

Battling with the unwilling learner: A case for Gweru urban schools in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

Observation of students in the learning situation has revealed that some students are unwilling learners, as becomes apparent in their loss of interest that is evidenced by absenteeism, low performance, non-submission of assignments, unruly behaviour, truancy, uncooperative behaviour and other negative behaviour. It would appear that among other many probable causes, classroom work makes very limited demands on the vast abilities students have (Holt, 1974). This is one of the reasons that account for students' failure at school. Based on the above observation, a case study was carried out in Gweru urban schools in Zimbabwe to find out from the educators and students what the underlying causes of uncooperative behaviour are.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research. A questionnaire and interviews were used as tools to collect data from teachers and students. A voice recorder was used to maintain an uninterrupted flow of interaction during interviews. Results revealed a heightening of negative attitude towards school from early childhood classes to secondary school classes. The implication of the findings for policy and practice are discussed in this article.

Introduction

Interaction with students and teachers has revealed that there is disenchantment among students towards school as well as disgruntlement among teachers about students' seemingly uncaring attitude towards schoolwork. This raises a number of questions about the root causes of such an unfortunate phenomenon. It is indeed a fact that schooling is a preparation for life: why then would students seemingly reject the road that leads to good life? The major assumption that we initially made was that students are faced by many challenges that are not addressed by school experiences. The Zimbabwean school curriculum is objectives-oriented. This behaviourist curriculum, which is positivist and deterministic in nature and characterised by the need to fulfil intended learning outcomes, leaves teachers no room to address the many challenges that students encounter, as their attention is be focused on the ends.

Thus, our research was undertaken to establish the causes of the negative attitudes that most students seem to display. Our interest was twofold; first, to find out what teachers identified as the cause of students' lack of interest in school work, and second, to find out from students themselves why they displayed a negative attitude towards school. It was hoped that the research would generate information that would

encourage teachers to reflect on their interactions with students, so that they could come up with strategies that would address the concerns of the students.

Literature Review

According to Steinberg (1999), literature has identified quite a number of causes of students' seemingly untoward attitude to school work. These include among others the school and its curriculum, stress and developmental issues, economic factors and the impact of HIV and Aids.

Several curriculum issues have also been blamed. One argument is that learning experiences should be compatible with children's culture. Culturally responsive teaching is currently being championed by, among others, Ladson-Billings (2003) who argues that the use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognising the students' own cultures. This link between culture and classroom instruction is derived from evidence that cultural practices shape thinking processes, which serve as tools for learning within and outside school (Hollins, 1996). Thus, culturally responsive education recognises, respects and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources (Nieto, 2000) for creating optimal learning environments. Unfortunately, more often than not the curriculum is mediated through learning experiences that are alien to students. Above all, the use of English as a medium of instruction puts the learner of English as a second language in an awkward position: in addition to learning new concepts they also have to learn the new language and its culture. According to the North West Regional Education Laboratory (2002), children whose teachers fail to provide home-school cultural connections lose their self-confidence and enthusiasm for learning. Sensing their teachers' disapproval and rejection, they give up trying to succeed.

Gettinger and Seibert (2002) note that often classroom behaviour problems occur simply because students find the assigned work too difficult or too easy. When assignments are too simple, the student may become bored and distracted. When work is too difficult, the student is likely to feel frustrated and upset because he or she cannot complete the assignment. As a significant mismatch between the assignment and the student's abilities can trigger misbehaviour, teachers should inventory each students' academic skills and adjust assignments as needed to ensure that the student is appropriately challenged but not overwhelmed by the work. Indeed The Yerkes-Dodson Law postulated by Yerkes and Dodson (1908) seemingly still holds water. The law maintains that individuals under low and high stress learn the least and those under moderate stress learn the most.

The Zimbabwean schools curriculum is objectives-oriented. This means-ends, exam-oriented curriculum which is usually positivist in nature tends to be rigid as it has no room for opportunities for choices for students as teachers will be racing to cover the syllabus. Bernstein (1990) describes such a curriculum as being strongly framed, that is, as having a limited degree of options between teacher and students. Kern and Bambara (2002) observed that teachers who do not allow students a degree of choice in structuring their learning activities tend to have behaviour problems in their classroom. On the other hand, providing choices gives students a sense of autonomy and a say in their learning.

Another important factor that causes negative attitudes towards schooling is stress. Stress, according to Feldman (2004), is any situation that evokes negative thoughts and feelings in a person. However, the same situation is not evocative or stressful for all people and all people do not experience the same negative thoughts and feelings when stressed. Lazarus (1966) points out that the person-environmental model of the concept “stress” helps to understand stress among students. According to one variation of this model, stressful events can be appraised by an individual as “challenging” or “threatening”. When students experience their education as a challenge, stress can bring them a sense of competence and an increased capacity to learn. However, when education is seen as a threat, stress can elicit feelings of helplessness and a foreboding sense of loss.

Growing up can be a difficult experience for both males and females. During this period, rapid physical transitions necessitate transition in a child’s mental make-up and the child’s attitude towards people and circumstances (Herman-Stahl and Peterson, 1999). Children are often ill-equipped to cope with stress during these transitions from childhood to pre-adolescence, and from pre-adolescence to adolescence. Esman (1999) is of the view that during this period the adolescent needs to be handled sympathetically and with understanding.

For pre-adolescents and teens, an identity crisis, the perils of peer interaction, acceptance and rejection of situations, persons and ideas are a constant source of stress and depression. “Where do I stand?” and “How do I compare to others?” are key concerns for this age group (Feldman, 2004). Choices about drinking, smoking, drugs and sex, along with fears about violence, are common stressors. Stress-induced fears and anxiety in children adversely affect children’s performances at various levels. Stressed children show signs of emotional disabilities, aggressive behaviour, shyness and social phobia, and they often lack interest in otherwise enjoyable activities. Research has found that children who are forced to live on adult levels prematurely, sometimes come into resistance against their parents’ rules (or those of society) (Bakken, 2001). Such children tend to respond to stressors with aggression and indignation.

Poverty has become a child development context for many children in developing countries (The Children’s Defence Fund 1994). As a result, poverty has generated helplessness in family systems, resulting in the generation of risk that channel children to poor developmental outcomes. Poor school outcomes are not only caused by limited learning resources but also by inferior schools, poor health and poor adult supervision, among others. In addition, because of HIV and Aids, child-headed families are a common phenomena in most of our communities. These orphans experience multiple stressors: in addition to grieving over lost parents these children experience anxiety about where their next meal will come from and about remaining alone. The rest of the school day is spent nursing feelings of helplessness. For children living under these circumstances school is more often than not an untold burden.

Teacher-student relationship are characterised by tension arising from teacher burn-out (Fullan, 1993). This, coupled with low remuneration, does not help teachers cope within the current harsh socio-economic climate. It would appear that most teachers are both physically and psychologically absent for their students: they are physically

absent because they have to cross the borders of their country to buy groceries for their families and they are psychologically absent because they do not prepare for their students. Krishnaveni and Anitha (2007) argue that the teacher is a powerful source of either satisfaction or frustration in students. The teacher's enthusiasm, competence and interpersonal communication skills should be a model that illustrates that cognitive and affective motives can cohabit side by side. As reported by Koutsoulis (2003), students demand a humanistic approach, effective communication skills and better understanding towards them by the teacher. Teacher attitudes may enhance or adversely affect students' achievement and behaviour. Hakkar (2004) mentions that students usually avoid particular lessons in subjects they dislike or a teacher they hate. Teacher-student relationship may or may not develop a sense of responsibility and self-discipline in learners (Krishnaveni and Anitha, 2007).

Literature has highlighted some pertinent issues that could shed light on some of the underlying causes of students' seemingly negative attitude towards schooling. Thus, in our research we wanted to find out from the teachers and students themselves what the underlying causes of lack of interest in school work were.

Methodology

The main data sources were teachers and students because they provided first-hand information. Purposeful sampling was done to select fifteen teachers and fifteen students from three Gweru urban schools. Gweru is the largest town in the central province of Zimbabwe, known as the Midlands Province. The town has heavy as well as light industries and is surrounded by some of the leading commercial farms. An unofficial count showed that there were about twenty schools. Data collection was designed in three stages. First, a sample of fifteen teachers – five each teaching in early childhood, junior school and secondary school – completed a questionnaire concerning their beliefs about students' attitude towards school. Six teachers who included interesting responses over and above those solicited in the questionnaire were then chosen for interviews to provide more detailed information on ideas raised in the questionnaire. Issues probed during interviews included:

- Perceptions and beliefs about students disenchantment
- Understanding of student behaviour and possible causes of this behaviour
- Feelings and attitudes towards teaching and learning
- Learning contexts
- Strategies and administrator roles.

A voice recorder was used to maintain an uninterrupted flow of interaction during interviews. Informed consent was sought from the heads of schools as well as heads of departments. All respondents were informed about the research and they participated voluntarily. Confidentiality was ensured and all respondents remained anonymous. Data was analysed by means of descriptive statistics (for the questionnaires) and content analysis for interviews. The recorded interviews made it possible to crosscheck and validate data.

Results: teachers

From the questionnaire (Table 1), the following pattern emerged of the teachers' beliefs about students' attitude towards school.

**Table 1: Distribution of responses to teacher questionnaire on students' attitude towards school statements.
N=15**

Teacher Statements	Most of the time	Sometimes	Not at all
Students participation in class is as expected.	3	5	7
Students prefer sporting activities to class lessons.	6	6	3
Students show enthusiasm in class.	3	4	8
Student show lack of interest in schoolwork.	8	3	4
Student participation makes my work enjoyable.	2	4	9
Most students hand in their written exercises on time.	4	3	8
Class attendance is quite pleasing.	0	9	6
Most students reflect autonomy in class work.	2	3	10
Factors outside the classroom are the major causes for students' disenchantment with schoolwork.	12	2	1
Factors emanating within the classroom lead to students' lack of interest in schoolwork.	4	5	6
Family support has a lot to do with students' participation in class.	10	4	1
Students from a poor background do not participate in class.	8	4	3
Meagre resources could be a cause for students' lack of interest in class work.	5	7	3
Poor classroom management could lead to misbehaviour by some students.	8	7	0

From the teachers' point of view, they were battling with unwilling learners and nine out of fifteen respondents felt that students' participation did not make teaching enjoyable. During the interview, one teacher remarked that ... *Students have simply lost interest in school.* Responses to the questionnaire revealed that teachers felt that students no longer showed enthusiasm in class and that they did not hand in their written exercises. Responses further indicated that most teachers attributed most of students' negative attitude to school to factors external to the classroom. During the interview, one teacher said: *It would appear to me that students would rather yield to peer pressure at the expense of their schoolwork.*

Further interviews revealed that teachers' motivation was at its lowest: *We cannot afford bus fare, we are failing to come to school to work.* Another teacher indicated: *I am coming to work really because I have nowhere else to go. How can you come to work leaving your children hungry – I would rather cross border and bring something for my children.*

Feelings of helplessness were evident among teachers as they talked about the issue of remuneration, which we felt touched them most. Lack of resources and poor classroom management were indicated as likely causes of a negative attitude towards school.

Results: students

The following results were attained from focus group interview responses at three levels, namely early childhood education, junior school and secondary school.

Table 2 Summary of students' responses during focus group interviews about their perceptions, beliefs, feelings and attitude to schoolwork.

Question	Early Childhood Education	Junior School	Secondary School
How do you experience school life?	-We are happy -Interesting	-It is all right but our teacher beats us. -Interesting but too much written work.	-Poor meals in the dining hall make school life boring. -Given unequal treatment. -Lack of resources adds to boredom.
What would you say interests you when you are at school?	-Saying rhymes -Reading -Playing	-Drawing -Playing during break time.	-Interacting with peers.
What do you not like about school?	-not going outdoor to play. -Get tired- want to go home. -Not allowed to go to the toilet.	-No activities, teacher talks most of the time. -Not allowed to do what we want.	-Having soccer and netball as the only sporting activities. -Inexperienced teachers. -Teachers not turning up for lessons. -Lecture method and unguided presentations. -Racing to cover the syllabus. -One textbook for three classes. -Handling differing abilities differently – always at the expense of the less gifted.
Would you say you are happy when you are at school?	-Yes!! -Yes!!!	-It is alright. -Sometimes.	-No -Teachers make students feel they are wasting their time. -Mode of teaching is not good – teachers focus on a few students who are able or come from rich background. -Few resources that are there are given to a few favoured students.
What do you think would make school life interesting?	-Want to go home after break. -Want to play more.	-Teacher must not beat us. -Want to be given time to practice new work. -Marking of our work on time.	-Fair treatment-focus on every student. -Teachers should wear happy faces. -Teachers should be approachable. -Teachers should show concern for each student. -Improving meals in the dining hall.
Do you have any problems?	-Live with grandmother. -Have no pencil.	-Living with stepmother. -Tired of eating barley.	-Things are expensive – parents not managing to buy textbooks -Responsibility – some of us are looking after our young brothers and sisters.

Focus group responses reflected quite a different picture from the teachers' responses pertaining to students' disenchantment with schoolwork. Notably, the negative attitude towards schoolwork showed an upward trend from early childhood to secondary school. Results revealed that when pupils first enter school they are really motivated and they like school. However, circumstances seem to dampen their enthusiasm as they move up the school ladder. Disenchantment becomes more

apparent at the secondary school level. The responses revealed that secondary school students experience that teachers do not treat them equally. One student said that *teachers tend to favour students from rich families – its quite boring*. Teachers not turning up for lessons and being taught by inexperienced teachers were some of the reasons offered for students' absence from school. One student mentioned that *teachers make students feel they are wasting their time*, while another expressed the feeling that *teachers should wear happy faces and should be approachable*. Hakkar (2004) also indicates that students attempt to avoid particular lessons in a subject they dislike or taught by a teacher they hate. It would appear that for most students, from early childhood right through junior school to the secondary school classroom, factors such as methodology and classroom management (including teacher-student relationships) greatly influence students' lack of interest in school work. In addition, family background also has an impact on students' participation in class; this may be either negative or positive.

Discussion

From the interviews it was quite apparent that the perceived poor remuneration negatively influenced teachers' attitude towards their work. In turn, this negative attitude significantly contributed towards students' frustration (Krishnaveni and Anitha, 2007) and it adversely affected students' behaviour. This is confirmed by students' responses that teachers made them feel as if they were wasting the teachers' time. Mowrer-Reynolds (2008) points out that teacher enthusiasm engages students and captures their attention, resulting in better student achievement. The tension between students and teachers gives rise to a sense of irresponsibility and lack of self discipline among students. While there are other variables that fuel students' disenchantment with school, the teacher's role remains pivotal and is the major underlying cause of students' negative attitudes towards school. The teacher should be a trusted advisor or mentor to the students. Koutsoulis (2003) reports that students require a humanistic approach, along with sympathetic and understanding handling. The school curriculum should move beyond school success as the major objective to the quality of human life, that is, human development objectives. In other words, school programmes should authentically address the developmental needs of students and genuinely tackle the problems that lead to negative developmental outcomes. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education has an uphill task to reinstate the dignity of the teacher and to make teaching an attractive career.

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