies and formal systems (NHS, 2002).

Schools must allow employees to use their creativity and apply their imagination in dealing with educational issues. Higher levels of skill are required of everyone, not just those at the top. There must be a guiding vision for quality that is viewed as the guiding philosophy by every member and not simply as another change programme. Everyone in the school must feel and support this compelling vision and mission. Is this the case? This study seeks to establish the true picture in selected Zimbabwean schools.

Dess and Lumpkin (2003) also argue that organisations that have strong cultures and strong reward systems can rely less on boundaries such as rules, regulations and procedures. Thus a culture of excellence in research, student services and continual improvement backed by a sound reward system can ensure the attainment of the education vision and mission without relying too much on rules and regulations.

From another angle, Branden (1998) argues that development of self-esteem is useful to teachers in schools. He defines self-esteem as the experience of being competent to cope with basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. To teachers in schools, this means trust in one’s ability to think, learn and make appropriate decisions and respond effectively to new conditions. It also means confidence in one’s right to experience success and personal fulfilment. Employees will attain strategic objectives because they have confidence in their minds at a very deep level. Branden (1998) goes on to say that it means trust in the process by which one reasons, understands, learns, chooses, decides and regulates actions.

Bennet (cited in Chiome, 2012) also mentions worker involvement that can be of use to schools in general. He says in an increasingly dynamic, interdependent and unpredictable world, it is simply no longer possible for anyone to figure it all out at the top. “The days when Henry Ford learned for the organisation are gone”. School leaders must learn not to think for others and adopt a strategy of involving and integrating both students and staff in decision-making. While the challenge is great, the potential pay off is equally great, hence this study.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The following specific objectives were formulated for this study:
To explore what is going on in Zimbabwean schools in pursuit of quality in line with the Nziramasanga Commission’s (1999) recommendations.

To identify teachers’ perceptions of the factors that they think affect quality in their schools.

To recommend measures that can be taken to attain quality in schools.

To inform the department of education on the way forward in pursuit of quality in schools.

ASSUMPTIONS

The research assumes that quality will ensure goal attainment in schools. Success in this regard will make a significant contribution to the achievement of the millennium goals.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Zimbabwe education system has set quality as a target among its educational goals in schools. The days when leaders learned for the organisation are gone. Many organisations fiercely resist this, yet this is the fact of life that a few people who think and many who do what they are told can no longer run a modern department. It is critical therefore, for schools to inculcate a culture of learning so that quality in service delivery can be achieved. If this is not the case then there is a problem. It is against this background that the research sought to find out the factors that affect quality in selected Zimbabwean schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research question: What are the factors affecting quality in schools?

Sub questions

- Are schools training staff for quality??
- Do staff members possess the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for achieving quality?
- Are there any incentives for task accomplishment?
- Are resources made available to enable members to achieve strategic plan targets?

Significance of the Study

The resources that go into schools are overwhelming. It is imperative that these schools attain set objectives. This study will contribute towards realisation of the vision of quality educational provision. It will promote reflection and debate from teachers, researchers and educational managers to ensure attainment of quality in schools. It will encourage exercise of initiative in challenging the status quo in pursuit of quality.
METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research was largely qualitative because it employed personal accounts to collect data. Qualitative research focuses on understanding a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and views of people involved (Merriam, 1998) using their own expressions. This study sought to obtain the perceptions of teachers on how the factors affecting quality in the schools they teach. The survey used personal accounts, as these are suitable methods for collecting original data from a population too large to observe directly. As the schools in this study were dispersed across the whole nation, the survey method was very relevant in collecting the perspectives of teachers. Using surveys, it is possible to collect data from large or small populations (sometimes referred to as the universe of a study). Borg and Gall (1989) say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. The survey was chosen because it was seen as the best method for collecting original data for purposes of describing a population too large to observe directly, as was the case in this study (Leedy, 1997). This method allowed teachers to say exactly what they felt about the factors affecting quality in their schools. This was the primary goal in this study.

Sampling

The population for the study consisted of the eight thousand teachers in the three districts of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. To get the sample for the study, quota-sampling procedures were used to ensure that each of the seven districts of the province had an equal chance of being selected for the study. Quota sampling has been described by Bailey in Cohen and Manion (1994) as the non-probability equivalent of stratified sampling. It attempts to obtain representatives of various elements of the total population in the proportions in which they occur there. The categories in this case were the seven districts and the primary and secondary sections of the schools. The sample was made up of 278 respondents.

Instruments

The study used personal accounts to collect data. Teachers wrote personal accounts of their perspectives of factors affecting quality in their schools. The teachers were students of the Zimbabwe Open University who were attending tutorials Armstrong (1987) argues that personal accounts are useful instruments of collecting data because they assign significance and value to a person’s own story and the interpretations s/he places on their experiences. In addition the personal account documents the inner, subjective reality as constructed by the individuals. The personal accounts in this study placed value on the teachers’ own perceptions of the factors that affect quality. Personal accounts gave respondents time and flexibility to write what they thought prevailed in their schools.
Procedures

The researchers asked teachers who are students of the Zimbabwe Open University to write their personal accounts during tutorial sessions when they had breaks. This was done in September 2008. Authority was obtained from the relevant authorities to conduct the research.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using the thematic approach in which teachers’ accounts were put together into themes emanating from their views.

FINDINGS

The following section presents teachers’ accounts of the factors they thought affected quality in their schools. They are organised according to themes that emerged from the responses.

Poor remuneration

The teachers in this study were of the opinion that poor remuneration was getting in the way of quality in schools. One said: ‘the pay is pathetic to say the least.’ This appeared to be a valid assertion because at the time of the study in September 2008 teachers were earning an average of eight (US$8) dollars a month.

Working conditions

The respondents in this study also cited poor working conditions as a factor affecting quality in the schools in our study. Chief among these was the issue of rewards and incentives that featured prominently in the personal accounts of teachers. Substantiating statements are:

“Financial rewards for pursuing quality should be commensurate with economic realities.”
“Pay rates that are in tandem with current economic situation.”
“A good financial package must accompany the idea of quality education.”

Teachers in this study felt that the school authorities were not doing enough to reward the staff. They felt this could affect quality in many ways. Dess and Lumpkin (2003) say that organisations that have strong cultures and reward systems can rely less on boundaries such as regulations and procedures. In this case, the schools under this study need to think seriously about incentives for the teachers if quality is to be realised. Linked to this is teacher retention.

Teacher Retention

The respondents in this study cited high teacher mobility in school as a very grey area in schools. 87% of the respondents mentioned this issue and said teachers are living schools on regular bases. Some of the following statements bore testimony to this:
‘There is a lot of staff movement. Retain staff to promote continuity.’
‘Staff mobility has adversely affected my school that lost half its staff compliment of twenty two in the last six months.’
‘The schools must see to it that strategies are put in place to attract and retain the best brains for quality in schools.’
‘There is brain drain that is negatively affecting quality in schools.’

The issue of staff retention appear to be a hot issue in the Zimbabwe education system. Chabaya and Chiome (2008) found out that one reason for this rote is the issue of culture neglect and culture decay in the Zimbabwean institutions. Continuity is affected by staff exodus due to various challenges and has been cited as a factor in this research.

**Shortage of Resources**

Insufficient resources in the schools in this study were one area that the teachers mentioned as getting in the way of quality. In this respect, the following data was gleaned from the accounts and the following resources featured prominently.

**Figure 1: showing teaching conditions in 278 sampled schools in Zimbabwe**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources mentioned</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dilapidated buildings</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No piped water</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No electricity</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate furniture</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials for teaching practical subjects</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Textbooks</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other teaching materials (chalks, maps, flipcharts etc)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main finding though is a general one:
‘If education is to be expected to help the poor to lift themselves out of poverty, then education itself needs first to be lifted out of poverty.’ (UN 2002: 55). In this regard, the quality of educational provision is greatly limited by the teaching conditions in the schools in this study.

**Administrative Shortcomings**

The respondents in this study cited administrative shortcomings that give rise to favouritism in the allocation of resources and absenteeism as factors affecting quality.

**Favouritism**

Favouritism in appointment of school managers and allocation of scarce resources were seen as threatening quality in schools. Some supporting statements were:
‘Quality can be achieved if favouritism is avoided.’
‘Highly qualified and experienced personnel are sidelined in promotions.’
Absenteeism

The teachers in this study cited absenteeism as one area that threatened quality in the schools under the study. Up to 55% of the respondents in this study stated that this is a grey area.

Lack of a Shared Vision

A major finding of the study was the need for a shared vision in the school system. The teachers indicated that they wanted:

“quality education”, “quality is a right. This should be the guiding vision”, “We must all strive for high quality education.”

They went further to say:

“The vision is really what all of us aspire to. However, in pursuit of it, action must speak louder than words”

The respondents in this study brought an important dimension to educational vision that it is one thing to talk about achieving quality standards and another to actually act in ways that demonstrate the willingness to achieve the vision. In support of this, Izuagie (2001) says there is need for a strong desire for a consistent collaborative management in which the learner or student arguably claims a centre stage in all operational scenarios.

There is evidence from the study that the teachers in the study knew about a shared vision and its implications for their practice Mugridge (2001) says an effective quality assurance system must be embraced by all members of staff within the organisation and must become their collective responsibility in fact as well as in theory. This has to be the case with the schools in this study.

Strategic Thinking in School Managers

The pinnacle of a manager is to be in a position to participate in charting the overall direction of an organisation and to manage the process of getting there (Smith and Malaba, 2001). This assertion was evident in this research in which a sizable number of the teachers in the study cherished the idea of contributing in determining the game plan of an organisation.

‘There is need to react to the demands of the environment in ways that promote accountability.’

‘We must craft a strategy the help us achieve quality.’

‘There is apparent lack of strategic thinking in our managers.’

The views expressed here appear to point out that without strategic thinking, the quality in schools will be affected.

Professional Development

Most respondents agreed that staff development is key to quality. Nevertheless, they bemoaned the absence of the same in their schools. Statements below pointed out this issue:

“We are allowed to rote in the schools without an rejuvenation.”
“Pedagogical skills change from time to time and we must move with the times.”
“Staff development in new subjects such as HIV and AIDS Education is a must if quality is anything to go by.”
“Most of us have no skills in computer use.”

The need for continuous professional development corroborated Cohen and Bradford’s (1984) suggestion that there is need to develop skills needed for making the best contribution to managing the total unit in order to achieve excellence.

Current management theory considers the human resources of any organisation as paramount to the effectiveness of any organisation. As such people in an organisation need to be continuously developed for the benefit of the organisation and for the people themselves. The schools must now realise that when people work to achieve their own goals, they also achieve the goals of the organisations. Skyrme (2002:15) wrote:

‘Much of the value of a company is in its intangibles. These include assets such as brands, customer loyalty, patents, and trademarks and of course knowledge.’ It appears there was unanimity in this research that there is a direct relationship between intellectual capital growth and organisational excellence. Thus extensive training of teachers and school principals in modern ways of handling children will improve the delivery of services.

**Research Based Innovations**

Another interesting finding from this study was on the role of research in achieving quality in schools as evidenced by the following excerpts:

“Research is the cornerstone of quality in learning institutions’
‘Research based innovations can contribute to quality but this is not the case in my school.’
“Involvement in research promotes staff members’ professional growth and enhances their reputation.”

In the case of research, respondents felt that the schools are not doing enough in promoting this critical area. Research is seen as crucial in a learning institution because in addition to enhancing the professional development of teachers, it also helped to find solutions to day-to-day problems in the schools.

**Use of ITC to Achieve Excellence**

What further emerged from the study is that the use of ICT in the schools under study was greatly affecting quality. The respondents went on to point out that it appears like a pipedream in their schools. Nearly all the respondents appeared in agreement. Substantiating statements are:

“Provision of the state of the art computers is the first step towards quality.”
“There three computers in my school but no one is able to use them.”
“Without computers, our school is lagging behind in the information revolution. This greatly affects quality.”
“I have no access to the computers.”
“No idea of a computer.”
“I stay in a remote area where I do not have access to computers and Internet.”

The teachers in this study were unanimous on the tremendous work of computers in enhancing quality but access to and skills in the use of computers were an impediment. This issue appears to agree with the earlier observation in figure 1 that the teaching conditions in schools greatly affect quality. The use of computers would enable the schools to offer more to students using multimedia strategies such as Internet, videoconferencing etc. To support these findings, it has been suggested with some justification that information and communication technology is beginning to form the basis of educational reforms around the world (Selwyn in Mcllroy 2004).

**Political Environment**

The respondents in this study indicated that the political players use education for purposes of:

“Expressions of political will’
*As an instrument of political change’* however, they say in the process, there is great political intolerance that greatly affects the operations of schools. They cited high polarisation in politics that have found expression in the schools with the teacher being caught on the wrong side of the poles. One teacher lamented:

*‘The politics of the day is taking the steam out of the teachers.’*

At the time of this research Zimbabwe was going through a tough time in its political landscape. This is the reason why politics was cited as a disturbing factor in the pursuit of quality in schools.

**Cluster Governance of Schools**

The teachers in this study mentioned team work at schools level as a cornerstone of quality. They indicated that teamwork, clusters and networks are important stepping stones if quality is to be rigorously pursued. Some substantiating statements were:

*‘One school can not achieve quality on its own. We need to establish networks.’*

*‘We do no have established networks of schools that will work together in pursuit of quality.’*

*‘There are no viable school clusters in my area that will help articulate quality issues.’*

**CONCLUSION**

Having found out these perceptions on factors affecting quality in schools, the following conclusions were reached.

- The idea of quality was appealing to teachers as it was both exciting and compelling for them to move with the times.
- Quality should not be divorced from goal attainment, stakeholder satisfaction, excellence and effectiveness as defined by stakeholders in this study.
Strategic thinking and shared vision have been hailed ahead of central control and top-down initiatives.

Availability of computer and information technology (ICT) is indispensable in ensuring quality but there are no computers in schools and where these are available, there are no skilled teachers to operate them.

Teachers are hungry for staff development workshops as they fear they can be left behind by technological developments worldwide.

Poor remuneration and administrative shortcomings were cited as retrogressive areas.

Research is seen as an indispensable pillar in quality improvement that must be nurtured with resources and training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having made these conclusions the research thus recommends that:

- Zimbabwean schools must take the quality initiative head on and accompany it with resources and training to meet its targets.
- ICT must be given priority to meet present day technological demands.
- Incentives and a strong reward structure must be put in place to support the teachers in schools.
- Research culture need to be nurtured so that teachers can engage in research to remedy problems.
- The schools must work through teams, clusters and networks more than through hierarchies and formal systems.
- Further researches could be undertaken on quality assessment in schools and resources needed to ensure quality in schools.
- The political environment must improve to enable educators to concentrate on their core business of teaching.

REFERENCES


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