



Factors that Affect the Academic Performance of Learners in Accounts at Ordinary Level: Case of Selected Secondary Schools in Lupane District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that affect the academic performance of learners in Accounts at Ordinary Level, using the case of selected secondary schools in Lupane District, Zimbabwe. The study adopted the qualitative approach and case study design which utilised a sample of thirty-two (n=32) participants to accomplish the study. Interviews and Document analysis were used to gather data that were analysed through thematic content analysis. The major findings of the study were that O-level Accounts students' academic performance in the area under study was affected by a constellation of factors. Accordingly, the study concluded that high learner academic performance was influenced by educators' high teaching experience in the subject area, learners' positive attitudes towards the subject, high level of parental involvement in children's learning and students having career aspirations in relation to the study discipline. Some recommendations were made for the future and the major one was that O-level Accounts teachers should regularly participate in staff development programmes as they boost their pedagogic skills, experience, and confidence in teaching the subject which no doubt serves to improve learners' academic performance and success in the subject area.

Keywords: Factors; Academic performance; Learners; Accounts; Ordinary level

Background and Its Setting

Introduction

Low academic achievement in numerical and commercial subjects such as Accounts, Mathematics and Economics is an issue of great concern to the public, policy makers, educators, and other interested parties [1]. This is largely because society believes that knowledge of these subjects is directly linked to the nation's competitive economic growth and development. Accordingly, teachers and students are expected to perform effectively in the teaching and learning of Accounts so that learners succeed in their study of the subject and as well make useful contribution to the economy of their communities and nations. The Republic of Zimbabwe (RoZ) is in a state of economic recovery and requires young people with basic skills in the numerical and commercial subjects so as to promote socio-economic transformation in line with the country's National Development Strategy (NDS) 2021-

2025 and Vision 2030. This means that the nation should have schools and students who perform well in such subject areas as a necessary grounding for take-off to economic growth and sustainability. Before the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980, African education was mainly dominated by a watered-down curriculum, where subjects like communication skills, gardening, cookery, home-craft, among others, were the mainstay of African curriculum. With the attainment of independence, the curriculum was revamped to meet the socio-economic and political needs of society and the nation at large [2]. From that perspective, Accounts became one of the secondary school subjects on which emphasis was put in order to develop a strong commercial base within the country. This is in line with the thrust of the Zimbabwe School Curriculum Policy of 2002 which is geared towards the establishment of a strong scientific, numerical, and commercial base for socio-economic growth and development (Secretary's Circular No 3 of 2002). In order to meet this target, school subjects

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that promote this national agenda are now recommended as subjects of choice at O-level and A-level in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, developments in education in Zimbabwe have been fraught with challenges such as low pass rates which are commonly high in the scientific, numerical, and commercial subjects, yet such subjects are considered as key drivers of industrial growth and development. In a number of studies cited by the Zimbabwe MoPSE, such subjects have been noted as the bedrock and an indispensable tool for scientific, technological, and economic advancement of any nation. The poor performance in such subjects by most students at O-level in particular implies that the country still has a long way to go before meeting the country's economic target. There is a lot of national debate going on, on how to foster improved knowledge and performance in these said subjects particularly so for students in rural secondary schools that are generally under-resourced, and communities impoverished. Educators and researchers have long been interested in exploring variables contributing to the performance of secondary school learners in different subjects. Notably, such variables are generally inside and outside the school and classroom; and affect students' academic achievement either directly or indirectly. It is against this backdrop that the current study sought to interrogate the major factors that affect the academic performance of learners in Accounts at O-level within the area under study.

Statement of the Problem

Accounts in one of the most important school subjects for daily economic routines and occupational success, especially in a country like Zimbabwe that targets to be an industrialized middle-income economy through its Vision 2030. Unfortunately, many O-level products are failing to take up their career choices in accounting because they have not passed Accounts at this level. Colleges and universities demand that one has passed Accounts in addition to Mathematics at O-level in order to qualify to study for an accounting programme, such as a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting. The problem at stake is that the general performance of O-level secondary school students in Accounts in Lower Gweru district in Zimbabwe is very low compared to most subject areas; a scenario which may be similar in a number of secondary schools in rural Zimbabwe. This is a cause of concern for many stakeholders, with many parents having gone to the extent of engaging part-time teachers to provide their children with extra lessons in O-level Accounts as a way of mitigating the continued failure and lack of interest in the subject.

Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- To assess the effect of teachers' teaching experience on learner performance in O-level Accounts.

- To assess the effect teacher-learner attitudes towards students' academic performance in O-level Accounts.
- To determine how parental involvement has an effect on learner performance in O level Accounts.
- To ascertain if learners' career aspirations have any influence on their performance in O level Accounts.

Significance of the study

It is considered that the study will have significance to a number of stakeholders and institutions. Firstly, the study will help the school management and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's Quality Assurance Unit to take appropriate and corrective action towards the teaching and learning of O-level Accounts as a way of fostering improvement in learner performance in the subject area. Secondly, it is likely to help secondary schools to better understand teacher and learner perceptions on the importance of Accounts which may encourage the school to motivate the learners to appreciate the significance of passing Accounts at O-level. Thirdly, it is expected that students will do a self-introspection and consider the factors affecting their own performance in Accounts so that they may be guided on how to overcome the negative factors and utilise the positive ones. Fourthly, since industries are generally worried about profit and loss issues and would want to recruit the most productive employees with appropriate O-level subjects including Accounts, this study could shed light on how schools and employers may network and work hand in glove so as to produce the best would-be employees. Fifthly, the study will be of benefit to educational researchers as it will open more research gaps for the future or opportunities for improving learner performance in Accounts at O-level.

Review of Related Literature

The effect of teaching experience on learners' academic performance in Accounts at O-level

From an educational perspective, it is generally assumed that teachers' teaching experience has an important effect on learners' academic performance. Teachers' experience which is largely determined by the training that teachers go through, and the duration of their teaching, significantly determines their effectiveness in teaching. The same source says that teaching experience is frequently included as a variable in educational research, with its impact on academic performance being noted. Teachers with few years of teaching experience are generally considered less likely to teach effectively while those with a reasonable number of years in the teaching profession to those with high teaching experience are considered more likely to teach effectively resulting in better academic performance by learners. It is of the view that a successful teaching experience is an important variable within the teaching and learning process, particularly in



relation to learner performance [3]. Thus, teaching experience will enable the Accounts teacher to acquire certain commendable characteristics such as improved knowledge of subject matter and its pedagogics. In addition, an experienced teacher is capable of promptness, adaptability, efficiency, utilising appropriate techniques of arousing and maintaining learner interest, ensuring adequacy and appropriateness of instructional materials and the ability to face the class with confidence, which all result in better academic performance in the subject area. Most experienced teachers having interacted with the subject matter for a while and having had classroom experiences for a longer time are likely to have a positive impact on student performance and achievement. As noted by several related studies in the USA found a positive relationship between years of teacher experience and student performance, particularly test scores [4]. They concluded that teaching experience was a crucial factor in determining learners' academic performance, as the experienced teacher, unlike the inexperienced, knew the 'tricks of the job' which make learners perform better, including those learners with special learning needs. Similarly, the UTD Texas schools project data showed that students of experienced teachers attained significantly higher levels of scores than did students of new teachers. In an analysis of school academic performance, achievement and drop out in a sample of California high schools, the same source also found out that schools whose pass rate was high were taught by well experienced teachers particularly in scientific subjects. On the other hand, those with poor pass rate and high dropout rates, had newer and inexperienced teachers.

The effect of teacher-learner attitudes towards students' academic performance in O-level Accounts

Views attitudes as positive or negative feelings or thoughts that an individual holds about objects, persons, or ideas. Attitudes are generally acquired through experiences in the environment and learned in much the same way as skills and habits [5]. Many educators agree that attitudes play an important role in the teaching and learning of a subject and Accounts is not an exception. This implies that the success or failure by learners in any school subject is somehow affected by attitudes, directly or indirectly [6]. As learners develop through the different phases of schooling, they become increasingly aware of different subject matter and this awareness clearly affects the growth of their attitude towards a subject area. These attitudes are, however, not just learner-centred, as teachers also have to deal with their own attitude as they are faced with a number of problems that frustrate their efforts to teach a subject effectively and efficiently. Accounts teachers for example, put in extra effort to improve Accounts instruction and thus learner performance, but when national examination results are released, performance may be poor. This obviously discourages such teachers, resulting in some developing negative attitudes

towards the subject. Unemployment has also forced some people into the teaching profession. Consequently, teachers, who are not in the profession by choice, are not committed hence, easily develop negative attitudes towards a subject especially if its teaching is beset with some challenges. This unfortunately negatively affects learner performance in the subject, and Accounts is not an exception. study also suggested that the student's attitude towards a subject is dependent on his or her level of understanding and confidence in that subject, which is also influenced by the teacher's level of self-confidence when teaching the subject. Thus, students' level of confidence and performance in Accounts will largely depend on how confident and effective the teacher delivers Accounts lessons. Concur with that students taught by teachers with positive attitudes towards their work particularly the subjects they teach, who are friendly to students and approachable by the students concerning subject matters, are more likely to develop positive attitudes themselves, which also tends to enhance their performance and achievement. It is important that teachers understand the attitudes of their students towards Accounts because by so doing, they will help them develop a positive attitude towards the subject. This is a very important ingredient in desirable performance in any subject including Accounts at O-level or any other level. On the other hand, students who develop a negative attitude towards a subject such as Accounts may also cause the teacher to be discouraged as the learners show no commitment to learning the subject. Thus, students' negative attitude towards Accounts lessons will make them perceive it as either a useless or difficult subject that also wastes lots of their study time. Apart from these opinions, other action tendencies that reflect negative learner attitudes towards Accounts include absenteeism, coming to class late, sleeping during the lesson, not participating during lessons and so on. Students like any other person, can develop positive attitudes towards a subject through approval, being made to feel capable and important, secure, and independent. When these needs are met, a student is likely to develop an interest in any activity, including the learning of Accounts. Thus, teachers are the most important agents that can influence students' attitude towards Accounts or any other subject for that matter. Negative verbal comments by the teacher towards students during lessons can discourage them, hence leading to students developing negative attitudes towards the subject. Utilising practical activities in the teaching and learning of Accounts often motivates students, thereby helping them to develop positive attitudes towards the subject.

The effect of parental involvement on students' academic performance in O-level Accounts

Assert that parental involvement has long been identified as a contributory factor in enhancing student success at school. Various types of parental participation in schools include, among others,



communication with child's teachers and by attendance at parent-teacher meetings, attending school presentations by pupils, attending school events or activities related to other altruistic activities in the school and volunteering at school. Parent involvement can also be by way of reading activities at home, assisting a child with homework, or communicating with a child about learning experiences at school. Based on the researcher's long experience as an educationist, it is a given fact that learner performance and achievement largely depend on the nature of communication between the school and the parents, especially as it fosters parental involvement in their children's studies. Parents feel involved in the activities of the school particularly their children's progress and involve themselves more because they are aware that the progress of the school constitutes their children's achievement. Educationists generally believe that primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe and elsewhere will function well and effectively due to the relationship that the school has forged with the parents. In that regard, parental involvement plays an important role in the learners' academic performance because the school and parents share the responsibility for learners' learning and success. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in their children's learning in order to support the work of teachers. For example, the South African School Act 84 of 1996 emphasises parental involvement in the education of their children. According to the same Act, the school governing body of a public school must promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners at school. The School-Parent Compact (SPC), is a legislation that was introduced through the same Act to encourage schools to reach out to parents by implementing practices that support strong parent participation such as flexible scheduling of home-school programmes including conferences. The compact recognizes that families and schools need to work together towards mutual goals and that they share responsibilities for every student's academic performance. Thus, the South African Schools Act 1996 emphasizes that an educator recognizes that an educational institution serves the community. Section 20 of SASA No. 84 of 1996, lists a number of duties to be performed by the governing bodies of schools in collaboration with parents. However, it must be noted that, even under these circumstances, there are a number of factors affecting learner academic performance; with the level of involvement by parents being one of the major factors. Some of the factors affecting the extent to which participation in school governance takes place, particularly in rural areas; are financial backgrounds of the parents, the literacy level of parents and the distance that parents travel to school. All things being equal, parents have an obligation to carry out their responsibilities successfully in order to support their children's education without any excuses. Failure by the parents to carry out this obligation would have a negative impact on the child's learning, success, and future life in industry. Postulates that

the parental illiteracy is one of the key negative factors contributing to lack of parental involvement in school matters, particularly parental involvement in learner activities. At secondary school level, such non-involvement of parents in their children's schoolwork including homework, has a negative impact on learner performance and success as the affected child will go about his or her learning business without any support from home, which is detrimental if the learner is facing challenges in studying a subject, such as Accounts.

Effect of students' career aspirations on their performance in Accounts at O level

Several studies indicate that learners' career aspiration to some extent influence their scholastic performance. This is easy to understand when one recognises that education is thought as a preparation for the future. On this basis, it implies that students' present learning is influenced by their future plans and aspirations. A student whose aspiration is to become an Accountant will work hard to achieve in the accounting subject areas while one who aspires to be an architect or engineer will work hard in sciences in order to achieve his or her career goal. Therefore, learners' future aspirations to take up an accounting-related job will have a big bearing on their performance in Accounts. It is considered that students who plan for higher education and aspire for it perform better than students who do not have such plans but find themselves studying at that level. In fact, many studies suggest that young people with higher educational ambitions have greater motivation and higher educational attainment levels than their peers. Undeniably, the relationship between educational outcomes and academic ambitions seems to be a complex but a realistic one. Ambition thus, can both be a predictor of educational performance and achievement and an outcome of it, and might be influenced by self-efficacy, personal traits, experiences, and mediating family factors [7]. Individual learners' aspirations and ambitions are considered important because they generally influence key choices and indicators as well as outcomes such as educational performance and achievement as well as future career success.

Research Methodology

Research approach and design

This study employed the qualitative research approach which enabled the researcher to collect information from the respondents in their natural settings as the researcher was physically in the study area and collected data directly from the respondents [8,9]. The approach sought to describe and analyse the cultural and behaviour of participants from the point of view of those being studied. In this approach, flexibility was experienced which allowed the discovery of unexpected and in-depth information relating to the research problem. For example, in finding out the effect of learner attitudes

on academic performance, the researcher interviewed O-level students who had dropped the subject of Accounts who were willing to share information on the basis for their attitudes towards the subject. This study adopted a case study research design which is also referred to as a “naturalistic” design [10-12] describes a case study as a detailed, intensive analysis of a particular event, situation, organisation, or social unit bounded by space and time. It is an in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, with a defined space and time frame. There were several benefits of adopting a case study design in terms of research processes and outcomes. For this study, the case study design helped the researcher to focus within the confines of the defined space, which were secondary schools. The boundaries set made it possible to identify essential factors, processes, and relationships relating to factors that affect the academic performance of learners in Accounts at O -level within the study area. In harmony with Patton (2012) and [13], the researcher’s choice of the case study design gave him an opportunity to have an in-depth look and to collect different kinds of data from the schools did not separate the researcher from the participants of the study, hence, the researcher got first-hand and rich data regarding the research problem.

Population, sample, and research instruments

The population of the study comprised of O-level Accounts learners (and former students of the subjects), teachers and parents as these were the targeted groups. Purposive sampling, which involved selecting a particular or targeted sample aimed at giving specific and purposive information was utilised [14, 15]. The researcher used this sampling strategy to help him to reach out to the targeted participants. This was done to select key informants with in-depth knowledge of the research problem. The key informants were selected to get the most informed viewpoints on factors affecting learner academic performance in the subject area. The reason for using purposive sampling was that these participants were the only ones with the specific information needed to accomplish the study. Accordingly, a sample size of 32 ($n=32$), which comprised of 20 O-level Accounts learners, 5 teachers, 5 parents, and 2 school heads was preferred. In addition to being the primary medium of data generation through the ‘researcher as a research instrument concept’, the study employed face-to-face interviews and document analysis to generate data from the field. Use of more than one research instrument was meant to have them complement each other in terms of their strengths and weaknesses [16]. For interviews, both closed and open-ended questions were employed in order to allow participants to express their opinions fully and flexibly. The major advantage of the interviews is that the researcher was able to explain further the research questions that the interviewees did not understand, and participants were able to elaborate in depth in areas of interest

while their body language meant to emphasize certain issues were also easily captured. In addition, face-to-face interviews also enabled the capturing of verbal and non-verbal cues; including body language of participants and also indicated a level of enthusiasm on the part of specific participants for the topics which were being discussed in the interview. Document analysis involved deriving information by carefully studying school written documents or visual information from reputable sources in this case attendance registers, school files and individual progress record books for O-level Accounts [17,18]. Document analysis was, therefore, used to obtain some information on learners’ previous academic performance in the subject area.

Findings of the Study

The following were the major findings of the study:

- All educator participants, namely the Accounts teachers and school heads (100%) were of the view that teaching experience greatly affects learners’ academic performance and achievement, and O level Accounts is not an exception. By acknowledging this, the educators gave the impression that an Accounts teacher with high teaching experience was the best in as much as promoting high academic performance among learners was concerned, which agrees with the assertion that ‘experience is the best teacher’. On the other hand, it also meant that an Accounts teacher with low or without any teaching experience is most likely not capable of promoting high learner performance in the subject area. This, therefore, illustrates that teachers’ experience is an important educational factor that should be seriously taken into consideration when implementing strategies to enhance learner performance in any subject area including O-level Accounts.
- It is unfortunate to note that most of the O-level Accounts students (55%) had negative attitudes towards the subject while only 35% had positive attitudes. The possible reason for the positive attitude by some learners is that the subject was interesting, and they were also capable in the subject. On the other hand, the negative attitude could be the assumption by learners that Accounts is a difficult and not interesting subject compared to other subjects, which agrees with reviewed literature that says that students generally enjoy and succeed in learning subjects that are interesting and in which they are capable. The findings of this study are a cause for concern considering that negative attitudes towards O-level Accounts by learners were noted to outweigh the positive attitudes towards the subject. This means that most O level Accounts students in the study area are most likely to perform badly in the subject which has a negative bearing on the school pass rate of the subject in the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC).

- It is shocking to note that as many as 65% of the parent participants were not involved at all in their children's learning of Accounts at O level. A total of 25% of the parents were partly involved while only 10% was fully involved. This agrees with reviewed literature that reveals that parental involvement has long been identified as an important contributory factor in enhancing learner participation and success at both primary and secondary school level. Various types of parental involvement included communication with the child's teachers, attendance at parent-teacher meetings, attending school presentations by pupils, attending school events or activities related to other altruistic activities in the school. Thus, parents can help and inspire their children in their education which can also improve their performance in O-level Accounts.
- From the study, the majority of O-level Accounts students (75%) indicated that they would opt for other subjects other than Accounts at university or college while only 25% would prefer pursuing the subject further at tertiary level. The researcher noted that this isn't an encouraging situation since one would have expected that O-level Accounts students have developed interest in the subject such that they would like to pursue it further and even take accounting as their career of choice. Findings also indicate that the majority of the learners (65%) were not willing to become secondary school Accounts teachers while only 35% were willing. This is quite a sad scenario since it simply shows that most of the students were not motivated to be like their Accounts teacher. Related literature revealed that secondary school students who had plans for higher education and related occupational plans performed better than students who did not have such plans, hence, students who had no aspirations in the field of Accounts in the studied area were a cause for concern as this had negative implications for their academic performance.
- O-level Accounts teachers should regularly participate in staff development programmes which can be in the form of short courses, workshops, and seminars. This would possibly boost teachers' pedagogic skills, experience, and confidence in teaching the subject as they would acquire better teaching methods, approaches and strategies for effective teaching and learning of Accounts. This will no doubt improve learners' academic performance and achievement in the subject area.
- To improve learners' attitude towards Accounts, it is recommended that proper guidance and counselling on the subject should be given to them. Role models and speakers should be invited to schools to talk to the students on the importance and significance of Accounts in the real world of work (industry) and people's daily lives.
- School Development Committees (SDC) should come up with ways for positive reinforcement such as provision of prizes and other incentives for students who show interest, commitment, and improved performance in Accounts at O-level.
- O-level Accounts teachers should motivate their students by providing quality education through making their teaching interesting and effective [19]. Teachers should always give positive and encouraging feedback to learners during Accounts lessons as a way of encouraging learners including slow learners to perform better [20-22].
- In order to encourage parents to be involved in school matters concerning the teaching and learning of Accounts, it is recommended that schools arrange regular parents' meetings and involve them as much as possible in school activities such as consultation days, sporting days, funny-fare days and so on.
- Parents should be regularly informed about their children's progress in O-level Accounts based on continuous learner assessment in line with the Zimbabwean Updated Curriculum. Individual parents may also be consulted where their child's performance in the subject becomes a cause for concern.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It was interesting to note that O-level Accounts students' academic performance in the area under study was affected by a constellation of factors. These factors included teacher's level of experience in teaching the subject, learners' attitudes towards the subject, level of parental involvement in their children's learning and whether or not students had career aspirations in relation to Accounts as a discipline. Accordingly, the study concluded that high learner academic performance was influenced by educators' high teaching experience in Accounts, learners' positive attitudes towards Accounts, high level of parental involvement in children's learning and students having career aspirations in relation to Accounts as a discipline.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made for the future:

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