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Primary School Teachers' Views on Grade 7 Examination Preparations: A Comparative Analysis of Urban and Peri-urban Primary Schools in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract The study sought to compare teachers' views on the preparation for grade 7 examinations between urban and peri-urban primary schools in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. Four primary schools were purposively selected comprising of two from each school location. 60 teachers (30 from each school location) volunteered to participate. A convergence parallel design was utilized. The results show that teachers in peri-urban schools received lower scores (M = 4.30, SD = 1.52) than did those teachers in urban areas (M = 7.00, SD = 1.73), t (58) = 34.57, $p < 0.01$, two tailed. The size of this effect is large (effect size r = 0.95). Most urban teachers had above 16 years teaching experience, while most peri-urban teachers had between 6 to 10 years teaching experience, $\chi 2$ (1, N = 60) = 19.08, $p < 0.05$. Although the two variables are not independent of each other, the strength of the association between them is moderate (V = 0.56). The lecture method was a form of instruction for both school locations. After completion of the syllabuses the use of past examinations papers will be frequent in urban schools. Lack of resources and unknown school missions hamper teachers' effectiveness in teaching in peri-urban schools.

Keywords: *washback, quality education, curriculum, teaching and learning*

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1. Introduction

The study sought to determine if there are differences in the way peri-urban and urban primary schools prepare their grade 7 students for examinations. Peri-urban schools are located between 15 and 20 kilometers from central business district. The education system in Zimbabwe is divided into four levels namely, pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary education. Pre-schools currently called Early Childhood Development accommodates children in the 3 to 5 year age group. Primary school is a 7 year automatic cycle with children starting first grade at 5 years 6 months and writing their grade 7 at the age of 12 years in four subjects namely Mathematics, English, Shona or Ndebele (indigenous languages) and a General paper (comprising of Social Studies, Environmental Science, and Religious Education) before transiting to secondary school (form one). Performance at grade seven does not affect progression to secondary school. The academic year in Zimbabwe runs from January to December, with three months terms, broken up by one month holidays, with a total of 40 weeks of school per year. The Education Secretary's Circular No. 17 of 2004 stipulates that the teacher to pupil ratio at primary level should be 1 to 40 but this can be as high as 1 to 50 pupils in urban schools. Zimbabwean literacy rate of above 90% is among the highest in Africa.

Testing is an integral part of every educational system [11] and was originally designed to be at the service of learning and teaching. Tests are used to differentiate between individuals and therefore have consequences for test takers. Tests and their results may be used improperly to make interpretations and decisions, which may lead to unfair consequences to different groups of test takers [2]. However, tests are important as they indicate student achievement levels. Such assessments procedures impacts on how and what teachers teach [3].

1.1. Studies on Washback

McEwen [4] points out that "what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught." Taylor [5] assumes that teachers are influenced by the knowledge that their students are planning to take an examination and will therefore adapt their teaching methodology and lesson content to reflect the examination demands.

The term washback refers to the way tests affects teaching materials and classroom management. Thus, washback or backwash can be viewed as the influence of testing on teaching and learning [6,7,8]. Pearson [9] states that

"public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors and motivation of teachers, learners and parents, and because examinations often come at the end of a course, this influence is seen working in a backward direction – hence the term 'washback'." Pearson also believed that the direction in which washback actually works must be forward (that is, testing leading teaching and learning).

Washback can be negative or positive [6]. Negative washback is harmful as there will be a mismatch between the goals of instruction and the focus of assessment and can lead to the dropping of instructional goals in favor of test preparation. This can lead students to memorize (surface processing) and teachers narrowing the curriculum and thereby concentrating on those skills most amenable to testing. This is a form of item teaching [10]. Positive washback on the other hand is beneficial as there will be no differences between teaching the curriculum and teaching to the test [11] and it promotes good teaching practice as it focuses on measurement driven instruction [12]. Measurement driven instruction stipulates that testing should drive instruction. This curriculum teaching means teaching to the knowledge in the curriculum [10].

Yeh [13] reports the negative classroom effects produced by 'item teaching' or examination coaching: the curriculum is narrowed by excluding from it the subject matter not tested; excluding topics not likely to appear on the examination; reducing learning to memorization of facts, and devoting too much time to examination preparation rather than learning thereby sacrificing higher order skills to memorization. This is regarded as 'teaching to the test'.

Teachers know examination materials available from bookshops, colleagues and staff rooms when they want to revise for examinations. Lam [14] found that teachers believe that the best way to prepare students is to practice past examination papers while Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong [15] found that teachers spend two-thirds of their class time working on examination related material and as examinations get closer there is greater use of past examination materials [6]. These studies indicate that teacher factors like personal beliefs, past education, and academic background, appear to be important in determining the teaching methodology a teacher employs [16].

Spratt [17] categorises the effects of washback in the classroom as follows: curriculum, exam related textbooks and past papers, teaching methods, learning, feelings and attitudes. On curriculum, Alderson and Wall [6] found that examinations had an effect of narrowing the curriculum to those areas most likely to be tested. Lam [14] found that teachers emphasize in teaching those parts of the examination carrying the most marks and also that more curriculum time is given to examination classes. However, Read and Hayes [18] also indicate that time allocation may be greater or lesser depending on the school.

Kellagham & Greany [19] have noted that external examinations are limited in the areas of knowledge and skills that they assess; they contain little reference to the knowledge and skills that students need in their everyday life outside the school; and they tend to measure achievement at a low taxonomic level which may imply that teachers focus their teaching on what is assessed in an examination which then compromises on the quality of teaching and learning in schools which examinations foster.

Rahimi, Esfandiari & Amini, [2] indicate two major types of washback studies: those related to multiple-choice, large scale standardized tests, which have negative influences on the quality of teaching and learning and those studies where a specific test or examination has been modified and improved upon in order to employ a positive influence on teaching and learning.

1.2. Peri-urban - Urban Disparity

Peri-urban areas lack potable water, electricity, good roads and school infrastructure to improve upon the lives of people (Kashaa, cited by [20]). Such areas provide lower crime rates, fresh air, and enhanced quality of life; many teachers do not like peri-urban postings due to poor quality of housing, classroom facilities, and school resources [20]. The peri-urban schools have low enrolment, fewer textbooks and less experienced teachers while urban schools are overstaffed with experienced teachers, better funded, and monitored and have better infrastructure and adequate resources to work with [20]. Schools in urban areas perform better than those in peri-urban areas because they are staffed with quality teachers and have better educational facilities.

The study focuses on teachers' views on the preparation practices of students who are writing grade 7 Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) examinations. The lead researcher has worked for the Ministry of Primary and secondary and has noted that in most primary schools in Zimbabwe, teachers take their students from grade 6 to 7 and then back to grade 6 after students write their grade 7 examinations. Most teachers at primary school level hold a diploma in education though there are an increasing number of those attaining degree programs.

In Zimbabwe the quality of education tends to be in terms of students passing terminal examinations hence, students view education as nothing more than merely passing examinations [21]. Teachers need to prepare their students for grade seven examinations so that they can gain entry into prestigious secondary schools and gain recognition regardless of automatic promotion. Also in rural and peri-urban schools, teachers' transfers to urban schools are based on their students' performance. Thus, these conditions are a way of improving the education system by holding teachers and students accountable for their actions.

The teaching and learning strategies in Zimbabwe emphasize; learning by experimentation, activity and discovery with the use of learning materials in the form of kits and readily available local materials; group work in different sized groups with particular emphasis on interaction and feedback; interactive learning through the use of audio-visual aids such as radio, video, charts, posters and computer assisted learning, and collaborative teaching and learning [22].

The quality of education tends to be evaluated in terms of the number of students passing national examinations [23]. Thus, examination class teachers might be encouraged to teach to the test. Furthermore parents or guardians need the best educational investment for their children and therefore they want to secure admissions in better performing schools. What is not known is whether there are differences in teaching and learning at grade 7 levels

between urban and peri-urban primary schools in Zimbabwe. For example, since teachers take students from grade 6 levels, it is not known for how long they coach their classes for examinations and/or if they take into cognizance pupils' prior knowledge, experiences, learning styles and interests. Some teachers taking examination classes might study the trend of past examination papers and hence coach their students instead of making them understand the curriculum. Teachers may also focus their efforts on students who are more likely to succeed in their classes because their reputations depend on how well these students perform in examinations.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

The lead researcher, who has worked as an educational psychologist, has noticed that when examinations are closer, schools invite or hire experienced markers at grade 7 level examinations to do exercises with students that directly aim at developing examination skills or strategies. It is therefore important to determine how grade seven examinations affect classroom instruction. In her review of literature, Cimbricz [24] found that testing influences teacher beliefs and attitudes but concluded that more research is needed to tease out the influence of teachers' knowledge of their subject matter, their views of teaching and learning, and the context in which teachers worked affected their perception of how much state-mandated testing influenced their beliefs and practice. Farkas, Johnson and Duffett [25] found that although teachers thought too much emphasis was placed on testing, they exhibited contradictory attitudes about the influence of testing on teaching.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to determine if there are differences in the way peri-urban and urban primary schools prepare their grade 7 pupils for examinations.

1.5. Objectives of the Study

1. To determine if there are any differences in the teaching and learning between urban and peri-urban primary schools at grade seven levels.
2. To determine if there is an association between school location and teaching experience.
3. To find out if there are differences in the way urban and peri-urban schools are influenced by tests in their teaching and learning.
4. To determine whether there is an association between teachers' experience and the teaching strategies they employ**.**

1.6. Research Questions

1. Are there any differences in the teaching and learning between urban and peri-urban primary schools at grade seven levels?
2. Is there any relationship between school location and teaching experience?
3. Are there differences in the way urban and peri-urban schools are influenced by tests in their teaching and learning?
4. Is there any association between teachers' experience and the teaching strategies they employ?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

A convergence parallel design [26] is useful for the study because of concurrent quantitative and qualitative data collection, which would then be analyzed separately, and then emerging of two sets of results into an overall interpretation. This study sought to determine if there are differences in teacher preparation of grade seven pupils between peri-urban and urban primary schools.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

Two urban primary schools and two peri-urban primary schools in Masvingo district were purposively selected using 2014 grade 7 results at the District Education offices. Two high performing schools in each school location were selected. It is interesting to note that urban areas generally outperform peri-urban areas. The teachers' experiences in teaching examination classes ranged from 1 year to above 16 years. Thirty participants from each school location volunteered to participate in the study. The table below indicates how teachers' experiences were classified by school location.

Table 1. School location and teaching experienceSchool location

Experience in years	Urban	Peri- urban
	number	number
1-5	0	7
6-10	5	12
11-15	11	9
Above 16	14	2
Total	**30**	**30**

2.3. Instrument

The questionnaire for teachers was designed using literature. The first part consisted of six five point likert scale questions tapping on examination preparation and the second part consisted of four five point likert scale questions focusing on how tests influence teaching and learning. Teacher experience was categorized as from 1-5 years; 6–10 years; 11 – 15 years and above 16 years. In-depth interviews with deputy head-teachers and teachers were done using open ended questions. The questionnaire was tested for reliability using single urban and peri-urban primary schools in Gweru. A reliability coefficient of 0.76 made it usual for data collection. Other lecturers in the department of psychology and education validated the instrument and appropriate adjustments were then made.

2.4. Research Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Permission to carry out the study was sought from the District Education Officer in Masvingo District offices and appointments were made with head-teachers in primary schools. The purpose of the study was explained to the teachers and deputy-head teachers and they were assured that they could pull out of the study at any time without being asked the reasons for doing so. They were also assured that no harm could be envisioned in participating in the study. They were also notified that their responses would be kept confidential and would be used for the purpose of this study only. Anonymity was preserved by requiring the participants not to write their names on the questionnaires.

Participants were allowed to write their responses in an empty class (peri-urban schools) or staff room (urban schools) while in-depth interviews were being carried in the deputy-head-teacher's office. Participants were allowed to read through the questionnaires and make sure that that they understood everything. They were allowed to ask any questions which were not clear to them. The time limit for completing the questions was one hour and all participants completed the questions within 30 minutes.

The in-depth interviews lasted for 20 minutes per participant.

2.5. Data Analysis

Teacher responses were analyzed using a t-test for independent samples and a chi-square. Interviews from deputy head-teachers and teachers were content analyzed.

3. Results

The first research question seeks to determine if there are differences in teaching and learning between urban and peri-urban primary schools.

Table 2. Differences in teaching and learning between urban and peri-urban primary schools

School location	$\sum X$	$\sum X^2$	M	SD	n	t-value
Urban	210	1473	7.00	1.73	30	34.57**
Peri-urban	129	557	4.30	1.52	30	

** Significant at 0.01.

Teachers in peri-urban schools received lower scores (M = 4.30, SD = 1.52) than did those teachers in urban areas (M = 7.00, SD = 1.73), t (58) = 34.57, $p < 0.01$, two tailed. The size of this effect is large (effect size r = 0.95).

The second research question sought to determine if there is an association between teaching experience and school location.

The results indicate that most urban teachers had above 16 years teaching experience, while most peri-urban teachers had between 6 to 10 years teaching experience, χ^2 (1, N = 60) = 19.08, < 0.05. Although the two variables are not independent of each other, the strength of the association between them is moderate (Cramer's V statistic = 0.56).

Table 3. 2 x 4 contingency table showing the relationship between school location and teaching experience (Expected frequencies in parentheses)

School location			
Experience in years	Urban	Peri- urban	Total
1-5	0 (3.50)	7 (3.50)	7
6-10	5 (8.50)	12 (8.50)	17
11-15	11 (10.00)	9 (10.00)	20
Above 16	14 (8.00)	2 (8.00)	16
Total	30	30	60

Chi-square (χ^2) = 19.08 significant at 0.05; Cramer's V statistic = 0.56.

The third research question focuses on whether there are differences in the way urban and peri-urban schools prepare examination classes.

Teacher comments in urban and peri-urban schools indicated they give tests in order to determine students' mastery levels. Both school locations do not consider students learning styles in their teaching. However, most urban schools concentrate on past examination papers after completing their syllabus. Some urban schools hire chief examiners to drill their students on test taking skills. One urban school teacher said "Some urban parents hire teachers to give extra lessons to their students outside school hours." A lecture method or teacher centered approach is utilized when examinations are closer because these urban teachers are highly experienced and are more familiar with examinations. Teachers in both school locations heavily rely on text books and teacher made materials, with urban schools having more supplementary books in their libraries. Peri-urban school teachers indicated that parents do not value the education of their children and do not pay school fees for them. The use of past examination papers is minimal due to lack of resources. A peri-urban teacher said "Most teachers prefer the teacher centered approach as most students are achieving far below their grade levels."

In-depth interviews with deputy head-teachers in urban schools indicated that they track learner achievements in their schools and there is high parental involvement which does not have to wait for school consultation days. Head-teachers and their deputies discuss with individual teachers and agree on pass rates in their classrooms. Such agreements are written down and then discussed when the examination results are out. For example, the reasons for failure to reach the agreed target are discussed with individual teachers. Also these schools have mission statements which are pervasive. At one school the deputy head-teacher said "anyone can teach any grade level so that every teacher becomes knowledgeable about what is happening at any level in the school." Staff development is carried out twice per term. The schools in urban areas emphasize syllabus coverage by August and then teachers will focus on revision using past examination papers. The class sizes in urban schools range from 45 to 60. A deputy head said "urban schools have committees that set examinations for each grade level so that examinations can reflect the teaching and learning occurring in these schools." Such a strategy minimizes item teaching and encourages syllabus completion.

In peri-urban schools, the mission statements were seen in the deputy head-teachers' offices and one teacher said "students are not knowledgeable about school missions."

Teachers indicated that it is difficult to complete the syllabus by third term. The class sizes are range from 26 to 34. Learner achievement tracking is focused on students who show significant underachievement. There is little use of past examination papers in these schools. Low parental involvement and inadequate resources were cited in most peri-urban schools. One teacher said "this is my third month without pay since my deployment to this school." Head-teachers indicate that they do not set targets for the examinations classes because of diverse learners in classrooms but do staff developments in order to improve the teaching and learning.

4. Discussion

The study established that teachers in peri-urban schools received lower scores (M = 4.30, SD = 1.52) than did those teachers in urban areas (M = 7.00, SD = 1.73), t (58) = 34.57, $p < 0.01$, two tailed. The size of this effect is large (effect size r = 0.95). These results therefore show differences in teaching and learning between urban and peri-urban schools at grade seven levels. Effective and experienced teachers are found in urban areas because many teachers refuse rural postings due to concerns about the quality of housing, classroom facilities, healthcare, school resources, and opportunities for professional development [27]. The association between school location and teaching experience show that the more experienced teachers are found in urban areas.

Teacher comments in urban and peri-urban schools indicated they give tests in order to determine students' mastery levels. This is a form of curriculum teaching [10] but both school locations do not consider students learning styles in their teaching. This suggests that the planning of teaching is done for the whole class without considering diverse learners in their classrooms [28]. However, findings indicate that most urban school teachers concentrate on past examination papers after completing their syllabus. This is necessary as it familiarizes students with tests and practicing test tasks [29] thereby giving teachers information with which they can target remediation [30].

Some urban schools hire chief examiners to drill their students on test taking skills while parents hire teachers to give extra or private lessons to their students outside school hours although private tutoring is prohibited in Zimbabwe. Private tutoring assists students to learn but can interfere with educational processes in mainstream classes and it reflects on parents' lack of confidence in the schools [31]. In Kenya, Nzomo, Kariuki and Guantai [32] found that 68.6% of standard six students received private tutoring. National samples of students receiving private tutoring in grades 7 and 8 exceeded 50% in Czech Republic, Russia, Romania, Slovenia, South Africa and Slovak Republic [33].

Teachers in both school locations heavily rely on text books while past examination papers are used in urban locations. Such form of overt washback is negative as it involves the explicit use of examination papers or examples in textbooks that emphasize the skills used in examinations [3].

A lecture method or teacher centered approach is utilized by both school locations but is more emphasised in urban schools when examinations are closer. This is in contrast to teaching and learning strategies in Zimbabwe which emphasize experimentation, collaborative, and interactive learning [22]. Taylor [5] assumes that teachers are influenced by the knowledge that their students are planning to take an examination and will therefore adapt their teaching methodology and lesson content to reflect the examination demands. Miller and Metz [34] found that teachers do not adopt active learning because of lack of necessary class time, a high comfort level with traditional lectures and insufficient time to develop materials. Muijs, Kyriakides, Van der Werf, Creemers, Timperley and Earl [35] warned that it is wrong to associate higher levels of time on task and opportunity to learn with teacher centered and authoritarian approach. Also Stallings [36] indicated that achievement is maximized when teachers prioritize academic instruction and allocate available time to curriculum-related activities.

5. Conclusion

- The study established that there is an association between school location and teaching experience with urban teachers being highly experienced as compared to peri-urban teachers.
- While it was established that both school locations do not consider students learning styles in their teaching, however, findings also indicate that most urban school teachers concentrate on past examination papers after completing their syllabus. This was not the same situation with peri-urban teachers who found it hard to complete their syllabuses in time so they could not find ample time to concentrate on past examination papers.
- The study established that peri-urban teachers are less experienced as compared to their urban counterparts and this lack of experience militated against their capacity to complete their syllabuses in time for examination preparation.
- Peri-urban teachers barely use past examination papers in their teaching owing to resource constraints.

6. Recommendations

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education needs to reorient general education teachers on how to teach diverse classes through the department of School Psychological Services which is found in every province in the country. The department has specialized personnel such as educational psychologists and remedial tutors.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should put mechanisms in place to ban private tutoring of students which interfere with educational processes in mainstream classes.

Continuous supervision by District school inspectors on the teaching and learning processes and ongoing in-service training of teachers is recommended.

Consultations with parents or guardians on the value of educating students through home visits by school personnel need to be on-going whilst resources are being availed to the most disadvantaged schools.

Adequate physical structures in peri-urban schools in the form of housing, classroom facilities, healthcare, and school resources need to be put place so that few teachers can move to urban areas. This form of bridging the gap in educational resources could promote quality teaching and learning.

7. Further Research

Further research should focus at secondary schools' terminal examinations which are high stakes examinations and students' perceptions need to be considered in the research.

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