Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of Streaming Learners and Their Impact on the Teaching and Learning of Principles of Accounts at Ordinary Level in Masvingo Urban District Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to find out the perceptions of teachers and learners of Principles of Accounts at ordinary ("O") level in Masvingo Urban District secondary schools in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe regarding streaming of learners and how such perceptions impact on the teaching and learning of the subject. The study used the descriptive survey design so as to enable the researchers to study a limited number of cases with a view of generalising the conclusions to the whole group under study. A sample of *one hundred and eight learners* and *six* teachers from *three* schools as well as *two* education inspectors was drawn for study from an estimated population of *eight hundred and forty* "O" level Principles of Accounts learners and *eight* teachers from *four* schools plus *two* education inspectors. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and observations, and then subjected to interpretational analysis. The study found that schools streamed learners in order to improve the pass rate in the subject and to improve teacher effectiveness in teaching the subject. Most learners disliked streaming for various reasons. Teachers prepared better for lessons with fast streams and used different strategies to teach the different streams. The researchers recommend continuous monitoring of the performance of learners so that they can be moved between streams. Staff development workshops and in service training can be used to improve the attitudes of teachers towards slow learners. Setting, which involves assigning learners to groups based on performance in specific subjects, could be a more viable alternative to streaming. Schools can also adopt mixed ability grouping which enables cooperative learning to take place. Where streaming has to be practised then teaching and learning resources and teachers must be allocated equitably between the fast and slow tracks.

Key terms: steaming, tracking, fast stream/track, slow stream/track, setting, mixed ability grouping, cooperative learning

INTRODUCTION

Streaming of learners by ability, also known as tracking in the United States of America (USA), which involves "assigning learners to classes based on some measure of ability" (Harlen& Malcolm, 1999), is a common practice in schools in Zimbabwe. In some countries, the practice is over 100 years old.

The three main reasons that have been proffered by the advocates of streaming are that; it is easier and more efficient for the teacher, learners are assisted to reach their learning potential and learners feel better about themselves and it limits the amount of failure that slower students may experience and feel (DiMartino, 2005).

However, DiMartino (ibid) disputes each of these claims. He points to research that has shown that it is not possible to place learners equitably and accurately into groups based on their level of ability. He further argues that students in slower tracks have a lower self esteem. Furthermore, streaming polarises, creates elitism, sets low expectations for slower stream learners as well as teachers, wastes time and encourages "segregation".

Gamoran (2000) argues that learners in faster streams take more academic subjects and engage in more academic work. More experienced, better qualified and better prepared teachers are commonly assigned to such classes whilst lower stream learners are more often affected by interruptions and student misbehaviour.

Barquet (2000) argues that lower stream learners have fewer demands placed on them and spend most of their time in routine activities such as rote learning, working in workbooks, basic computations and memorization. As a consequence, many learners who are placed in slow tracks show a progressive retardation as they progress through school.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The practice of streaming or same ability grouping has been debated extensively both within Zimbabwe and outside. Morrison (2000) avers that the debate on streaming learners has raged since the beginning of the modern educational system. In Zimbabwe this practice has become so institutionalised that very few schools, if any, do not stream students. A lot has been said both for and against this practice.

Chivore (1992) states that the practice of streaming started in government (state) schools in Zimbabwe and was later adopted in non-government schools. The idea was to exploit the individual differences among the learners, that is, learners of different levels of ability learn at different paces and each learner should be allowed to learn at his/her pace in order to help him/her reach his/her highest possible potential.

Chivore (ibid) suggests that this practice was meant to steer learners into different courses of study where their potential could be exploited to the fullest. According to Zvobgo (1998), learners were streamed based on their performance in form one entrance tests. However, currently schools stream students according to their performance in the Grade 7 results for junior secondary education and according to performance at junior education for "O" level. According to Akinpelu (1981), streaming may enhance achievement of higher standards of education as teachers and students in slow tracks compete with teachers and learners in the fast stream. According to Keddie (2004), cited in Rubin (2008), high ability learners in streamed classes perform much better than those in non-streamed classes. Chisaka (1992), however, pointed out that teachers and learners in lower tracks may despair of doing anything better than or equal to learners and teachers in the fast track.

Shaw (1981) suggests that the main objective of streaming learners is to promote effective teaching and learning because teachers prepare their lessons according to the specific ability levels of the learners. Rubin (ibid) suggests that, for comparison purposes, we should consider learners of similar ability levels on their own. It also prevents the inflation of the egos of the fast learners when they are compared with slow learners.

However, Chivore (ibid) argues that learners in mixed ability classes seem to achieve more than learners of the same levels of ability in streamed classes. Chisaka (2000) also noted that teachers have low expectations and poor working relationships with learners from the lower

streams, resulting in learners from such streams getting less work in terms of quantity and the demands of the tasks.

Chivore (1992) argued that, because of low teacher expectations, their preparations for lessons are different for lower track classes compared with fast stream classes.

Chisaka (ibid) pointed out that streaming results in inequitable distribution of resources to the different streams. Keddie (2004), cited in Haralambos and Holborn (2008), supported this view when he indicated that there is unfair treatment in terms of access, control and distribution of resources among streamed classes. This disadvantages slow stream learners who may lose commitment to the learning process as a result.

Haralambos and Holborn (2008) declare that streaming results in labelling and the self fulfilling prophecy of failure. Learners in the lower tracks are labelled as "dull" and given shallow content. This can instil a permanent negative attitude and the learners in the slower streams develop an inferiority complex.

These differences in the research findings of the different scholars and the divergence of opinion prompted the researchers to want to find out how teachers and learners of Principles of Accounts at "O" level in Masvingo Urban District view the issue and also how these perceptions of the teachers and learners impact on the teaching and learning of the subject.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Schools in Masvingo Urban District practise streaming, which is the assigning of learners to different classes based on their academic achievement. The researchers would like to find out how teachers and learners of Principles of Accounts at "O" level in the district perceive this practice and, furthermore, to assess the impact of such perceptions on the teaching and learning of the subject.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

How do teachers and learners of ordinary level Principles of Accounts in Masvingo Urban District view streaming and what are the effects of their perceptions on the teaching and learning of the subject?

Research Sub-Questions

- o What are the reasons for streaming learners in Masvingo Urban District?
- o To what extent are resources, both human and material, shared equitably among the streamed classes in Principles of Accounts at "O" level?
- o What are the effects of streaming on the attitudes of teachers and learners regarding motivation and academic performance in Principles of Accounts?
- o How do these attitudes of teachers and learners of the subject affect the teaching and learning of the subject?

Delimitations

This study was carried out in secondary schools in Masvingo Urban District. It was confined to the perceptions of streaming of teachers and learners of Principles of Accounts at "O" level and how such perceptions impact on the teaching and learning of the subject. The study subsisted in the period between July and November 2014 to which period the findings of the study can be attributed although some of them may be regarded as timeless.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study employed a descriptive survey design. This design enabled the researchers to collect data from a limited number of respondents with a view of drawing up conclusions that cover the generality of the whole group under review (Chiromo, 2000). It also allowed the use of questionnaires, interviews, observation and document analysis to gather data for analysis.

Population

The population of the study was made up of eight (8) ordinary level Principles of Accounts teachers and eight hundred and forty (840) Principles of Accounts learners from four secondary schools in the district as well as two (2) education inspectors of commercial subjects in the district.

Sample And Sampling Procedure

The researchers used the simple random sampling technique to select the three schools which took part in the study. They then employed the purposive sampling method to select the six (6) teachers who took part in the study. Stratified random sampling was used to select the one hundred and eight (108) learners of Principles of Accounts who participated in the study. This was done to ensure that equal numbers of boys and girls would take part in the study. The two (2) education inspectors were included by virtue of the fact that they were the only specialists in commercial subjects at the district office.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was sought and obtained from the participants, who were assured that the information that they would provide would be used solely for academic purposes and that no adverse repercussions would befall them as a result of participating in the study. Furthermore, they were informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any stage of the study if they so wished.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data that were collected were classified and summarised using tables. They were then subjected to interpretational analysis, which is the process of examining data closely in order to find constructs, themes and explain phenomena (Borg and Gall, 1996:562).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study indicated that the objective of streaming learners in Masvingo Urban District was to improve the pass rate in Principles of Accounts and other subjects at "O" level. This is supposed to happen in two ways. Firstly, the learners would be allowed to work at their own pace, improving their understanding of the subject matter as a result, since no one would be there to force them to work faster. Secondly, there would be competition among learners in the fast track and those in the slow stream, thus improving results. These findings tally with what Akinpelu (1981) had suggested, that higher standards of education can be achieved as a result of competition among learners.

It was found that the schools used Grade 7 examination results to stream students and learners who would stay in those streams until they wrote their "O" level examinations. No intermediate interventions are in place to change learners from fast to slow streams or the other way round.

The two education officers who participated in the study indicated that streaming of learners was mot government policy. However, schools were free to practise streaming and it was also up to them to decide on the method of implementing their streaming.

The study found that schools do not allocate teachers to fast and slow streams on the basis of teacher quality, skills and experience. Thus slow learners can get teachers who are highly qualified and experienced. These findings contradict the findings in a study by Gamoran (2002).Gamoran had found that there was a tendency in schools to allocate qualified and experienced teachers to the fast stream. The policy in place in Masvingo Urban District is likely to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning of Principles of Accounts at "O" level since no group would feel segregated against and equal teacher skills are brought to bear on both slow and fast learners.

The other findings which follow are classified as perceptions of teachers and learners. For this purpose, education inspectors are regarded as teachers since they are in these positions by virtue of professional qualifications and experience as teachers.

Perceptions of Teachers
From the findings of the study, it was evident that teachers expect more from fast stream learners than from learners who are in the slow stream, whom they regard as failures. This does not bode well for the effective teaching of the slow stream by such teachers. However, some teachers of learners from the slow stream seem to take their work more seriously since they give remedial lessons to the slow learners.

Teachers' negative perceptions of slow learners manifested themselves in the way textbooks were shared among the streams. There were more learners per copy of the standard text (6 learners to a copy) in the slow track than in the fast stream (2 learners to a copy). This tallies with what Slavin (2002) found, that there is bias against the slow stream in the sharing of resources which might be in short supply. This does not augur well for the effective teaching and learning of Principles of Accounts at "O" level in Masvingo Urban District, particularly in the slow stream. A teacher tried to justify this by saying that some of these students drop the subject and never return the copies that would have been allocated to them, but there should be ways to solve these problems without disadvantaging learners.

The teachers believe that learners in the fast stream are more motivated to learn than learners in the slow track. Consequently, teachers report for lessons to the fast track punctually, as do the learners. However, the teachers are not as punctual for lessons in the slow stream. It is also not surprising to find as many as 30% of learners being absent for lessons in the slow stream. Before the teachers can blame the learners in the slow stream for lack of motivation, they need to demonstrate that these learners are equally important by reporting for their lessons as promptly as they do for lessons in the fast stream. The lack of motivation may be a consequence of perceived unfairness on the part of teachers rather than wilful disobedience.

Teachers were found to use different teaching strategies in the two streams. While the teachers could assign learners in the fast stream to read up on a topic and make a presentation in class, they simply provided the learners with the information in its completed form to the learners in the slow track.

On behaviour, teachers tended to expect wayward behaviour from the slow stream learners more than they did from the fast stream learners. These pre-conceived ideas do not augur well

for the uniform treatment of learners and might have negative consequences for the effective teaching and learning of the subject. Furthermore, it was found that in some schools, learners with problems of behaviour were assigned to the slow stream as a kind of punitive measure. Hargreaves (1987) is in agreement with such expectations from teachers.

Perceptions by learners
Learners in the slow stream feel hopeless to the extent of dropping Principles of Accounts before they sit for the examinations at "O" level. A teacher said a learner from the slow stream said to him in the Shona vernacular: "Sir, I do not know why you bother with us; we are dunderheads". Students lose hope because they have been labelled as failures by both teachers and fellow students.

Learners in high ability streams may feel uncomfortable about seeking assistance from teachers in the slow track, believing innocently, that such teachers are as hopeless as the learners that they teach. This may have negative consequences for the effective teaching and learning of Principles of Accounts at "O" level in Masvingo Urban District. Many students, both from the fast and slow tracks, declared their loathing for the practice of streaming for various reasons. This shows that, from the outset, streaming learners may negatively impact on the effective teaching and learning of the subject.

Learners indicated that teachers in the fast stream take a short time to mark the work written by their students whilst those in the slow stream take much longer. This means that feedback to the learners in the slow track is delayed, thereby compromising on the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Learners in the slow track thought that learners in the fast stream were arrogant and do not want to cooperate with learners in the slow track. This poisons the relationship between fast and slow stream learners, compromising the effectiveness of the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

o Streaming is problematic because it is considered a contributing factor to segregation. Whatever the effect on achievement may be, schools need to take this issue into account when deciding whether or not to stream learners.
o Streaming is linked with increasing inequality in the achievement of learners. While learners in the fast streams gain more because of a favourable environment and larger quantities of resources, learners in the slow tracks fall further and further behind because of an unfavourable learning environment and disruptions caused by the unruly behaviour of some of them, who consider it heroic to misbehave. Thus streaming may benefit fast stream learners but it is at the expense of slow track learners.
o Streaming that is done on the basis of one criterion, for instance performance in the Grade 7 examinations, is likely to be inaccurate in the sense that some fast learners may find themselves in the slow stream and the other way round.
o While teachers claimed to stream learners so that they could tailor their teaching approaches to the different needs of the learners, the situation on the ground was rather different. It seemed to indicate teaching habits that amount to neglect of learners in slow tracks. Kelly (2000) confirmed that the intended benefits for all students did not materialise.
o Teachers tend to employ a democratic leadership style when they deal with learners in fast streams and an autocratic style when dealing with learners in the slow track as confirmed by Watyoka (1999).

- o By promoting competition between teachers and learners in the fast track with teachers and learners in the slow stream in Masvingo Urban District, the authorities negate the benefits of cooperative learning which are well documented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- o Form one entrance tests should be used to stream students where streaming has been adopted but there must be continuous monitoring of learners' performances, so that those who improve are promoted and those who regress are demoted.
- o Where streaming has been adopted, there must be close supervision of teachers by heads of school, heads of department, senior teachers and education inspectors to ensure that equal academic standards are applied across streams.
- o Teachers' negative attitudes towards slow learners must undergo transformation. This can be achieved through staff development workshops and in-service training.
- o Teachers should give extension work to fast learners and remedial work to learners in the slow stream in order to promote effective learning.
- o Schools should allocate teaching and learning resources equitably to both fast and slow track learners to obviate perceptions of unfairness.
- o Schools should actively consider the alternative to streaming which is setting. Setting involves assigning learners to groups based on performance in specific subjects.
- o Schools should also consider mixed ability grouping which facilitates cooperative learning. Research by Slavin (1991) and Sharan and Sharan (1990) found that there were tremendous benefits for both fast and slow track learners in cooperative learning.

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