

Barriers to Quality Education in Selected Rural Secondary Schools in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe: Teachers' Perspective

Lazarus S.T. Nyuke¹, Douglas Gasva^{2*}, & Wisdom Moyo³

¹Quality Assurance Manager, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

²Quality Assurance Coordinator/Senior Lecturer, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

³Senior Lecturer, Department of Development Studies, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

***Corresponding author**

Douglas Gasva

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine barriers to quality education in selected rural secondary schools, from the rural secondary school teachers' perspective. The qualitative research paradigm was adopted and a case study design was preferred. Rural secondary school teachers in the area under study were targeted as the population and a sample of 20 (n=20) teachers from 4 secondary schools randomly selected from the rural part of the district was utilised to accomplish the study. The Convenience sampling method was used in selecting the participants. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were preferred as the research technique while FGD guides were used as the instruments to gather data. Consistent with qualitative inquiries, the researchers were the primary mediums through which data was generated. The major barriers to quality education as highlighted by the participants included family poverty, long distances from home to school, negative community beliefs and practices, gender discrimination, improper infrastructure, limited or lack of funding for education, low and inappropriate teacher qualifications and experience as well as limited learning resources in some schools. Based on the findings, the study concluded that the quality of education in rural secondary schools was hindered by several factors which consequently had a bearing on the school retention of students, their participation, outcomes and attainment. Accordingly, the researchers recommended that there is need for concerted effort by the community, concerned government ministry and Non-governmental organisations involved in educational interventions in order to address the different barriers to quality education in these rural secondary schools and other schools with similar conditions in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Barriers, quality education, education stakeholders, rural secondary schools, teachers.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It is critical to state from the onset that normative instruments of the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO lay down international legal obligations for the fundamental right to education for every child. These instruments essentially promote and develop the right of every person, particularly children, to enjoy access to education of good quality, without discrimination or exclusion. It is the responsibility of national governments to fulfill their obligations both legal and political in regard to the provision of education of good quality to all children [1, 2].

The inalienable right of every child to a quality education was first acknowledged in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948. The UDHR states that *'everyone has the right to education and that it should be free at least at the*

primary level'. According to UDHR Article 26, not only does everyone have the right to education; but that education should focus on full human development, strengthen respect for human rights, and promote understanding, tolerance and friendship [3, 4].

The 1960, UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education further mandates that discrimination in education is a violation of human rights. It sets out that discrimination in education includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference that is based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth [5]. Notably, the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 further defined children's right to education and the Millennium Development Goals as well; other international conventions have since reinforced education as a universal right to be guaranteed to all

children [6]. For [7] there are three important aspects of education as a human right for children;

- The practice of human rights in education;
- Education as a right that facilitates the fulfilment of other rights; and
- Participation in quality education in itself.

Howe [8] resonates that accessing and receiving a quality education is a universal human right, hence all children around the world should have access to quality education that respects and promotes their right to dignity and full development.

The World Education Forum hosted by the UNESCO in 2000 in Dakar, titled 'The Dakar Framework of Action: Education for All' came up with goals all focused on promoting the right to education, whereupon one of them was "improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognizable and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all learners, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" [9].

The International Working Group on Education [10] also notes that; *In all aspects of the school and its surrounding education community, the rights of the whole child, and all children, to survival, protection, development and participation are at the centre.*

This means that the focus of quality education is on effective learning which strengthens the capacities of learners to act progressively on their own behalf through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes and values; which creates for children, and helps them create for themselves and others; conditions of good well-being, places of safety, security and healthy interaction [11]. It is against this context that this study was undertaken.

Statement of the Problem

While education is a fundamental human right; and access to quality education an enshrined right for all children, in reality there are, however, barriers to quality education in some situations including in rural secondary schools which have a negative bearing on learners' participation and achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to establish secondary school teachers' views on barriers to quality education in selected rural secondary schools in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following specific research questions;

- What does the concept 'quality education' mean to rural secondary school teachers?

- What are the characteristics of quality education?
- What are the barriers to quality in secondary education?
- How can the barriers to quality secondary education be addressed?

Significance of the Study

It is envisaged that this study is of importance to the different education stakeholders; including learners, teachers, parents, responsible government ministry and other organisations interested in educational welfare. The study will for the most important part uncover the different barriers to quality education in rural secondary schools from rural secondary school teachers' perspective. Last but not least, the findings are expected to shed light on how the barriers to quality education may be addressed particularly for the benefit of learners and other stakeholders within the education fraternity.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Concept of 'Quality in Education'

'Quality', which may literally be considered as 'excellence', is basically a catch-word in most enterprises and organisations. A brief look at some of the definitions of quality show that;

- It refers to those measurable and felt attributes of a product or service that enhance customer satisfaction [12]
- It is simply executing organisational tasks in an excellent way that meets the requirement of customers (Goddard and Leask, 2002:20) [13]
- It is broadly related more to the relevance and value of an institution's mission, purpose, goals and objectives, as well as the achievement of identified outcomes [14].
- It entails the characteristics of a product or service that consistently satisfy specified standards set by experts and meeting or exceeding customer and stakeholder requirements [15].

Many authorities including Bradley [16], Herman [17], Greenwood and Gaunt [18] cited in Nyenya and Gabi (*ibid*) note that two aspects defining quality seem apparent; and these are 'measuring up to specification' and 'meeting or even exceeding customer and stakeholder requirements'.

Article 1(a) of UNESCO's 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace cited in Gwembire, Mubika and Gasva [19] broadly defines education as;

The entire process of social life and school socialisation by means of which individuals and social groups learn to develop consciously within, and for the benefit of, the national and international communities, the whole of their personal capabilities, attitudes, aptitudes, values and knowledge.

The 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education cited in Gwembire, Mubika and Gasva (*ibid*) view education as all types and levels of learning; including access to education, the standard and quality of education, and the conditions under which it is given or simply all activities by which a human group transmits to its descendants through social institutions including the school a body of knowledge and skills as well as a moral code which enable the group to subsist.

What then does 'quality in education' mean? Many definitions of quality education exist; testifying to the fluidity, complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept, but the terms educational excellence, efficiency, effectiveness and eminence have often been considered closely related to quality education [5]. Quality in education is, thus, defined by different authors, as for instance; an expression of significant range of educational effectiveness and reflection in which need of systematic evaluation of undertaken activities is taking essential meaning including improvement and making endeavours towards accreditation with the aim of confirming that all the standards of educational effectiveness are provided [20]. For them, the idea of quality in education is relatively youthful and it replaced the concept of effectiveness of education which was used until recently. For Gandhe [21] echoed by Coombs and Manzoo [22], quality in education is characterised by different notions, some of which are;

- Fitness for purpose
- Value for money
- Exceptionally high standards
- Perfection and consistency; and
- Transformation capabilities
- Fulfilment of industrial needs and demands

Notably, most if not all the above conceptions of quality are held by the client or customer, who in the case of this study is the learner.

Conditions for Quality in Education

Wallberg and Kahn [23] posit that considerable consensus exists around the basic dimensions of contemporary quality education. For them, it is essentially determined by a constellation of factors; including the professionalism of service providers, the nature of the service being delivered, the environment within which service is provided, the social and cognitive aptitude of learners, the way it is delivered and the way the customer views the service. For Asking [24] quality education essentially involves, among other aspects;

- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn;
- Learners who are supported in learning by their families and communities;

- Learning environments that are conducive, provide adequate resources and facilities;
- Learning environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive;
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy life skills and knowledge in such topical areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV and AIDS;
- Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools;
- Processes where the school uses skilful assessment to facilitate effective learning and reduce disparities;
- Student outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

Thus, quality has several facets most of which focus on the learner.

MacMillan [25] has it that 'a good quality education is one that provides all learners with capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being'. The learning outcomes that are required vary according to context but at the end of the cycle must include threshold levels of literacy and numeracy, basic scientific knowledge and life skills including environmental management, awareness and prevention of disease. Capacity development to improve the quality of teachers is crucial throughout this process [26, 27].

In quality education, the International Working Group on Education [28] distinguishes the following dimensions that all interventions of the organisation need to meet;

- *Contextualisation and Relevance*: Quality education cannot be based on a blueprint that is applicable in all situations. Solutions and adaptations of education systems must be based on the real needs of the institution, community and country;
- *Equity*: basically implies non-discrimination and in education, equity means that personal and social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to achieving educational potential and accessing quality education;
- *Child-centered and friendly teaching and learning*: Quality education puts the child in the centre and helps him or her to reach his or her full potential while promoting children's active participation;
- *A balanced Approach*: Quality education aims at developing a balanced set of capabilities of children they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods,

contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being.

- *Measurable Learning Outcomes:* After completing a certain level of education, children must have developed a minimum standard of knowledge, attitudes, skills and values. Quality education requires a results-oriented approach characterised by measurable learning outcomes
- *Empowerment:* a process of strengthening individuals, organisations and communities so they get more control over their own situations and environments. Quality education is a crucial factor in promoting child empowerment, combating poverty and inequality in society
- *Beneficiation and Sustainability:* Quality education enables children to acquire education that is beneficial to them and their communities; an education whose value and application is sustainable.

This shows that there are essentially different dimensions that all interventions of the school system needs to meet if it is to realise quality education.

Hoy *et al.*, [29] contend that “quality in education should be considered to be an evaluation of the process of educating which enhances the need to achieve and develop the talents of learners, and at the same time, meets the accountability standards set by the clients who pay for the process or the outputs from the process of educating” In the same vein, Grisay and Mahlck (*ibid*: 105) posit that evaluating the quality of any education system mostly entails examining the following;

- The extent to which the products or the results of the education provided meet the standards stipulated in the system’s educational aims and objectives;
- The extent to which the knowledge, competencies, skills and values acquired are relevant to human and environmental needs;
- The extent to which the acquired education is generally utilised by individuals and groups and their communities to solve micro and macro problems in life.

As noted by Silva [30], the conditions for quality in education as well as its evaluation are somewhat complex as they are essentially influenced by different factors such as their context, diversity and dynamism.

Barriers to Quality in Education

Writing on ‘barriers to quality education in developing countries’, [31] acknowledges that; *Around the world, children want to go to school but sadly, 124 million children and adolescents in developing countries face barriers to getting a quality education. For some, it may be one obstacle, while for*

others; there are many hurdles to jump to go to school; let alone accessing quality education.

MacMillan [25] notes that the following are some of the major barriers to quality education in developing countries;

- *Growing up in a poor family:* Poverty is the most pervasive factor preventing children from accessing quality education as poor families are less able to afford school fees, uniforms and textbooks for all of their children;
- *Being a girl:* In patriarchal societies, girls more than boys are more likely to be marginalised in accessing quality education; especially because entrenched gender norms and discrimination continue to persist unabated. This inequality is most pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia and the Arab states;
- *Living in a remote rural area:* A child growing up in a remote rural community is at a disadvantage in accessing quality education, and more often than not, there is a wide gap even in educational opportunities between rural and urban children;
- *Living in conflict-prone areas or war zones:* The growth in the number and intensity of conflicts and wars around the world has consequently meant that millions of children are unable to access quality education. The war in Syria alone, for example, has decimated the chances of a whole generation of children to access quality education.
- *Having a handicap or handicaps:* Research by UNESCO [32] shows that in developing and middle income countries, children with disabilities were less likely to access quality education and in some cases, completing either primary or secondary school. Approximately 93 million children live with a disability, disproportionately in developing and poor countries
- *Being from a minority ethnic, linguistic, religious group:* A child from a minority ethnic or religious group or who grows up speaking a minority language is less likely to access quality education, particularly if teaching is not conducted in her mother tongue. This consequently often leads to higher drop-out rates and a situation where minority children become marginalized and even excluded from school.

Notably, many children in developing countries face overlapping barriers to quality education while a poor rural girl in sub-Saharan Africa is among the least likely in the world to be able to access and complete quality education (Macmillan, *ibid*).

At the global level, the Global Partnership for Education [33] identifies a total of 10 barriers to quality education around the world, namely;

- *Limited or lack of funding for education*
- *Having no teacher or having an untrained teacher*
- *Having no classroom for learning*

- *Lack of learning materials particularly textbooks*
- *Long distance from home to school*
- *Hunger and poor nutrition*
- *The expense of education particularly school fees and cost of uniforms and stationery*
- *The exclusion of children with disabilities*
- *Gender inequality; with the girl child often being the marginalised*
- *Living in a country in conflict or at risk of conflict*

Thus, a number of barriers to quality education have a global significance.

As argued by Krappman [34]:

Some barriers to quality education for children are typical of developing and poor countries; with hunger and poor nutrition, lack of learning materials and funding, the expense of education as well as long distance from home to school often topping the list.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE)'s primary purpose is to help strengthen national education systems of the poorest countries in the world as well as building their capacity to deliver quality affordable education for all children. In such countries, the GPE specifically prioritises the most marginalised children, supporting countries to find ways to provide even the poorest families with access to quality education [35].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative research paradigm, which basically studies phenomena or activities in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people develop, infer or bring to them [36-38]. A case study design was preferred as it essentially involves the act of or an instance of analysing one or more particular case with a view to understand social patterns and trends [39, 40]. The case of 4 selected rural secondary schools in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe was used in this study.

Rural secondary school teachers in the area under study were targeted as the population and a sample of 20 (n=20) teachers from the 4 secondary schools randomly selected from the rural part of the district was utilised to accomplish the study. The Convenience sampling method, which allowed for easy access to available potential participants within research sites [41, 42] was used in identifying the participants. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were preferred as the research technique with FGD guides being used as the instruments to generate data. Consistent with qualitative inquiries, the researchers were basically the primary tools in data generation [39, 43] while they also were the FGD moderators. Data was presented as it emerged from the FGDs; which allowed the researchers to pick on critical and major barriers to quality education in the research sites.

Study Findings

This study focused on finding out secondary school teachers' views on the barriers to quality education in selected rural secondary schools and was restricted to Hwange District which is one of the seven districts of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe [44].

From the study, the major barriers to quality education as highlighted by the participants with reference to rural secondary schools under study were;

- *Family poverty*: some children were negatively affected by family poverty resulting in them failing to pay for their education (school fees), buy uniforms and stationery as well as failing to cope with learning demands at schools due to hunger and starvation. On giving evidence from developing countries on the demand for quality education, Bergmann [45] revealed that family poverty is one of the worst barriers to quality education in the developing world.
- *Long distances from home to school*: some children walked very long distances from home to school which ranged between 6km to 10km. These students were often late at school, got tired such that they could not concentrate at school, and were unable to effectively do homework due to fatigue;
- *Low and/or inappropriate teacher qualifications and experience*: Some schools and subjects were manned by teachers who had low professional qualifications while some had no teaching qualifications. Most of the teachers were not senior teachers; a grade which is attained at least four years in service after teacher training. Usually, the most qualified and experienced teachers moved to urban schools where living conditions are comparably better off;
- *Limited or shortage learning resources*-Most schools had limited resources particularly textbooks. Hence up to three or four learners could share one book, some of which very old and out-dated, often with torn pages. Most of the schools did not have an equipped school library or computer laboratory, which consequently disadvantaged children from accessing quality education associated with library use and E-learning;
- *Improper infrastructure at some schools*: Some of the schools did not have enough classrooms for children which consequently led to learners overcrowding. In some instances, some teachers taught composite classes which saw more than one class learning in a single classroom. To make matters worse, shortage of toiletry facilities exposed children to unhygienic conditions and poor sanitation. Verwimp [46] echoed by Carron and Chau [47] believe that this situation is typical of impoverished communities in developing countries.
- *Shortage and inappropriate furniture*: Some schools do not have enough and appropriate

furniture for use by learners which resulted in learners struggling to secure sitting space. This negatively impacted on their concentration and attention to learning tasks;

- *Poor funding for education:* Funding from government was limited due to the economic meltdown affecting the whole country. Also, there is lack of funding of school projects and initiatives by the community which is generally impoverished while other stakeholders including Non-governmental organisations such as potential donors tending to shun the funding of education as take it is considered government responsibility.
- *Negative community beliefs and practices:* The communities in question were largely ignorant as many parents had not gone to school, hence, unfortunately were full of negative beliefs about school while they also exposed their children to traditional practises which absented them from school; thereby negatively affecting their access to quality education as they were often left behind by the school learning programme or simply ended up developing negative attitudes towards school; and
- *Gender discrimination:* As most rural communities are predominantly patriarchal in nature, some families still preferred to support the boy child more at school than the girl child as many parents still believed that the girl child by nature should be home-bound, while the boy child would be expected to take up an occupation that will care of the family. Consequently, such parents' commitment to quality education for boys and girls becomes prejudiced.

Participants were also generally of the view that it was largely the responsibility of the community within which the schools are located and government to address the many barriers to quality education that some students faced. Interestingly, the researchers found this view to be in part consistent with the United Nations Children's Fund's assertion cited in the Commonwealth of Learning [48] that "*The provision of quality education is essentially the responsibility of the Government; hence, it should be committed to providing a sound education to all children*".

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study concluded that the quality of education in rural secondary schools in the area under study was generally hindered by several factors which consequently had a bearing on the school retention of students, their participation, outcomes and attainment. The researchers also concluded that most of the barriers to quality education as revealed by the participants were related to most of the barriers to quality education as reviewed in the related literature.

Accordingly, the researchers recommended that there is need for concerted effort by the community, concerned government ministry, Non-

governmental organisations involved in educational interventions and other interested stakeholders in order to have a holistic approach in addressing the different barriers to quality education in rural secondary schools. The researchers also recommended that a study of the same nature be conducted in other rural secondary schools in order to have a broader picture of the barriers to quality education in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. This will possibly inform government policy makers and other key education stakeholders in coming up with sustainable ways of addressing barriers to quality education in rural secondary schools, particularly those in marginalised and remote areas.

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