

# Challenges in Implementing Subject Specialisation by Primary Teachers in Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

The study aimed at investigating challenges faced by teachers in implementing subject specialisation in primary schools in Zimbabwe. A case study design was used and primary schools in Bindura Primary Schools which have which apply subject specialisation were conveniently selected. Data were generated through interviews open-ended questionnaires. Data were qualitatively analysed. The study found out that there was more of subject sharing than subject specialisation since teachers were teaching subjects they did not specialise in. The study concluded that subject specialisation is relevant in primary school teaching and learning an appropriate model should be designed to ensure its effectiveness. The study recommended that an appropriate model be designed to ensure subject specialisation is applied effectively in schools.

**Key Words:** Challenges, Subject Specialisation

## 1.0 Introduction

In Zimbabwe primary school teachers are expected to teach all the eleven subjects of the primary school curriculum. These include English, Shona/Ndebele, Environmental Science, Agriculture, Mathematics, Religious and Moral Education, Social Studies, Home Economics, Physical education, Art and Craft, Music (Tsabalala, Khosa, Gazumbe and Muranda 2015. According to Ndawi (2000) many teachers will not have learnt these

subjects at ordinary level and the college curricula has little time to equip teachers with both content and pedagogies. These teachers are not expected to teach well some of the subject offered in the primary school. Hence teachers are teaching all the subjects even in cases where they cannot teach some of the subjects of the curriculum.

## 2.0 Research Questions

- What are the views of teachers towards subject specialisation?
- What are the qualifications and level of expertise of these teachers?
- What challenges are the teachers facing on the implement subject specialisation?

## 3.0 Literature Review

According to Ojo, Akintomide, and Ehindero (2012) primary school years are important in that the child's intellectual and all round development takes place during that time. The primary school should be able to equip children with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes. The teacher is central to learning in the primary school. In Zimbabwe the primary school teacher is expected to teach all the subjects offered in the primary school curriculum. Teachers specialise in one curriculum subject which is the main subject during training. The other subjects are taught as professional studies subjects with emphasis on how to teach the subject than mastering of content (Samkange 2015).

### 3.1 The concept of subject Specialisation

Specialisation has often been used to mean concentration on a particular field of practice or an indication of expertise in a specific field of study (Makhala 2008). This means subject specialisation includes competence, concentration, and expertise in terms of a specific subject area. The specialist will possess both content and pedagogy relevant and useful to a specific subject area.

### 3.2 Advantages of subject Specialisation

Subject specialisation has a number of advantages revealed in literature. According to Makhula (2008) the subject specialists brings a high level of subject knowledge other teaching and it is the lack of subject knowledge which is the major weakness of the generalist teacher. Research posits that specialist teachers bring a number of positive dimensions to teaching and learning. (Honnessy 2000). These include greater confidence greater enthusiasm and specialised content . In Zimbabwe Ndawi (2002) found out that subject specialisation promotes better teaching, improvement in pupil performance and better

preparation on the part of teacher. Pupil enjoyed the variety of exposure to different teachers and were motivated.

### 3.3 Disadvantages of Subject Specialisation

Other researches have indentified the negative aspects of subject specialisation. These include teacher isolation, subject isolation and subject compartmentalisation. The National Commission on Education 1993 (Malawi) criticised subject specialisation for harming socialisation and progress learners since pupils at primary school level need to know and identify with their teachers who will monitor how they progress through the curriculum

Ndawi (2002) identified problems such as:

- Bigger marking load and a lot of record books
- The programme did not allow for “spill over” into the time for e next lesson while he pupils would not have finished written exercises.
- Description and noise during change-over
- Other problems were those of hot seating, inadequate classrooms and materials and lack of remediation arrangements.

### 3.4 Subject Specialisation in Primary Schools

In Zimbabwe subject specialisation in primary schools in Zimbabwe has seen introduced on an optional basis. Schools have adopted a mode of specialisation the deem suitable for their school. Subject specialisation has been introduced on various levels of the primary school. According to Samkange (2015) specialisation is in terms of levels than specific subjects. The levels include Early Childhood Development (ECD) 8 years infant level (Grade 1 – 3) and junior levels covering grades 4 – 7. Subject Specialisation has been applied to practical subjects such as Home Economics, Physical Education, and Introduction to computers and in some schools Sindebele. Tshabalala et. Al. (2015) revealed that in Zimbabwe teacher education institutions produced general teacher qualifications without in-depth subject knowledge. Hence these teachers were considered to have little knowledge in a number of subject areas.

### 4.0 Statement of the Problem

Why should primary school teachers teach all the subjects of the school curriculum? Subject specialisation has been embraced a good alternative. However it is being implemented by schools has not been the experiences of those implementing subject specialisation. The study sought to establish the experiences of teachers as they implement subject specialisation in their school.

## 5.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed the qualitative research methodology. This methodology had the advantage of soliciting the views and opinions of teachers who are implementing subject specialisation

### 5.1 Research Design

A case study design was used in this study. A case study enables the researcher to examine a social unit of institution in a given context to be able to understand it better. The case study design was employed and two schools were selected as cases. Interviews and open-ended questions were used to generate data. The study focused on two schools in Bindura District. These schools were selected because they are employing subject specialisation at junior primary school level. Data were qualitatively analysed.

### 5.2 Sampling Procedure

To purposive sampling techniques was used to identify the participants to this study. The participants included teachers involved in subject specialisation in the primary schools selected. The purposive sampling technique enabled the researcher to pick individuals with the vital information to ensure relevant data would be collected.

### 5.3 Data Generation and Analysis

To generate data interviews and open-ended questionnaires were used. The researcher was able to clarify complex questions and follow up on the responses made by the participants. Ten teachers were interviewed and 20 responded to questionnaires.

### 5.4 Data Analysis

The interpretative study analysis was used to analyse the data. During data analysis the following steps were followed coding, categorising. The researcher had to structure the categories of data so that they would be meaningful. Analysis also involved selecting the categories and relating them to other categories. The researcher had the task of integrating the categories to generate meaning and understanding, this involved describing recurring views and feedback of the participants

## 6.0 Results

The research found out the following:

Teachers are sharing subjects and each teacher teaches between three to four subjects. The participants supported the introduction of subject specialisation in primary schools. They identified the following advantages of subject specialisation:

- Student performance is enhanced and the pass rate goes up.
- Teachers have time to research on a specific subject.

- There is wider subject coverage for a specific subject and offer expert teaching of the subject.
- Various teachers bring variety in the classroom and learning become more exciting.
- Teachers are able to cover the syllabus and improve results.
- Different teachers impact on the pupils differently thereby improving learning

The participants highlighted the challenges they faced in the implementation of subject specialisation as :

- Lack of adequate infrastructure and resources.
- The time table is congested and too many subjects are assigned to one teacher hence there is little time to rest throughout the day.
- Pupils tend to have a negative attitude towards certain teacher.
- Truant pupils are not easy to monitor.
- Slow learners will not receive help.
- Teachers are overloaded by a high workload and too much marking.
- Specialisation is negatively affected by high teacher pupil ratio.

Asked to suggest the ways of improving the current practice of subject specialisation the participants suggested the following:

- There is need to have specialist teachers teaching subjects such as art, music and physical education.
- There is need to reduce the teacher pupil ratio.
- Time for each period should be increased.
- Teacher's colleges need to train teachers for specialisation.
- Mobilise parents and other stakeholders to accept subject specialisation and its related advantages.

## 7.0 Discussion

Most teachers considered subject specialisation as good for Primary Schools. They preferred subject specialisation because it ensured the teachers and make in-depth research on the subject matter and this improved their subject matter knowledge. Subject specialisation ensured different teacher impact on Children's' learning differently thereby motivating the students and improving learning. Teachers attributed improved pass rate at their schools to subject specialisation.

However, effective implementation of subject specialisation was negatively affected y a congested timetable and lack of manpower which resulted in some teachers teaching subjects in which they were not specialists. Teachers highlighted that they were overloaded and the marking load was high. Slow learner did not get remedial and truant pupils were not well monitored. Effective implementation of subject specialisation was affected by high teacher pupil ratio of 1:50.

To improve implementation of subject specialisation teachers suggested that subjects such as art, music, physical education and agriculture should be taught by specialised teachers. Teachers should teach subjects in which they are specialists and the teacher pupil ratio should be reduced. Teachers colleges need to train teachers for subject specialisation. Stakeholders such as parents need to be informed of the benefits of subject specialisation.

## 8.0 Conclusion

Subject specialisation has several advantages that will enhance teaching and learning hence should be introduced in all primary school in Zimbabwe.

## 9.0 Recommendations

- A model should be designed to ensure standardisation of subject specialisation in schools.
- The Ministry of Education, Primary and Secondary should review the teacher pupil ratio.
- Subject specialisation should be introduced in all primary schools in Zimbabwe.
- Teachers colleges should be realigned to train teachers for subject specialisation.

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