

## **Head teachers' expectations of a quality teacher produced through distance education.**

**BY**

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**HEAD TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS OF A QUALITY TEACHER PRODUCED THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION BY SHARAYI CHAKANYUKA, CHRISPEN CHIOME AND OWENCE CHABAYA.**

**Theme: Formal Education      Sub-theme: Quality issues**

### **Background to the study**

Distance education has been viewed internationally as a viable option for improving access to, and the equity and quality of basic education in various settings (McQuaide, 2009). It is a way to educate people who would otherwise get no education and a tool to support and supplement conventional educational programmes (Perraton, 2000). The quality of open and distance learning (ODL) varies, like any other form of education as result of a variety of factors, both internal and external to an ODL organization for example, the levels of skills and expertise of the staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its administrative systems, or the communications infrastructure in a country (Robinson 1995). Quality is not value free as it is a social and political construct.

Robinson (2008) says the goal of teacher quality is proving difficulty to achieve in many countries, especially in rural and remote areas which face such problems as shortages of advanced Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Gulati (2008) observes that in developing countries, traditional technologies such as print media, radio, and television remain more effective because the high cost of information technology service prevents poor people from accessing it. The Zimbabwe Open

University, like other institutions in developing countries faces similar shortages and yet must produce professionals who will compete on the global market.

The content of teacher training is also an important issue. Chinese scholars argue that the key for developing appropriate course materials lies in changes to the way courses are produced. Li (2007) argues that course content should be drawn from the experience and setting of the country, and experts and teachers from rural regions should be involved in designing courses. Yu and Wang (2006) argue for a grassroots approach in which relevant stakeholders are involved. This research sought grassroots opinion so that the teacher produced by the ZOU University meets the quality constructions of the heads that work with the teacher on a day-to-day basis.

The School Leadership Capabilities (2003) research suggested the characteristics of highly effective leading teachers as passion for teaching and learning, taking initiative, achievement focus, ability to influence others, analytical thinking and management of self (School Leadership Capabilities 2003:11). Even though these characteristics of a quality teacher are from the perspectives of a developed country, they are still relevant to a developing country like Zimbabwe.

Petty (2004) argues that a teacher's attitude and approach is crucial. A teacher must see her/ himself as a learning facilitator or learning manager, and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. This shows respect for the learner and develops their self-belief, autonomy and resourcefulness.

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the only university in Zimbabwe dedicated to open and distance-teaching was established by an act of Parliament, the Zimbabwe Open University Act (1999). It started in 1993 as a College of the University of Zimbabwe initially to train teachers and heads of schools in educational management. Now with an enrolment of about 21 000 students, it is the second biggest university in Southern Africa. The university offers various programmes of learning in four faculties, one of which, the Faculty of Arts and Education, offers teacher education programmes.

### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study was to find out head teachers' expectations of a quality teacher produced by the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), as school heads' constructions of a quality teacher will inform practice and can be a basis for planning and improving ZOU's teacher education programmes.

### **Statement of the problem**

Stakeholder sentiments, such as those of heads of schools whose constructions of a quality teacher are important raw materials for teacher production. To this effect, the statement of the problem is, 'what are the head's expectations of a quality teacher produced by the Zimbabwe Open University using distance teaching methods?

### **Research questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are heads' perceptions of a quality teacher?
- What are the characteristics of a quality teacher expected by heads of schools?
- What skills, knowledge and attitudes do heads expect ZOU produced teachers to have?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study was a qualitative case study (O'Leary 2004) of Masvingo educational province. The target population for this study was all the 700 heads of schools in Masvingo education province. A convenience sample of fifty heads (33 primary and 17 (34%) secondary school heads) who supervise ZOU teacher education students was considered for this study (Merkens 2004). The selected heads of schools were believed to be knowledgeable about qualities of a good teacher as they had an average of eight years experience as heads of schools and a further eleven and half years as teachers in schools. About 37(74%) heads in this study had a degree qualification in education and were aged between 30 and 50 years. The remainder 13 (26%) was above 50 years and ten of them had a diploma or certificate qualification in education.

The researchers used a semi- structured interview and personal accounts (Armstrong 1987) for data collection. Personal accounts are useful instruments for collecting data because they assign

significance and value to the interpretations a person places on his/ her experiences from the point of view of participants and their particular social and institutional context (Kaplan & Maxwell 1994; Brown & Dowling 1998). All school heads wrote accounts of what they expect of a quality ZOU teacher. Thirteen of these heads were interviewed to verify and clarify the issues they raised in the personal accounts. One of the researchers personally visited the schools to interview the thirteen school heads. The interviews lasted for about twenty minutes each.

The researchers adopted the multiple method of data collection to triangulate data in line with Flick's (2004) assertion that using different data collection instruments would produce findings that were as close as possible to the needs of heads of schools. Triangulation helped to identify possible inconsistencies between two sets of data (Patton 1990), improve validity and increase the understanding of human nature and social reality in their full complexity (Brown & Dowling 1998) and enhanced the trustworthiness of the results (Ralph 1999).

Data was analysed according to the themes that began to emerge as data analysis proceeded. However, the researchers had some tentative themes acquired through the reading of literature around teacher education through distance (Saba 2008, Gulati 2008, McQuaide 2009; Moore 2007 and UNESCO 2002).

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study are presented below according to themes generated by the researchers from the personal accounts and the interviews. Two clear views, the traditional and the progressive, could be delineated from perceptions of the heads of what a quality teacher should be.

### **The traditional view of the teacher**

About 26% of the respondents holding a diploma qualification and in the aged 50 years and above appeared to prefer teachers who submit unquestioningly to authority. These heads displayed traditional thinking in which the classroom is teacher-centred based on behaviourists' assumptions. The heads have a transmission view of knowledge, as shown below.

### **A knowledgeable teacher**

The traditionally-minded heads in this research were of the opinion that knowledge is indispensable in teacher education. They preferred a teacher who has the capacity and the knowledge to deliver to the children.

- 'The teacher must be the knower if there is to be meaningful learning in the classroom'.
- "There is no substitute for knowing".
- "The distance education graduate must be able to discipline the students and then go on to make a difference in the form of the knowledge that he/she brings to the classroom'.

From these excerpts, we note that the thirteen heads were concerned with the knowledge level of the teacher. A teacher should have knowledge of the subject matter s/he teaches, knowledge of the teaching methods and approaches, knowledge of the pupils and knowledge of the situation in which s/he is operating (Maynard and Furlong, 1995). These forms of knowledge are the foundation for quality teaching. However, the manner in which the knowledge is imparted to children is crucial. Teachers should no longer be mere dispensers of knowledge in a teacher-centred classroom. Yet this is what these heads expected.

Another aspect raised in the excerpts is management of pupil discipline. An effective teacher needs to manage discipline to enable children to learn. Traditional views of discipline place focus on silence and order which are not prerequisites to learning.

It was interesting to note that up to three quarters of the respondents in this group mentioned submission to authority as a characteristic that they are expect in quality teachers.

- 'I prefer a trusted cadre who does not rock the boat when I am not there'.
- 'mechanical compliance with my directives'.
- 'must take instructions as given.'
- 'A confident and trustworthy teacher who obeys instructions'

These attributes expected of ZOU graduates by traditional heads are worrying as they would produce a teacher who is so subservient as to be ineffective as a teacher.

From the above it is noted that conservative heads expected ZOU graduates to be knowledgeable, trustworthy, and be willing to obey the heads' instructions without question. These requirements lead to a teacher who is teacher-centred, lacks initiative and who may not produce pupils who will learn and become useful members of their communities.

### **The Progressive Views**

However the majority 34(78%) of the respondents, aged between 30 and 50 years and with a degree qualification in education, indicated that they expected a quality teacher to be reflective and flexible. The researchers termed this view 'progressive thinking'. The progressive strand includes more active and participatory learning methods, less authoritarian approaches, thereby placing more demands on teachers. The following are some of the expectations of the heads that appeared pupil focus, teacher focus, community focus and the changing role of the teacher.

#### **Pupil focus**

A key issue that was raised by the heads of schools is pupil- centeredness.

- 'The teacher must respond to the aptitudes and inclinations of the students and be committed to the total development of children.'
- 'Positive attitudes about developing and nurturing the potential of children in the school.'
- 'Love for children is the beginning of all effectiveness.'

From the above excerpts, the heads placed value on the extent to which teachers demonstrated their pupil-centredness through their response to the needs of children, knowledge of pupils and overall positive attitude to children. The heads also expected ZOU graduates to have subject knowledge and knowledge of methods and approaches of teaching the subject knowledge.

#### **Expertise in Selection and Organisation of Knowledge**

In addition progressive heads expected teachers to be able to create opportunities for learning through their expertise in the selection and organisation of knowledge, as shown by the extracts from personal accounts and interviews below:

- 'The teacher must be able to interpret the syllabus for the benefit of the students'.
- 'There is need to select and organise knowledge in the context of the ever-changing dispositions of individuals and whole groups of learners'.
- 'Planning, scheming and evaluation of learning activities must be done in a professional manner'.

Teachers are expected to be skilful in interpreting the syllabus, organising pupils' learning, planning and organisation of the learning content with a view to meeting the needs of pupils as individuals and as a group. In this regard the progressive heads agreed with the conservative heads.

#### **Develop self-managing learners**

The progressive heads preferred teachers who can develop learners who are self managing, as shown by the following excerpts:

- 'Independence must be the guiding principle these days.'
- 'I believe that distance education is a beacon of independent learning. This must cascade into schools. The distance education graduates must be the torch bearers.'

Teachers are expected to be facilitators of learning where they create opportunities for pupils to learn on their own. Pupils with this capacity can learn from any situations in which they find themselves. In order to do this, teachers should not be dispensers of learning but facilitators. Teachers produced through distance education were better placed to model self directed learning.

#### **Teacher focus**

The area of collaboration was cited as indispensable. In this respect, teamwork was seen as necessary for effective teaching, as shown below:

- 'Collaborative productivity can be the doctors' prescription for quality.'

- 'These days, individualistic orientations no longer have a place but fuller recognition of collective and collaborative action.'
- 'The quality teacher must be able to work in teams and networks that benefit the school.'

Collaborative endeavour ensures that teachers learn from each other and depend on each other for success. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2002) also recommends collaborative teaching and learning for teachers.

### **Willingness to learn**

The progressive heads expected teachers to be willing to continuously learn, as a teacher who stops learning is ineffective. Teachers need to remain current in an age where information changes rapidly. This was evident in the following excerpts:

- 'I expect distance education to produce a teacher who can learn from others.'
- 'It is good to learn to learn and to learn to know.'

ZOU-produced graduates are expected to remain students for life. Duthilleul (2005) argues that a teacher's professional development should be viewed as a continuum starting with initial training, then induction and continuous professional development. This means that teachers must continually learn to keep abreast with developments in education and so remain current.

### **The changing roles of the teacher**

The progressive heads also expected ZOU to produce teachers who could operate in changing social and technological environments. Two specific issues were raised by the heads- HIV/AIDS and technological literacy.

#### **HIV and AIDS**

The first area highlighted in this regard was HIV/AIDS. Heads expected ZOU produced teachers to help fight the menace, as shown by the following excerpts:

- 'Develop teachers who can be role models in the fight against AIDS.'
- 'You see, the HIV and Aids pandemic is with us. Every teacher to be churned out of teacher training programmes must be competent enough to teach others on prevention, treatment and stigmatisation of the affected and infected.'

From the excerpts, the heads highlighted the HIV/AIDS menace and expected teachers to model behaviour that discourages the spread of the scourge. The teachers were to be knowledgeable enough to teach about HIV/AIDS. This is necessary, as Zimbabwe still has a high rate of HIV/AIDS. With the right orientation, ZOU graduates can influence the behaviour of children with regards to HIV/AIDS.

#### **Technological literacy**

One area that was of high interest to the progressive heads is the area of technology, as shown in the extracts below:

- 'Technological literacy enables teachers to maintain their leadership of the ever changing curriculum'.
- 'A computer literate teacher can communicate with anyone anywhere'.
- 'I want my school to be in the global village not to operate in isolation'.

Teachers who are technologically literate would find it easy to create and retrieve knowledge. Use of information and communication technology is crucial in both knowledge retrieval and knowledge creation. Heads in this group expected teachers to be effective in these issues as evidenced by the extracts below: -

- 'Knowledge retrieving is the in thing these days.'
- 'Distance education graduates must be skilled enough to live and work in the global society, retrieving information for the benefit of the school'.
- 'Cultivate a research culture in teacher education graduates so that they become knowledge creators'.

In the case of research, respondents felt that distance education should instil a research culture of research leading to creation of new knowledge, which is crucial in schools because it enhances the professional development of teachers and helps resolve problems in the school.

Heads with progressive perceptions of what a quality teacher should be highlighted characteristics of their expectations of a ZOU-produced graduate that are similar to the following expected of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century teacher by Churches (2008): -

- ability to adapt curriculum in imaginative ways,
- being a visionary using the imagination to utilise available and new resources for the benefit of the pupil,
- collaborating with others to enhance pupils' learning,
- taking risks and reaching out to the goals set for the pupils,
- continuous learning to ensure that the teacher remains current both in subject matter and pedagogical knowledge,
- ability to communicate in ways that facilitate and stimulate pupils' learning;
- modelling behaviour and attitudes persistently for the benefit of the pupils and
- ability to lead.

These eight characteristics would ensure that a teacher becomes effective in his/her profession. The expectations of the progressive heads on qualities of a quality teacher are worthy noting and considering in the review of current ZOU teacher education programmes.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study makes the following recommendations:

- There is need to re-visit the ZOU teacher education curriculum to ensure it captures the characteristics of a quality teacher in this study;
- Develop human and infrastructure resource capacity to ensure that ZOU teacher education system meets stakeholder expectations.
- There is need for workshops or training sessions to reorient all school heads and make them current in their philosophies.
- Further research to establish if current ZOU delivery modes can produce the quality teacher expected by school heads.

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