

The Capacity Building Programme of the Government of Zimbabwe: Opening Opportunities to the Teaching of Minority Languages in Schools in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The context of this study concerns the Capacity Building Programme of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe and the United Nations Children's Fund to develop primary school teachers' skills base in minority language teaching. Focus group discussion with teachers and non-participant observation of lectures were the data collection instruments from fifteen randomly sampled primary school teachers and five lecturers in the programme. The research found that such a programme was overdue and that the teachers were excited about the prospect to develop academically, and professionally grow at minimum expense. The other finding was that the programme was not given adequate planning time as well as other support resources for effective implementation. The study recommended that the Capacity Building Programme transcend the paying of tuition fees to other areas such as the provision for requisite literature and accommodation. The other recommendation was that there is need to establish a Journal in indigenous languages, specifically on minority languages to contribute and further develop knowledge in these languages, as well as in ensuring the availability of relevant literature.

Keywords: capacity building, minority languages, curriculum, medium of instruction, Zimbabwe School Examination Council.

Introduction and Background

For a long time minority languages have played second fiddle to the main indigenous languages, mainly ChiShona and IsiNdebele in the Zimbabwean education system. This diglossic situation has seen children originating from minority language communities and backgrounds being grossly disadvantaged when it came to schooling. Yet literature by Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2011), Prah (2008), Setati (2005), Mutasa (2006) and others has pointed to the fact that children who learn using their mother tongue perform better as it reduces culture shock by bridging the school – home environment.

In Zimbabwe, there are a number of minority languages that had languished at the periphery of educational discourse. Children from these speech communities were and are forced to adapt and adopt either ChiShona or IsiNdebele for educational purposes placing a double burden on these children. They have to abandon their own languages and become content with one of the two indigenous official languages and English in the classroom. Nenty (1999) adds that classroom use of language which is not the mother tongue, the language already spoken by the child, results in cognitive and pedagogical difficulties. Successive efforts by these communities for recognition and highlighting the plight of the children seemed to fall on deaf ears. Work by Zimbabweans, namely: Chimhundu (1998), Gondo, Nyota and Mapara (2005), Magwa (2010b) and other international writers, like Ngugi waThiong'o (1994), Setati (2005) and Prah (2005) on how to take on board indigenous languages in education cannot be ignored.

Early work between 1978 and 1979 by the Tonga people in Zimbabwe which resulted in the formation of Tonga Language and Culture Committee (TOLACCO) tasked with production of teaching materials in Tonga cannot also go unnoticed (Ndlovu, 2013). It became a springboard for realizing the importance of language to children in these circumstances and the Zimbabwean government began to see reason. Academics from these communities began to agitate for the recognition of their languages in a united fashion with the formation of VETOKA (Venda, Tonga and Kalanga Association) after independence. In 1996 the Tonga speech community revived TOLACCO and in 2001 Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA) was formed and had six languages namely: Kalanga, Tonga, Sotho, Nambya and Venda. Circulars Number 2 of 2001, Number 1 of 2002 were generated to motivate the implementation of these minority languages both as subjects in the curriculum and as mediums of instruction. However, these efforts were not supported by the training of requisite manpower for effective implementation. Teachers colleges and universities remained seized with the traditional languages ChiShona and IsiNdebele leaving no space for minority languages. It was only in 2009 when Great Zimbabwe University in partnership with University of Venda introduced Venda and Shangaan at undergraduate level a positive step in realizing the importance of these languages.

Further, the Zimbabwean education system has remained grossly skewed towards examinations. Those subjects that are not examined by the evaluation board Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZimSEC) are usually given less attention and seriousness. However, in 2011 there was a positive shift with ZimSEC having its first examination in one of the minority languages, Tonga with hopes high that others will follow suit. This exposed the Zimbabwean education system to the discrepancy between the skills teachers possessed and what they were supposed to implement for examination purposes. It also put under the microscope the teacher deployment system by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education where primary school teacher graduates were deployed anywhere in the country responding to need regardless of their language background. Teachers without minority language background were and are deployed to those areas where minority languages are mostly spoken making it very difficult for them to champion the cause of these languages.

In 2014, the Zimbabwean government in partnership with UNICEF rolled out a programme, the Capacity Building Programme (CBP), primarily to develop and capacitate teachers from the minority languages hoping to improve teacher efficacy in these previously marginalized languages. A Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) in 2014 had two objectives namely to provide adequate and properly qualified teachers for all the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe, and second, to create conditions necessary for the development of all the officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe.

The initially targeted languages were Tonga, Venda, Shangaan, Nambya and Sign language. Great Zimbabwe University was chosen to implement this programme given its rich history and niche in culture and heritage. The hope was that all the remaining ones would be accorded a chance. Other universities, like Zimbabwe Open University, Bindura, Midlands and National University of Science and Technology were also roped in to develop and capacitate these teachers from minority communities in other needy areas such as science, technology and pedagogical issues at secondary school level.

It is against this background that the study sought to understand the benefits and challenges of the Capacity Building Programme at its inception with the view to point out those areas that needed attention early for the programme to realise its intended educational impact.

Statement of the Problem

The much awaited programme to capacitate primary school teachers from minority language backgrounds with knowledge and skills to effectively teach the languages has begun in Zimbabwean universities. However there have been some teething problems at the programme's inception and the need to identify them and institute corrective measures cannot be over emphasised.

The programme needs to be well planned, managed and packaged to ensure that the ultimate beneficiaries, the children would educationally profit with improved teacher efficacy. Hence, the research questions were what modalities were put in place for the successful implementation of the programme, and what are the challenges faced by the programme at its inception phase?

Methodology

The study reports a qualitative case study, a study of singularities (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010) of fifteen (15) primary school teachers and five (5) lecturers meant to understand the specific context (McKenna, 2003; Walliman, 2011) of the Capacity Building Programme at Great Zimbabwe University. The qualitative story provided insight on real world phenomena by studying in detail within the context in which they occur (Lehman, 2007) with the flexibility to use a number of voices and methods. The different results from the different participants, that is, teachers and their lecturers and methods reflected different aspects generating complementarity (Moran – Ellis, Alexander, Cronin, Dickinson, Fielding, Sloney and Thomas, 2009). The focus group discussion, a groupthink and non- participant observation were seen as the best conduit of eliciting quality qualitative data (Boateng, 2012) to record the lecturers and teachers' feelings and experiences about the programme and its challenges. The focus group discussion with the primary school teachers on the programme allowed the researchers to cross validate data from participants well supplemented by data from observation of real teaching and learning situations. Hence, the discussion of the findings in this work was organized according to the themes of selection criteria and language background, manpower, material resources and financial support.

Selection Criteria and Language Background

The study found that the selection criteria by the parent Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education were not clear for the primary school teachers on the programme. Teachers were asked to fill in application forms at their respective schools when the call for the programme was made. The names were forwarded to the District Education Offices for onward transmission to the Provincial Education Offices and finally landed to Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education head office. What really happened, teachers did not know. Those on the programme got phone calls and text messages informing them to register their willingness to be on the programme before proceeding to the host universities. One teacher in the focus group discussion to which the majority concurred had this to say:

I got a phone call from Harare that I had been selected to study on the CBP. I was really excited because I had wanted to advance myself but had no financial resources to do so. God really answered my prayers. The criteria are not for me to tell, the good thing is that am on the programme.

Initially the programme had included English and ChiShona but these were dropped in the last minute with the argument that they are already fully developed. Interestingly, the study found that some of those who had applied for these languages found themselves on either sign language or Early Child Development (ECD) programmes which they had very little knowledge about and had not applied for. While the question of nepotism and corruption in the selection criteria did not come out in the study, one cannot rule out the possibility.

The success of this educational programme hinged on getting the right teachers. The definition of 'right' was those teachers who are the native speakers of the language, committed to stay at those schools and add value to the teaching and learning of these minority languages. For the teachers on the programme a special entry was used as these primary school teachers did not have qualifications in the subjects they were studying. The study found that Tonga and Kalanga fell within the Ndebele zone and the politics of language dominance was evident as the independence of these languages threatened the Ndebele hegemony as some teachers from these areas had difficulty in getting released for the programme, the study found.

The study also found that the recruitment of students was done without consulting the hosting University. There was no coordination between the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and Great Zimbabwe University as the University just got a list of prospective students from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The government should be forgiven given that as a pioneer programme it had to get started but for the next group of students due processes should be followed to ensure the quality of the candidature.

The study findings also revealed that the lack of clarity on the selection criteria posed its own challenges. Firstly, some of the students on the programme did not come from those areas but were deployed there because that was where teaching vacancies existed. Some of the students on the programme were making frantic efforts to transfer to their regions of origin. If that happened, it would short change and defeat the programme's intentions. Secondly, issues of age, experience, qualifications, gender and the geographical spread of the schools should have been critically considered. The study revealed that some schools were oversubscribed while others did not have teachers on the programme. Achieving some balance would ensure that teachers across the divide would get the opportunity for greater impact, sustainability and continuity. Therefore, the selection criteria should have been more transparent with all stakeholders agreeing on the modalities.

Requisite Manpower

Successful curriculum implementation depends on the quality of the implementers. The study found that a total of fifteen (15) lecturers, three for each language, taught on the programme. Out of these, majority had first degrees and a teaching qualification as shown on the table below.

Table 1: Lecturers' qualifications

Qualifications	Languages				
	Nambya	Kalanga	Tonga	Shangaan	Venda
Diploma/certificate	0	0	0	0	0
B. Ed	2	3	1	0	1
B.A and Grad.C.E	1	0	2	1	0
M. Ed	0	0	0	0	0
M.A	0	0	0	2	2
Total	3	3	3	3	3

Table 2: Lecturers' tertiary and higher education experience

Higher and Tertiary Educ. experience	Languages				
	Nambya	Kalanga	Tonga	Shangaan	Venda
Nil	2	2	2	0	0
One year	1	1	1	0	0
Two years	0	0	0	0	0
Three years and above	0	0	0	3	3
Total	3	3	3	3	3

Thus the study found that the programme started without requisite manpower to man the programme given that these languages had been neglected for a long time. Most of the lecturers, while they were native speakers of the languages they were teaching, they had first degrees in other languages. The bulk of the lecturers were part – time teaching assistants head- hunted from teacher training colleges and schools basically looking at those who had language background, some authors in these languages and language activists from the minority languages. Furthermore, the University also made use of ZILPA who recommended some teachers as lecturers on the programme. This might not be the best way to recruit lecturers. The study found that most of the part time teaching assistants neither had the qualifications nor the experience to teach at this level but the positive aspect was that experienced lecturers kept a close eye and monitored the teaching – learning process and assisted whenever and wherever possible. It was Venda and Shangaan languages which had lecturers with requisite experience to teach at this level benefiting from Great Zimbabwe University offering these languages at undergraduate level. This helped the newly recruited teaching assistants to cut their teeth on the job with some confidence.

Observing them teach, the researchers saw them jittery at the start and with some growing confidence as days passed by. The other observation was that these teaching assistants were not given adequate time to prepare which was very necessary given their level of experience. Thus the ideal situation should have been to train lecturers first as what happened was placing the cart before the horse, a panic approach to programme implementation.

Material Resources

In terms of reading and other support resources, the researchers realised that the much needed material resources for easy implementation of the programme were not there. These languages, as already alluded to, had not been fully developed in terms of requisite literature. As observed during lectures, the lecturers did not have authors and literature in these minority languages to refer to save for Shangaan and Venda languages which had benefitted from the University of Venda and Great Zimbabwe University language development exchange programme. For the other languages, lecturers had to make reference to English, Ndebele and Shona literature which could be adapted in discussing various concepts. In addition, also observed in lecture rooms were lecturers and students arguing on some terminology especially in phonetics.

There is a dearth of literature in these minority languages. The net effect of this situation would be to restrict discussion, production of quality assignments and presentations which are enhanced through research. This would also compromise the kind of product from the programme as students would heavily depend on lecturer information with very little extension work. What this could point to is the need for financial intervention to fund the production of literature in these minority languages as an important ingredient to inspire, resuscitate and scaffold development of these languages. At this level, the need for dialogic reading and reflection cannot be overemphasised. This would enable students to connect meaningfully with their learning as well as their own environments.

Financial Support

The study found that the financial support where Government through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and UNICEF pay for tuition fees was a big relief and boost for most of the teachers on the programme. Most of teachers said that they could not afford astronomical university fees given their meager salaries. The financial support enabled them realise their dreams of obtaining a degree. One teacher in the focus group discussion had this to say:

I had almost given up on improving my qualifications since I left college with a diploma in education some years back. I have children at secondary school and could not compete with them on resources. This programme is the best and I hope its going to continue so that every teacher from the minority languages benefits.

Thus the study revealed that teachers were really elated with the financial gesture by Government and UNICEF but felt it could be extended to cover areas like accommodation and food. Majority of the teachers did not have relatives in Masvingo town and had to rent accommodation and most landlords on realizing the sudden demand, raised their rentals exerting some financial squeeze on these students. Students in the focus group unanimously agreed with these summarized statements:

For most of us it's our first time to be in Masvingo and finding accommodation for the block release period has not been easy. Landlords have not made our lives easy by raising their rentals as demand outstripped supply. The sad reality is that we do not have the money for accommodation and food. We are crowded in small rooms and this is not conducive for study.

These sentiments showed that those planning the programme should go beyond financially supporting students with tuition fees only but look at other areas that contribute to the total welfare of the students on this programme.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It has become a public secret that teachers in Zimbabwe earn far below the poverty datum line and the cost of goods and services has gone far beyond the reach of many. The sad reality is that most minority language teachers, by accident of history, come from ecological region four and five where livelihoods have been threatened by persistent droughts. Raising resources to academically and professionally improve themselves had been a luxury they could not afford and this programme had come at the most opportune time for most teachers from the minority languages. Further colleges and universities had no programmes for the minority languages and teachers from these speech communities had no option but to take languages available to them, that is ChiShona and IsiNdebele. The teachers were grateful to this very late gesture by the Government. 'Better late than never.' At least now teachers from these minority languages can hold better qualifications in their own languages which knowledge and skills they would use for improved teaching and learning.

From the conclusion the study makes the following three key recommendations. First, government should continue with the programme capacitating the generality of both primary and secondary teachers in these minority languages, raising them up to the level of their counterparts namely: English, ChiShona and IsiNdebele. Second, the support should take into account other hidden costs that these students bear like accommodation, photocopying, food and their general welfare when they come for lectures, and third, that universities should take the lead in establishing Journals in these indigenous languages in order to avail literature as well as ensure growth and development in these languages.

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