

## **An Assessment of The Factors That Contribute Towards The High Failure Rate of Pupils in The General Paper at Grade Seven Examinations in Chipinge Central Constituency**

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**Abstract:** This study assessed the factors that largely contribute towards high failure rate of Grade Seven pupils in the general paper subject in Chipinge Central Constituency. The population comprised of all the 194 primary school teachers from the thirteen primary schools in the constituency. The sample was made up of 5 randomly selected teachers from Grade 4 to 7 within each school making a total of 65 respondents from the thirteen schools. The study adopted the quantitative methodology and the descriptive survey design was used. The questionnaire was the only instrument used to gather data. The main findings of the study revealed that teachers were not competent to handle various topics in the subject. The study also revealed that the time allocated for general paper was very inadequate for teachers to complete the syllabus before pupils sit for their examinations. The study recommends inter-alia, that teachers should be staff developed on the best methods of teaching general paper. More time should be allocated towards the teaching of general paper in order to enable teachers to cover the long syllabus before pupils embark on the examinations.

**Keywords:** Factors, pupils, examinations, constituency, general paper

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### **INTRODUCTION**

General paper in the primary school in Zimbabwe covers social studies, environmental science, religious and moral education and home economics [1]. As Mufamba [2] states, this situation of having so many subjects in one, creates a multiplicity of challenges for both the teacher and the young children. Chikowore [3] found that most candidates complained that they did not finish answering the questions in the general paper because of the many areas the paper covers. Generally, the pass rate in Chipinge Central Constituency at Grade 7 examinations is very good in the other three subjects, Shona, English and Mathematics, but the low pass rate in General paper affects the overall percentage pass rate of pupils and schools [4]. The Grade 7 certificate is used for looking for places at secondary schools. As Ndlovu [5] argues, most secondary schools prefer to enroll those pupils with one digit figure at their Grade 7 results, that is aggregate nine (9) and below. The poor performance of pupils at General Paper in the constituency has resulted in most pupils obtaining aggregates above the one digit figure making it very difficult for pupils from the constituency to get Form one places at schools of their choice [3]. It is on account of this information that this study set out to assess the major factors that contribute towards the high failure rate of pupils in the General paper.

### **Statement of the problem**

The pass rate of pupils at Grade seven public examinations in general paper is a great cause for concern. This requires urgent steps to mitigate the problem since general paper lays a foundation for many subjects at secondary school level. Failure of the subject at Grade seven affects the aggregate of pupils and thus their choices of getting places at schools of their choices for Form one are diminished.

### **Research questions**

The study was guided by the following questions:

- Is the curriculum content suitable for the level of the learners?
- Do teachers use appropriate teaching methods for the subject?
- Are periods allocated to the subject adequate?
- What are teachers' attitudes towards the subject?

### **Significance of the study**

The study's importance stemmed from the fact that it seeks to expose the challenges faced pupils and teachers in the learning and teaching of general paper so that practical strategies can be crafted to improve the

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performance of Grade seven pupils at public examinations on this subject.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study is limited to the factors that contribute towards the high failure rate of pupils in the general paper at Grade seven public examinations using a quantitative methodology which according to Ary and Razaviah [6] uses data that may not be robust enough to explain complex issues; and related secondary data is sometimes not available or accessing available data is difficult or impossible.

### **Delimitation of the study**

The study was confined to one constituency in Zimbabwe; which is Chipinge Central Constituency in Manicaland Province in Eastern Zimbabwe. The population comprised of all 194 primary school teachers from the thirteen primary schools within the constituency. The sample was made of 5 Grade 4 to 7 teachers from each school giving a total of 65 respondents.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The high students' failure rate by pupils in public schools leads to a lot of important questions for educators and other stakeholders and policymakers. As Ncube [7] argues, a number of psychosocial, organizational, teacher and student variables seem important in influencing learning success or failure. Parenting practices and parental involvement with the school explain much of the variation in school performance. In addition, the art and science of teaching (delivery methodology) has been found to be the most important factor in improving student achievement in schools [8].

Anthony [9] reported in a study of factors influencing success in school subjects and emphasized the role of motivation. Students and lecturers agreed on the importance of motivation; however their opinions diverged in relation to factors such as importance of active learning, help seeking and student effort. Lecturers emphasized controllable student characteristics, while students were more prone to blame failure on course design and teaching quality [9].

According to Dei [10], effective teaching is a balanced blend of pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge. Content knowledge, sometimes referred to as subject matter knowledge, is the first component of effective teaching, equipping teachers with the educational background they need to engage students in learning the content, assess their students knowledge of the content, and push them to higher levels of understanding and application [7]. Freire [11] describes a prevailing "banking concept" of schooling, characterized by a deficit view of students as passive objects, rather than active subjects capable of changing

teaching practices which position students as passive objects, rather than active subjects capable of changing the world.

In most schools the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students are taught the teacher talks and the students listen meekly [11]. Students are rendered voiceless in this environment. As Freire [11] advises, teachers should respect what students know and take advantage of their knowledge of their own environment and culture. Children need to grow in the exercise of an ability to think, to question and question themselves, to doubt, to experiment with hypotheses for action and to plan, rather than just following plans that are imposed upon them [11].

Other studies have discovered that schools' administration should make a deliberate effort to supervise the teaching and learning resources to enable meaningful teaching to take place. The school administration should motivate the teachers in any form within its means [7]. Parents should lead in the delivery of content through constant staff development sessions on those subject areas that challenge both teachers and pupils [8].

One of the causes of failure by pupils on this subject according to Todaro [12] is the use of inappropriate teaching methods. Each subject has got its own unique and appropriate approach of teaching it [12]. The choice of the methodology can easily be linked to the choice of teaching aids and since general paper is made up of four different subjects, it would mean that it requires more time and greater variety of teaching aids compared to the other examinable subjects [7].

Teaching general paper required that pupils be allowed to explore their environment as much as possible; for example when learning about the topic water (ice) liquid water and steam be provided for the pupils to see, and the hydrological cycle could also be represented through appropriate teaching/learning resources [1]. There is need to marry theory with practice when teaching subjects of a practical nature as well as experimentation and the use of case studies whenever and wherever possible [1].

Social studies, which is another important component of general paper was introduced to the school system as a panacea to specific national problems [7]. According to Chikwore [3] it was believed that the exposure of young people to the subject would instill in them a love for their country and a sense of loyalty to the Zimbabwean government; and it was also believed that if the subject exposed them to the problems in our society, they would become better equipped through the organization of necessary skills

needed for survival. On the other hand, religious and moral education is meaningful in any society where beliefs and values are important. Home economics is aimed at promoting understanding of basic concepts of nutrition, hygiene, clothing, consumerism and family life [3]. The curricula for the four subjects has to be understood by pupils in just one paper called general paper and this is a very difficult task for both teachers and pupils [13].

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed quantitative methodology. Quantitative methodology was chosen for its ability to enable this study's findings to be generalized to other constituencies. The study settled for the survey research design. Random sampling was chosen because as Kumar [14] observes, each independent same size subset within a population is given an equal chance of becoming a subject. Therefore, as Anderson [15] postulates, if properly conducted, simple random sampling results in a sample highly representative of the population of interest. Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which enabled the researchers to collect pre-determined respondents' opinions regarding the studied phenomenon [14]. The researcher distributed the questionnaires to the selected schools and collected them after two weeks through the heads of the schools. Respondents were assured of anonymity and ethical use of the data collected.

### Presentation of data

**Table-1: Distribution of respondents by sex (N=65)**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	34	53
Female	31	47
Totals	65	100

Table 1 above shows that there were more male teachers than female ones in this study (53%: male; 47%: female).

**Table-2: Responses to the questions: "Did you adequately cover general paper content during teacher training" (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	12	18
Agree	13	20
Disagree	18	27
Strongly disagree	22	35
Not sure	0	0
Totals	65	100

Table 2 above shows that 62% of the respondents indicated that they did not cover adequate content during their teacher training. Those who

believed that they received adequate training in the general paper content constituted 38%.

**Table-3: Responses to the question: "Are there any topics that are difficult for you to simplify for the pupils" (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	37	57
Agree	21	32
Disagree	4	6
Strongly disagree	3	5
Totals	65	100

Table 3 reveals that 89% of the respondents admitted that there were many topics within the various content subject that were difficult to simplify for pupils (89%). Those who indicated that all the topics were easy to tackle constituted a paltry 11%.

**Table-4: Responses to the question: "Do you give priority to general paper subjects as you do with other examinable subjects?" (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	9
Agree	3	5
Disagree	29	45
Strongly disagree	27	41
Totals	65	100

From the table above Table 4, 86% of the respondents stated that they did not give priority to general paper subjects in the same way as they did with other examinable subjects. Those who stated that they gave equal attention to general paper and other examinable subjects were an insignificant 14% of the respondents.

**Table-5: Responses to the question: "Is time allocated to general paper subjects adequate for you to complete the syllabus?" (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	12	18
Agree	13	20
Disagree	16	25
Strongly disagree	24	37
Totals	65	100

Of the sample respondents, 62% indicated that time allocated to general paper subjects was not adequate to allow them to cover the whole syllabus before examinations. Those who felt that the time was adequate constituted 38% of the respondents.

**Table-6: Responses to the question: “Are the textbooks you are using adequate in content coverage for the general paper?” (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	16
Agree	8	12
Disagree	14	22
Strongly disagree	33	50
Totals	65	100

Information on table 6 above reveal that 72% of the respondents indicated that the textbooks they used did not adequately cover the content of the general paper syllabus. Those who indicated that the textbooks had relevant content constituted 28%.

**Table-7: Responses to the question: “Does your school organize staff development sessions on general paper?” (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	5	8
Agree	10	15
Disagree	24	37
Strongly disagree	26	40
Totals	65	100

Table 7 above shows that most of the respondents’ schools did not organize staff development sessions on general paper. Those who stated that their schools organized staff development sessions were 25% of the respondents.

**Table-8: Responses to the statement: “State the teaching methodology you use when delivering lessons in general paper subjects”. (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Lecture method	46	71
Group method	3	5
Discovery method	5	8
Contingency method	11	16
Totals	65	100

Most respondents indicated that they were using the lecture method (71%), 16% varied methods according to the situation, 8% used the discovery method and 5% used the group method.

**Table-9: Responses to the question: “Does your head prioritise the supervision of teachers taking general paper subjects”? (N=65).**

Category of responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	3	5
Agree	12	18
Disagree	17	26
Strongly disagree	33	51
Totals	65	100

Table 9 above reveals that most respondents (77%) indicated that their heads did not prioritise the supervision of teachers teaching general paper subjects.

## DISCUSSION

Most teachers did not cover adequate content on general paper subject areas during their days at teacher training. This implies that the college syllabi for the subjects under general paper did not correspond with the areas covered by what teachers meet in the schools. These tallies with observations by Dei [10] who states that effective teaching is a balanced blend of pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge. Content knowledge sometimes referred to as subject matter knowledge, is the first component of effective teaching, equipping teachers with the educational background they need to engage students in learning the content, assess their students knowledge of the content and push them to higher levels of understanding and application [7].

The most frequently used method of delivery lessons when teaching general paper subjects is the lecture method in spite of the fact that all the subject areas constituting general paper (social studies, environmental science, religious and moral education, as well as home economics) aim at imparting practical life skills to children. As Todaro [12] observes, one of the causes of failure by pupils in most subjects is the use of inappropriate teaching methods. Teaching general paper required that pupils be allowed to explore their environment as much as possible and there is need to marry theory with practice.

Heads were not prioritizing the supervision of teachers with respect to observation of teachers delivering lessons and inspecting exercise books on general paper subjects. As Ncube [7] postulates, the school administration should make a deliberate effort to supervise the teaching and learning process and should also provide adequate teaching and learning resources to enable meaningful teaching to take place. Teachers should be motivated in any form that helps them and thereis need to emphasize that heads should regularly and frequently check the teachers to solicit needs and inquire how things are going [8]. Freire [11] corroborates Davis’ observation when he states that effective leaders visit classrooms to discover what is happening in classrooms and they collect the data through formal observations and instruments and use the data to help teachers with their guidance of pupils.

There were no staff development sessions for teachers in the general paper subjects. This means that teachers were left to survive with the inadequate knowledge they possessed on these general paper subjects. All teachers in a school require professional development. For example, as Hansen [16] advises, a probationer might require a systematic programme of

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professional initiation, guided experience or further study of some management aspects of classroom control and as such, the probationer would have an induction need. On the other hand, the older and more experienced teachers in the system need staff development in order to keep up-to-date with new research on how children learn, emerging technology tools for the classroom, new curriculum resources and more, and the best collaborative, and connected to and derived from working with students and understanding their culture [17].

## CONCLUSIONS

Both theoretical and empirical evidence from this study converge on the fact that the majority of teachers in Chipinge Central Constituency did not possess those necessary competencies to effectively deliver lessons on general paper subjects for pupils to perform well. The teachers also used methods that did not promote pupil-centred activities and thus promoted rote learning. The heads of schools were not prioritizing the supervision of general paper subjects, and this left most teachers groping in darkness thereby in most cases misleading pupils. Schools did not conduct staff development sessions to guide teachers on best practices on teaching of the general paper subjects.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the researchers would like to make some recommendations: -

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should organise in-service programmes and staff development programmes aimed at improving the craft literacy and competency of teachers on general paper.
- Time allocated to the teaching of general paper should be increased in order to help teachers adequately cover syllabi within the general paper subjects.
- Heads should prioritise the supervision of teachers in the general paper subjects so that they (heads) provide professional guidance to teachers for enhanced performance of pupils.
- Teachers should use more pupil-centred teaching methods when they deliver lessons on general paper subjects as all these subjects are of a practical nature. There is need for teachers to allow children to grow in the exercise of an ability to think, to question and question them, to doubt and to experiment with hypotheses for thinking.

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