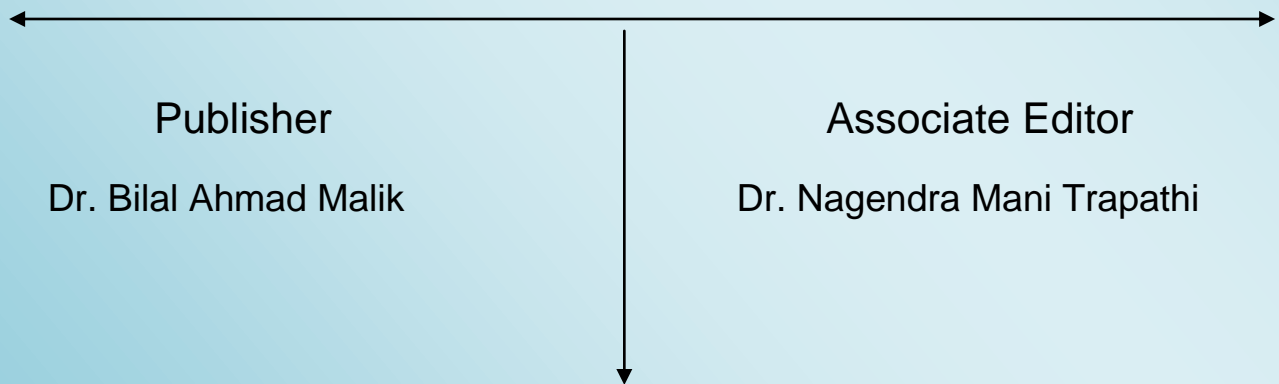


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*North Asian International Research Journal of
Social Science & Humanities*

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ISSN NO: 2454 - 9827

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STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF TEACHERS' EXPERTISE ON THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' expertise which include their teaching methods and knowledge of subject matter are some of the most critical factors that influence students' academic performance in schools. The current study explored commercial subject students' views on the effect of teachers' methodologies and expertise on their academic performance in Zimbabwe. The descriptive survey design was adopted while Ordinary level students in Hwange North Cluster of Matabeleland North province were the target population. A sample of fifty (N=50) students was randomly selected to accomplish the study. Questionnaires and interviews were used as the research instruments. The major findings of the study were that most commercial teachers use group work but students are not given enough time to discuss certain topics among themselves in the teaching and learning of commercial subjects despite the fact that group discussions allow for learners to learn from each other and build a sense of oneness and encourage cooperation. Most teachers did not use field trips or projects as methods of teaching commercial subjects which could be as a result of lack of funds and other resources needed to facilitate field trips and projects. The study also revealed that most students do not use textbooks in commercial lessons; which is indicative of the use of teacher-centered methods in the teaching and learning process of commercial subjects. Also, a large number of students believed that their teachers were knowledgeable in the subject matter that they taught and were capable of explaining their lessons well. The study mainly recommended that more hands-on activities such as field trips and projects should be adopted as appropriate teaching methods as they expose learners to the real world and help them to understand their learning content better. In addition, teachers who are limited in subject content should endeavour to learn subject matter thoroughly so that they are able to enable their students to increase their level of academic performance

Key words: Teaching methods, teachers' expertise, subject matter, academic performance.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

There are various factors that are considered as important in as far as they influence academic performance in school pupils. According to Etsey (2005), these factors are broadly either home-based or school-based. Of the different school-based factors that influence student performance, teachers' expertise which include their teaching methods or methodologies and knowledge of subject matter are some of the most important (Curick, 1993). This has seen secondary school teachers adopting different methods to teach different subjects and topics while also tapping on their wide and deep knowledge of the subject matter that they teach. In Zimbabwe, secondary school teachers specialise in the teaching of specific subjects during their period of training, hence, can be regarded as authorities in those areas. Research on teaching and learning constantly endeavours to examine the extent to which different teaching methods or approaches as well as teachers' knowledge of subject matter enhance growth in student learning (Peters, 2000).

Regular poor academic performance by the majority of students in both primary and secondary schools is fundamentally linked to the employment or application of ineffective teaching methods and poor subject content by teachers to impact knowledge to learners (Adunola, 2011). Substantial research by MOEVT (2003) on the influence of teaching methods and teachers' expertise or knowledge of subject matter indicates that the quality of teaching is often reflected by the general achievement and success of learners.

1.1 Background to the study

The primary purpose of teaching at any level of education is to bring fundamental change in the learner (Tebabal and Kahssay, 2011). To facilitate the process of knowledge transmission, teachers should apply appropriate teaching methods and knowledgeable expertise that best suit specific educational aims and objectives. In the same vein, Hightoner et al, (2011) resonate that questions about the effectiveness of teaching methods and teachers' expertise on student learning have consistently raised considerable interest in the field of educational research.

The Zimbabwe education policy 2 of 2007 postulates that;

The ultimate goal of the education system in the country is to provide an opportunity for each learner to obtain maximum benefit from the school curriculum according to the learner's potential.

Ncube's (2013) investigation on the causes of high failure rate in most secondary schools suggested that teachers should use effective teaching methods which are student-centred while applying their content knowledge as a solution to improve the pass rate. In the same vein, Gasva et al (2016:1) contend that;

The whole idea of the establishment of educational institutions is to impart knowledge and skills to learners of which good academic performance is expected of these learners.

The current research focused on the influence of teachers' methodologies and knowledge of the subject matter on the performance of commercial subjects students at 'O' level. This study will be conducted in Hwange North cluster. It will cover two secondary schools that have pupils learning commercial subjects at 'O' level and targeted commercial pupils.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Poor academic performance often characterised by low pass rate generally call for the need to teach the subjects through effective methods as well as harness teachers' knowledge of the subject matter. The problem is that while student-centred methods are assumed to be more effective, most teachers often use teacher-centred methods in the delivery of lessons.

1.3 Aim and Research Objectives

The study aimed at exploring the influence of teaching methods and teacher's knowledge of subject matter on the academic performance of commercial subject students. It was guided by the following objectives:

- To explore the different methods used by teachers in the teaching of commercial subjects
- To determine the effect of the use of either student-centred methods or teacher-centred methods on the academic performance of students
- To find out students' views on the implications of teachers' methodologies on their learning
- To determine the extent that the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter has on pupils' performance

1.4 Significance of the Study

It is expected that this study will help:

- Teachers to increase their level of awareness and understanding of the influence of teaching methods in the teaching and learning of commercial subjects at 'O' Level
- Teachers to determine the comparative effectiveness of student-centred methods and teacher-centred methods
- Curriculum planners to have empirical data on the effectiveness of teaching methods in teaching and learning
- Schools to examine if their pupils' apparent poor academic performance is a result of ineffective teaching methods

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 'Teaching Methods and Implications on Students' Academic Performance

A better understanding of teaching methods requires that the concept of teaching be defined first. The definition of teaching is quite fluid and is often applied within specific contexts. The current study focuses on teaching as a term applied to the facilitation of learning 'O' level commercial subject students. According to Haladyana (1997:123);

Teaching is essentially considered to be the formal process for helping students learn which includes coordinated set of activities that are based on learning objectives and require measuring student behaviour reflecting the instructional intent.

For Ayeni (2011), teaching is the process that involves bringing about desirable changes in learners so as to achieve specific learning outcomes.

According to Dupin-Bryant (2004:119)

A teaching method comprises the principles and methods used for instruction to be implemented by teachers to achieve the desired learning in students. These strategies are determined partly on subject matter to be taught and partly by the nature of the learner.

In other words, a teaching method entails the philosophies and procedures that teachers use to impart knowledge to learners which are largely influenced by what teachers have to teach and who is to be taught. For a particular teaching method to be appropriate and efficient, it has to be in relation with the learning objectives, the characteristic of the learner and the type of learning it is supposed to bring about (Gasva, et al, 2011). Davis (1997) suggests that the design and selection of teaching methods must take into account not only the nature of the subject matter but also how students learn. Thus, put simply, a teaching method is a teaching strategy adopted by a teacher to teach a specific lesson (Farrant, 1990).

The issue of the nature of teaching methods used is directly related to students' academic performance, which is a major concern of educational institutions, both primary and secondary. As noted by Bell and Edwards (2005:97)

Since the dawn of the school age, academic performance is increasingly being recognized as a measure of achievement that is used by educational institutions and all parents wish their children to perform well in school and to be successful.

Farrant (1990) has it that parents often devote a lot of financial and other resources and commitment to their children's education because they believe that their attainment of good results guarantees a stable future and life success. Thus, the importance of effective teaching methods in the teaching process cannot be overemphasised as it is directly related to influencing positive learning outcomes in learners.

2.2 The Effect of Teacher Knowledge of Subject Matter on the Performance of Commercial Subject Students

If anything is to be regarded as specific preparation for teaching, priority must be given to a thorough content grounding by the teachers in what to teach (Peters, *ibid*). In relation to commercial subjects, Buchman, (1984:32) says that;

It would be odd to expect a teacher to plan a lesson on, for instance, preparing financial statements in Principles of Accounts, if the teacher is ignorant of financial statements. Helping students learn subject matter involves more than the delivery of facts and information

As put forward by Ball (2012), the educational philosophical argument regarding teachers' knowledge of subject matter supports the conviction that teachers' own level of subject matter influences their efforts to help students

learn the subject matter. Conant (1999:98) argues that “if a teacher is largely ignorant or not informed about the subject matter he is teaching, he/she can do much harm than good”. When teachers possess inaccurate information or conceive of knowledge in narrow ways, they may pass on these ideas to their students. They may also fail to challenge students’ misconceptions about certain learning information; they may use texts uncritically or may alter them inappropriately.

According to Farrant (1990), what teachers need to know about the subject matter they teach extends beyond the specific topics of the curriculum. Scheffler (1973) notes that this kind of subject matter understanding strengthens teachers’ powers and heightens the possibilities of their teaching art. Pedagogical research by Gould (2003) has proved that when teachers are capable of explaining their lessons well based on their high knowledge of subject matter, the likelihood of students to understand their lesson is high. Shulman (2006:19) argues that;

Teachers must not only be capable of defining for students the accepted truths in an academic domain, but they must also be able to explain why a particular proposition is deemed warranted, why it is worth knowing and how it relates to other propositions.

Sometimes teachers face learners who do not understand certain complex intellectual tasks; as a result they feel pulled to simplify content, to emphasize algorithms and facts over concepts and alternatives (Cusick (2003). However, the most critical fact is that the teachers’ understanding of subject matter affects their capacity to simplify content to help students to understand. Surprisingly, teachers’ capacity to increase, deepen, or change their understanding of their subject matter for teaching depends on the personal understandings of the subject matter they bring with to the classroom (Wilson and Wineburg, 1998).

Teachers’ knowledge of subject matter also affects their ability to answer questions from their students. Shroyer (1991) studied how junior high Mathematics teachers coped with student difficulties or unusual responses and found that the teachers with weaker Mathematics backgrounds had more difficulty generating alternative responses to these critical moments. Studies on unprepared and underprepared teachers versus fully prepared teachers consistently show that the students of teachers who are prepared show stronger learning gains (Goldhaber, 2006). Moreover, a teacher who is largely ignorant or uninformed about a subject matter can pass inaccurate ideas to students, use texts uncritically and even change them unsuitably. A teacher will find it extremely difficult to answer varied questions from students about a subject matter if the teacher has little knowledge about it.

An understanding of the subject matter of a discipline or subject enables teachers to effectively plan their lessons and also to evaluate their students' assignments. Making a lesson plan requires teachers to simplify their teaching process so that the facts and information of a particular lesson are passed onto students in an efficient way. Evaluations of students' work on a particular lesson are based on specific criteria which are key about that lesson. For a teacher to be able to evaluate students' work on a particular lesson, he/she must understand that lesson, hence the dire need to have a good grounding in the discipline's subject matter (Wilson and Wineburg, 1998).

A conceptual mastery of subject matter and capacity to be critical of knowledge itself can empower teachers which will subsequently benefit students to be effective actors in their environment (Conant, 1999). In addition, teachers' knowledge of the subject matter influences their capacity to help students learn the subject matter with interest, ease and better understanding. As noted by Osuafor (2013), the knowledge of a teacher about a subject influences his/her ability to teach it, set questions on it and give work to students based on it.

The teacher's knowledge of the subject matter should exceed the limits of the curriculum and syllabus they teach (Conant, *ibid*). When teachers possess knowledge about a specific discipline in this way, the likelihood of them to explain it to students to understand is high. This kind of understanding encompasses an understanding of the intellectual fabric and essence of the subject matter itself. For example, an Accounts teacher needs to know well how to prepare financial statements and must also understand the importance of financial statements in industries. It has also been noted from research that the knowledge of the teachers about a particular subject matter enables them to teach it by using different teaching methodologies. Thus, when teachers fully understand the subject matter they teach, they will know which pedagogical approach is best to adopt in helping students learn the subject in the most effective way (Goldhaber, 2006).

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Cohen et al (2000) state that methodology refers to a systematic way of gathering data from a given population so as to understand a phenomenon and to generalise facts obtained to a larger population. This study employed the descriptive survey design to explore the influence of teaching methods and teachers' knowledge of subject matter in the teaching of commercial subjects. Orodho (2003) defined descriptive survey as a method of collecting information by interview or administering a questionnaire to a sample of individuals. Michael (1999) also defines the descriptive survey as a method of collecting information directly from the people about different aspects such as their background, wishes and feelings.

Chiromo (2006) asserts that the design is the method of research which describes what is seen. These descriptive surveys are useful for explanatory studies and well suited for producing information about characteristics in a given population (Borg and Gall, 1992). Shen and Minion (1985) assert that a descriptive survey seeks to establish, describe, interpret practices and trends in given places such as schools. Thus, a descriptive survey involves collecting data in order to test and answer questions concerning the current state of the subject of the study.

The choice of the descriptive survey was necessitated by the fact that this design is relevant for this study since not every member in a population responds. Since this study involved human behaviour which cannot be quantified, use of qualitative description was thus appropriate. According to Creswell (2007), researchers using qualitative approaches tend to attend to participants' views when doing their studies, ask general, open ended questions, and collect data in natural settings as the study develops.

The population of the study were 'O' level Commercial students in Hwange North East cluster. Best and Kahn,(1983) define population as any group of individuals that have one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher. In line with the former, Chiromo (2006) further defines population as all individuals, units, objects or events that will be considered in a research project. For the purpose of this study, the study population were 'O' level commercial pupils in Hwange North cluster. According to Leedy (1990), a descriptive survey also makes it possible for the population to be carefully delimited to set precise parameters in order to ensure its discreteness. In the current study, it allowed for a sample of population to be investigated representing the whole population

Sample as defined by Hitchcock and Hughes (1998) is a part of the entire population. Francis (1993) says it is a small representative of the population. Sampling is necessary in research because it is not possible for the researcher to study the whole population due to constraints such as financial, time availability and accessibility of population. The researcher collected information from a small group of subject of the population in such a way that knowledge gained is representative of the population. The researcher used random sampling which targeted Secondary Schools in Hwange North Cluster. The sample for the study was 50 (N=50) pupils who were selected through the random technique.

According to Chiromo (ibid) simple random sampling technique is one in which each member of the population has an equal and independent chance of being selected. Names of the pupils were put in a box and picked at

random without replacement. This was meant to ensure that each pupil had an equal and independent chance of being picked, in consistence with Denzin and Lincoln (2008). For the current study, the researchers concentrated on the '0' Level stream or classes in gathering data.

Questionnaires and interviews were used as the research instruments. These are the widely used data gathering instruments in descriptive surveys. Babie (2008) defined a questionnaire as a document containing questions and other types of items designed to solicit information appropriate for analysis. Both the questionnaire and interview schedule comprised questions that sought to gather the influence of teaching methods and teacher's knowledge of subject matter on the performance of commercial subject students.

The choice of the questionnaire was necessitated by the fact that there is anonymity and confidentiality because of the use of codes (Francis, 1993). Respondents preferred this technique because they answered the questions in privacy at their own time and as a result they felt unpressured. Also, the questionnaire allowed for the collection of a large amount of data from a considerate population size over a short space of time and they were easy to fill in.

Litchman (2005) defines interviews as a form of data collection in which groups or individuals are questioned orally. For the purpose of this research, interviews were held with students in order to complement questionnaire data. The researcher chose this instrument because it is adaptable to different situations and allowed for face to face interaction. Through respondent's comments, facial and bodily expressions, tone of voice, gestures, reactions and non-cooperation, an interviewer can acquire information that would not be conveyed in any other way (Litchman, 2005). In addition to the above, the interviewer can pick up non-verbal cues that would not be discernible in other forms of data collection such as questionnaires.

The use of questionnaires and interviews used allowed the complementation of data to verify and validate findings as observed by Borg and Gall (1992). In consistence with Denzin and Lincoln (2008), both questionnaires and interviews were pretested to ensure validity and reliability. This was done to pupils and teachers randomly selected from the schools in the cluster. The researchers personally administered the questionnaires and interviews. Responses from the interviews were transcribed while that from questionnaires were coded and presented in a frequency table and then qualitatively analysed.

4.0 STUDY FINDINGS

Among the respondents, there were 30 females who represented 60% while males were 20, which represented 40%. A comparison of the females and males percentages suggests there were more females studying commercial subjects than males. As well, the higher number of female students suggested that more females than males are interested in studying commercial subjects in the Hwange North cluster.

Item 1 sought to find out the involvement of students in group during commercial lessons. About 50% of pupils strongly agreed and 30% agreed that their teachers made use of group work in the learning process, while only 10% disagreed and the remaining 10% strongly disagreed that they are not exposed to group work. The results showed that well more than half of the teachers (80%) use group work in the teaching and learning of commercial subjects. However, most students indicated that they were rarely given time to discuss certain topics during group work despite the fact that it helps learners learn from each other and build a sense of oneness and encourage cooperation. In this regard, Caruso and Wooley (2008) advise that group work can be an effective method to motivate learners, encourage active learning and develop key critical-thinking, communication, and decision making skills.

Item 2 showed 60% strongly disagreed and 20% disagreed that their teachers used field trips as a teaching method in commercial subject lessons, while 20% strongly agreed and the remainder 10% agreed. These findings generally indicate that most of the teachers (80%) do not use field trips as a method of teaching commercial subjects. This could be as a result of lack of funds and other resources needed to facilitate field trips. These findings are in line with Rickinson (2004) who observed that despite field trips being valuable in improving academic standards in most schools, they are very difficult to undertake in schools in most developing countries due to financial constraints.

Item 3, as many as 64% of the respondents indicated that they strongly agree and 30% agreed to the notion that they easily remembered what they learnt during field trips. Only 6% of the students were of the view that they found it difficult to remember content taught during field trips. Maloch (1999) advises that field trips are important part schoolwork as it exposes learners to the real world which makes learning more tangible and memorable.

Item 4 sought to find out the rate at which students were given research projects to carry out as individuals. Results indicated that only 6% strongly agreed and 12% agreed 50% strongly disagreed and the remainder 30% disagreed that they partake in research projects. These findings indicated that teachers do not frequently engage pupils in projects as they teach commercial subjects in class. This could be as a result of projects demanding more time, dedication and resources. These findings are similar to Davis's (2004) study which revealed that for teachers, project based learning might create some problems because it requires more preparation time and raises new questions about what to assess and how to assess it.

Item 5 shows that up to 32% strongly disagreed and 38% disagreed that they used textbooks in commercial lessons, while 18% strongly agreed with only 12% agree make use of textbooks and other reading sources in the teaching and learning of commercial subjects. This indicates that with regards source material, teachers use teacher-centred methods in the teaching and learning process of commercial subjects.

In Item 6, as many pupils as 40% strongly disagreed and 20% disagreed that teachers do not use charts to teach commercial subjects, while 16% strongly agreed and 24% agreed that teachers used charts in the teaching and learning commercial subjects. The findings indicate that teachers largely use teacher-centred methods of teaching. This contradicts with Olahimola (1996)'s recommendation that charts should be used by teachers to concretise abstract concepts and ideas.

Item 7 sought to find out pupils' perceptions on their teacher's knowledge of subject matter. A total of 30% pupils strongly agreed and 40% agreed that their teachers have got content of the subject matter 12% strongly disagreed and 18% disagreed that their teachers had enough knowledge of the subject. From the findings, a large number (70%) generally agreed that their teachers were knowledgeable in the subject matter that they taught. From the review of related literature, this paper appraised that the knowledge of a teacher about a subject influences his/her ability to teach it, set questions on it and give work to students based on it (Osuafor, 2013).

In item 8, almost every pupil agreed that their teachers clarify concepts in the teaching and learning of commercial subjects, which according to the students helps them to understand better. From the total, as many as 80% agreed while 20% strongly agreed that their teachers were capable of clarifying most difficult concepts. This finding is in line with Shulman (1986:9) who notes that when teachers are capable of explaining their lessons well, the likelihood of students to understand their lessons is high.

On item 9, a total 42% strongly disagreed and 34% disagreed that they were not given opportunities to use the chalkboard by their teachers during commercial lessons, while 8% strongly agreed and 16% agreed that they were given chances to work out problems on the chalkboard. The vast differences in these percentages show that teachers use the teacher- centred method mostly than the student- centred method in their teaching enterprise.

Item 10 sought to find out if pupils understand commercial subjects based on their teachers' understanding of both the subject matter and the appropriate methodology. Results showed that 60% strongly agreed and 30% agreed that they understood commercial subjects, while 4% strongly disagreed and 6% disagreed that they understood the subjects. These findings are consistent with Curick (1993), who observed that teachers' understanding of subject matter helped students they taught to subsequently understand their learning content.

Item 11 sought to find out the rate at which pupils were generally engaged in hands-on activities during commercial lessons. Results indicated that 40% strongly disagreed and 32% disagreed that they were engaged in different hands-on activities during commercial lessons. On the other hand, only 8% strongly agreed and 10% agreed that they were engaged in hands-on activities. From these results, it is evident that pupils were exposed to the teacher centred methods where learning strategies are prescribed by the teacher while students are passive recipients of knowledge. This agrees with Field (2011)'s assertion that where teacher centred methods are used, there is no care whether the learners are able to process accumulated facts of information into knowledge which is usable and transferable in both their personal lives and social environment.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, the researchers concluded that:

- Most commercial teachers use group work but students are not given enough time to discuss certain topics among themselves in the teaching and learning of commercial subjects yet group discussions allow for learners to learn from each other and build a sense of oneness and encourage cooperation
- Most of the commercial subjects teachers do not use field trips or projects as methods of teaching commercial subjects which could be as a result of lack of funds and other resources needed to facilitate field trips and projects

- Most students do not use textbooks in commercial lessons, which indicates that; with regards source material, teachers use teacher-centred methods in the teaching and learning process of commercial subjects
- A large number of students believed that their teachers were knowledgeable in the subject matter that they taught and were capable of explaining their lessons well

Based on the above findings and conclusions, the study recommended that:

- More hands-on activities such as field trips and projects should be adopted as appropriate teaching methods as they expose learners to the real world and helps them to understand their learning content better
- Teachers who are limited in the subjects they teach should endeavour to learn subject matter thoroughly so that they are able to enable their students to increase their level of academic performance
- Further research could be done in other schools and clusters as well as for other subjects so as to further out the consistency of the current findings.

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