

Primary School Teachers' Comfortability with Generalised Teaching In Public Schools in Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the level of comfortability, adequacy of training/skills, influence of gender and years of experience on teachers preference for specialized teaching. Survey research design was adopted, and 254 teachers in Osun state, Nigeria participated in the study. Questionnaire on advocacy for specialised teaching in public primary schools was used to elicit information from the respondents. The result showed that 52% of the teachers were not comfortable with generalised teaching. The teachers reported having competence in teaching most of the major subjects except Health education, Music, Computer studies and French (99%, 96%, 80.7% and 94% respectively). Furthermore, agreement of teachers to specialized teaching across gender showed significant difference ($\chi^2=15.457$, $p>0.05$), but no significant difference with years of teaching experience ($\chi^2= 13.362$, $p <0.05$). It was therefore concluded that specialised subject teaching should be adopted in Nigerian primary schools.

Keywords: Specific teaching, Generalised teaching, Teachers method, Comfortability

1. Introduction

Education has become one of the most powerful weapons known for reducing poverty and inequality in modern societies. It is also used for laying the foundation for a sustainable growth and development of any nation. Primary education in particular is the level of education that develops in the individual the capacity to read, write and calculate. In other words, it helps to eradicate illiteracy, which is one of the strongest predictors of poverty (Bruns, Mingat & Rakotamalala 2003). Akinbote (2007) reports that the primary school years are very important years in a child's intellectual and all around development, therefore all primary school teachers should be intellectually sound to teach the school children with diverse interests, and capabilities.

A teacher is the central point of learning in a classroom situation. At the primary school level in Nigeria, a teacher teaches across all the subjects irrespective of his/her area of specialisation. The teacher has a class and takes all the subjects. It is worth noting that the teaching methodology of a teacher influences students' interest in that particular subject (Ohiwerei & Nwosu 2009). A National Certificate of Education (NCE) holder who specialises in English and Yoruba Languages for example might not be able to teach Mathematics and Science effectively if employed to teach all

subjects in the primary school. According to Barley and Brigham (2008) the nature of teaching can be different in rural areas than in suburban or urban areas, because of the small size of rural districts and schools. Teachers often need to teach multiple subjects and possibly multiple grades, sometimes in multigrade, mixed-age classrooms. Barrow and Burchett (2005) reported that 49 percent of rural science teachers in their study had more than four preparations. In some rural areas teachers also need to be prepared to teach students with a wide variety of skill levels in the same classroom (such as mainstreaming special education students and English language learner students). Perhaps the most significant difference between primary school and secondary school teaching is the relationship between teachers and children. In primary schools each class has a teacher who stays with them for most of the week and will teach them the whole curriculum. In secondary schools they will be taught by different subject specialists each session during the week and may have ten or more different teachers.

2. Literature Review

Good teaching demands that teachers know a lot of other things--for example, about learning, about their students, and about the cultural, social, and political contexts within which they work. Morgan and Hansen (2007) found that 60% of their sample of NSW primary school teachers would prefer to have a specialist teacher in the subjects of Music, Creative and Practical Arts, Computers and Science and Technology. Much of the current research posits that specialist teachers bring a number of important dimensions to a subject. Hennessy, (2000) for example, argues that specialist teachers bring greater confidence to the classroom, while Wilson Macdonald, Byrne, Ewing, and Sheridan (2008) contend that subject specialists use their specialized content knowledge to empower students to produce a higher quality of work. Emotional and values-based claims have also been made about the use of specialist primary teachers. Fromyhr (1995) reported that these specialists show greater 'enthusiasm' while others report that specialists 'value' the subject more highly (DeCorby, Halas, Dixon, Wintrup & Janzen (2005). Meanwhile Gazette (2008) believes that teacher subject specialization leads to teacher isolation in two ways; first, the teacher becomes isolated from teachers other than those teaching the same subject as themselves; second, the teacher is distanced from other subjects since she now concentrates on her one subject. The result is a teacher who has a very narrow perspective of life. School subjects are social constructions; their construction involves a deliberate 'slicing off' of a part of reality (the latter presenting itself to us as a whole) and as much as possible making it appear independent of other subjects but as a generalist teacher the relationship between children and their teachers tends to be closer in the primary school where they act as form tutor, specialist teacher and surrogate parent during the course of the day.

In a research carried out by Weiss, Banilower, McMahan, & Smith (2001) on elementary teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach various disciplines in self contained classes, where the teacher is responsible for teaching multiple subjects, 76 percent of these teachers reported feeling very well qualified to teach reading/language arts; in contrast, only 18 percent indicated feeling very well qualified to teach physical science. Social studies – 52%, Mathematics – 60%, Life science – 29%, Earth science – 25%. Also Ardzejewska, McMaugh & Coutts (2010) report that currently there is a great deal of discussion regarding the minimum standards required of pre-service primary teachers in Australia. It would appear underlying this, is an assumption that primary teachers are generalists who have an ability to provide instruction in all key subject areas. In contrast, there seems to be a parallel discourse increasingly promoting the need for specialist teachers in the primary school setting. It is unlikely however, that teachers approach all subjects with the same level of competence. Subject specialization has its advantages. First, teachers tend to like it because it gives them the opportunity to concentrate on that which they are most capable of, instead of being 'jacks of all trades'. This in a way is self-serving in that this specialization in turn gives the teacher a sense of professionalism. Secondly, there is evidence that students perform much better in a subject specialization system than in the current system. Specialization tends to increase teacher efficiency and effectiveness.

Odogwu (2000) reported that primary school teachers in most cases teach all the subjects in their classes. They have limited mathematical knowledge because they are not specialists. In that regard, they prefer to devote their time and effort to other subjects. Igboke (1975) described the foundation being laid for mathematics at the primary school as anything but strong and firm. He also observed that mathematics ranked high among those subjects which are poorly handled by teachers and greatly dreaded by the pupils. He emphasized that the status of mathematics in the primary school determines largely its status in the secondary school. This in turn determines the success or failure of it in the University. In other contexts it has been argued that the generalist primary teacher might be more appropriately employed as an 'expert' deliverer of prioritised key learning areas such as literacy, numeracy and science. Solo & Solon (2005) reported that teachers are of the opinion that the generalist teaching requirements of the curriculum reform especially for skills, attitudes and behaviours associated with "Making a Living" subject places high demand on teacher's knowledge and skills of the strands and sub-strand teaching relationships. In England it has been argued that the idea of the generalist is outdated and does not reflect practice (Alexander, Rose & Woodhead, 1992) and as such,

four types of primary specialist teachers were introduced (OFSTED, 1997). In his review into improving Literacy, Numeracy and Science Learning in Queensland, Australia, Masters (2009) claimed that “ideally, every primary school teacher would be an expert teacher of literacy, numeracy and science”, thus explicitly prioritizing the development of teacher competencies in some subject areas over others. This review further recommended that teachers be offered the opportunity to develop specialized subject knowledge and also advocated the employment of specialist teachers. Williams (2009) further articulated this vision by suggesting that primary schools would emulate the practice of high schools, forming curriculum departments with specialist teachers, whereby the specialist teacher “would hone their knowledge by teaching across year levels, and by delivering the same lessons to numerous classes within the same year level.” Williams further claimed that “curriculum and learning objectives would become truly standardised as specialists not only deliver deep knowledge but also uniformly plan and evaluate lessons”. Support for this position was found in an OFSTED (2009) survey which reported that when teachers “were less secure about aspects of a lesson which required subject-specific knowledge” they were unable to provide students with opportunities for deep learning. Such discourses represent a shift from the ideologically valued position of the subject generalist to one which appears to value the ‘deep knowledge’ of the subject specialist. There is also evidence of increasing perceptions that specialist skills are required for teaching primary school subjects (e.g. Appleton, 2003; Goulding Rowland & Barber, 2002; Hennessy, 2000; Wilson et al., 2008). It is based on these discourses that the researchers purposed to find out the perceptions of primary school teachers to the existing generalist form of teaching to subject specialist teaching. In carrying out this study, the following objectives were highlighted:

3. Objectives

- 1) To find out the level of comfortability of teachers in teaching all subjects in a class
- 2) To determine teacher’s perceived adequacy of training/skills they have in teaching all subjects
- 3) To find out the influence of gender and years of experience on teachers preference for specialized teaching or otherwise

4. Research Questions In achieving the objectives above the following research questions were raised

- 1) How comfortable are the teachers with generalised teaching in primary schools?
- 2) To what extent do teachers agree with specialised teaching in primary schools?
- 3) Are teachers well prepared during training to teach all subjects?

5. Hypotheses

- 1) There is no significant difference in the level of agreement of teachers to specialized training across gender.
- 2) There is no significant difference in the level of agreement of teachers to specialized teaching across years of experience in service.

6. Methodology

A sample size of 300 primary school teachers was selected randomly from all the 30 local government areas in Osun state, during a training workshop that was organised by Osun State Universal Basic Education Board for primary school teachers in the state. Ten representatives from each of the 30 local government areas of the state participated in the study.

A self developed questionnaire titled “Questionnaire on advocacy for specialised teaching in public primary schools” was used to elicit information from the respondents. The instrument is divided into 2 sections. Section A elicited responses on respondents’ personal data while section B consists of items on teachers preference and comfortability with generalised and specialised teaching. The validity and reliability of the research instrument was ensured. The reliability coefficients of instrument were between 0.72 and 0.78. The questionnaire was given to experts in the field of education for experts’ judgement. Some of the items were removed while some were restructured before a total number of 13 items were retained. Of all the 300 copies of the questionnaire administered, 254 (valid) copies were returned. Data collected were analysed using simple percentages and chi-square

7. Results

Research question 1: How comfortable are the teachers with generalised teaching?

To answer this question, item 12 of the questionnaire was subjected to descriptive analysis using simple percentile to determine the level of comfortability of the teachers with a single teacher teaching all the school subjects in a class and 254 valid responses were. The result is as presented in table 1 at the end of the article. The result revealed that 52% of the teachers were not comfortable with a teacher teaching all the subjects to the students. The result also showed that just 1.6% of the respondents were extremely comfortable, 28% were comfortable and 17.3% were slightly comfortable with the generalised teaching.

<Table 1 about here>

Research Question 2: What is the level of teachers' agreement with specialised teaching in primary schools?

This research question was drawn as a follow up to the first one. By implication, if someone agrees with the first question, such a respondent would be expected to disagree with the second one. In an attempt to answer the research question, item 13 of the instrument was subjected to descriptive analysis (simple percentages) to determine the extent to which primary school teachers agree with specialised teaching in their schools. The result is as presented in table 2. It is obvious that majority of the teachers were in agreement with specialized teaching. This is evident with 83.4% support for specialised teaching at different levels of agreement. Only 14.2% of the teachers were in disagreement with it while 2.4% of them were undecided.

<Table 2 about here>

Research Question 3: Are teachers well prepared during training to teach all subjects?

A section of the instrument that elicited responses on teachers' preparedness for the teaching of all the subjects was subjected to descriptive analysis. The result is presented below in table 3 and it shows that most of the respondents claimed they were well prepared to teach the major subjects such as Mathematics (94%), English Language (97%), Elementary Science (96%), Yoruba Language (94%), Social Studies (86%), Writing (93%), Home Economics (93%) and Religious Studies (92%). On the other hand it was only a very few teachers that were well prepared to teach subject like Health Education (1%), Music (4%), Computer (19.3%) and French (6%).

<Table 3 about here>

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the level of agreement of teacher to specialized teaching across gender.

Chi square analysis was used to test this hypothesis where different levels of agreement of teachers with specialised teaching were cross-tabulated with gender of the respondents. The results are as presented on table 4.

<Table 4 about here>

the result shows a chi-square value of 13.362 at $p = 0.010$ ($p < 0.05$). Since p value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected and it was concluded that there is a significant difference in the level of agreement of teachers to specialized teaching across gender. The result shows more female teachers agreeing to specialized teaching than male teachers, though there were more female respondents because the population of female primary school teachers was more than that of their male counterparts.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the level of agreement of teachers to specialized teaching across years of experience in service.

To answer this research hypothesis, respondents' level of agreement with specialised teaching was cross-tabulated with respondents' years of experience in service. The result is as presented in table 5. Results from table 5 above show a chi-square value of 15.457 at $p = 0.217$ ($p > 0.05$). In as much p value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted and it was concluded that there is a significant difference in the level of agreement of teachers with specialised teaching across years of teaching experience.

<Table 5 about here>

8. Discussion

The results of the study revealed that majority of primary school teachers are not comfortable with generalised teaching. Actually, researches have revealed that most teachers would rather want to specialise on the subject they majored. This appears contrary to the findings of Sawyer 2008 that decontextualised, abstract, narrow, specialised learning is rather outdated. This also appears to be the conclusion from European Commission (2007) which stresses that a renewed science-teaching pedagogy which involved widening one's horizon beyond narrow and abstract approach to subject areas, is fundamental to keep up students' interest in science, nevertheless, deep subject knowledge in one subject area and feeling comfortable with the subject will promote effective and innovative teaching and learning. Morgan and Hansen (2007) even found out that 60% of their sample of primary school teachers would prefer to have a specialist teacher in the subjects of Music, Creative and Practical Arts, Computers and Science and Technology.

The results further revealed that teachers said that they were well prepared for most of the core subjects in primary school. The minimum requirement for teaching in Nigerian basic education comprising primary and junior secondary schools now is National Certificate in Education (NCE). In this teacher training programme, a teacher majors on two teaching subjects except trainees majoring on primary education studies (PES) who will combine one other teaching subject with the PES. Trainees under PES are normally given some general training on almost all subjects which is

believed would make them capable of teaching these subject at elementary level. Though these set of teachers are given some training in all subjects, but this has not made them specialists in these subjects and may not likely handle the subjects as experts or specialists would do.

It was also discovered from the study that the level of agreement of teachers to specialized teaching differ across gender with more female agreeing to it more than male. This is not far fetched because the population of the female primary school teachers was greater than that of male. Contrary to gender difference, years of teaching experiences did not influence teachers' agreement to specialised teaching. This is by implication indicates that primary school teachers in Nigeria generally prefer specialised teaching to generalised teaching irrespective of their year of teaching experience. These teachers also believed as it has been established in literature that this will promote effective teaching and make teachers more competent in their areas of specialisation. Williams (2009) argued that through specialist teaching, the specialist teacher "would hone their knowledge by teaching across year levels, and by delivering the same lessons to numerous classes within the same year level." Williams further claimed that "curriculum and learning objectives would become truly standardised as specialists not only deliver deep knowledge but also uniformly plan and evaluate lessons". Support for this position was found in an OFSTED (2009) survey which reported that when teachers "were less secure about aspects of a lesson which required subject-specific knowledge" they were unable to provide students with opportunities for deep learning.

Having placed the advantages of specialised teaching side by side with that of generalised teaching, and having reviewed literature and sought the opinion of primary school teachers in practice, it is therefore pertinent to conclude and recommend that all efforts must be put in place by the government and policy makers to make sure that specialised teaching is adopted and practiced in Nigerian primary schools. Most of the western countries that Nigeria tries to model her educational system after, have seen generalised teaching as out of fashion. Nigeria should therefore go with the current trend of practicing specialised teaching in primary schools.

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Table 1. Teachers' level of comfortability with generalised teaching

Question	Extremely Comfortable	Comfortable	Slightly Comfortable	Not Comfortable	Undecided
How comfortable are you that a teacher has to teach all subjects?	4 (1.6%)	71 (28.0%)	44 (17.3%)	132 (52.0%)	

Table 2. Teachers' level of agreement with specialised teaching in primary schools

Question	Extremely Agree	Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided
What is your level of agreement with specialized teaching in your school?	4 (1.5%)	208 (81.9%)	3 (1.2%)	33 (13%)	6 (2.4%)

Table 3. Degree of preparedness of teachers to teach all subjects

Subject	Response	
	Well prepared to teach	Not well prepared to teach
Mathematics	94%	6%
English	97%	3%
Health Education	1%	99%
Social Studies	86%	14%
Music	4%	96%
Writing	93%	7%
Home Economics	93%	7%
Yoruba	94%	6%
Elementary Science	96%	4%
Computer	19.3%	80.7%
Religious Studies	92%	8%
French	6%	94%

Table 4. Level of agreement with specialised teaching across gender

Level of agreement	Gender			df	χ^2	p
	Male	Female	Total			
Disagree	5	27	32	4	13.362	0.010 (< 0.05)
Slightly Disagree	3	0	3			
Undecided	0	4	4			
Agree	71	131	202			
Extremely-agree	2	2	4			
Total	81	164	245			

Table 5. Level of agreement with specialised teaching across years of teaching experience

Level of agreement	Year of Experience				Total	df	χ^2	p
	0 – 10	11 – 20	21 – 30	31 – 40				
Disagree	4	9	15	2	30	12	15.457	0.217 (> 0.05)
Slightly Disagree	0	1	2	0	3			
Undecided	1	2	1	0	4			
Agree	27	70	97	3	197			
Extremely-agree	0	0	3	1	4			
Total	32	82	118	6	238			

Appendix 1: QUESTIONNAIRE ON ADVOCACY FOR SPECIALISED TEACHING IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS

SECTION A: PERSONAL DATA

- (1) Sex: M () F ()
 (2) Total number of years of experience in service:
 (3) Number of students in your school:
 (4) Numbers of teachers in your school:

SECTION B: ISSUES ON SPECIALISED TEACHING

- (5) Do you think the number of teacher to student ratio in your school is adequate Yes () No ()
 (6) How many subjects are teachers supposed to teach in your school? Tick as many as apply
- (a) Mathematics ()
 - (b) English ()
 - (c) Soc. Sciences ()
 - (d) Home Economics / Family living ()
 - (e) Primary science / Elementary science ()
 - (f) B.K / CRK ()
 - (g) Health Education ()
 - (h) Music ()
 - (i) Writing (Lower Primary) ()
 - (j) Yoruba ()
 - (k) Computer ()
 - (l) French ()
 - (m) Any other subject(s) not listed:
- (7) Which of these subjects are currently being offered in your school? Tick as many as apply
- (a) Mathematics ()
 - (b) English ()
 - (c) Soc. Sciences ()
 - (d) Home Economics / Family living ()
 - (e) Primary science / Elementary science ()
 - (f) B.K / CRK ()
 - (g) Health Education ()
 - (h) Music ()
 - (i) Writing (Lower Primary) ()
 - (j) Yoruba ()
 - (k) Computer ()
 - (l) French ()
- (8) As head teacher do you combine teaching with your duties? Yes () No ()
 (9) Which class do you teach with your role as head? (Tick all that apply)
- Primary one ()
 - Primary two ()
 - Primary three ()
 - Primary four ()
 - Primary five ()
 - Primary six ()
- (10) Are you well prepared during training at Grade II, NCE, Degree to teach all the following subjects
- (a) Mathematics ()
 - (b) English ()
 - (c) Soc. Sciences ()
 - (d) Home economics / Family living ()
 - (e) Primary science / Elementary science ()
 - (f) B.K / CRK ()
 - (g) Health Education ()

- (h) Music ()
 (i) Writing ()
 (j) Yoruba ()
 (k) Computer ()
 (l) French ()

(11) Can you effectively teach the following subjects?

- (a) Mathematics ()
 (b) English ()
 (c) Soc. Sciences ()
 (d) Home economics / Family living ()
 (e) Primary science / Elementary science ()
 (f) B.K / CRK ()
 (g) Health Education ()
 (h) Music ()
 (i) Writing ()
 (j) Yoruba ()
 (k) Computer ()
 (l) French ()

(12) How comfortable are you that a teacher has to teach all subjects

Not Comfortable Slightly Comfortable Undecided Comfortable Extremely-Comfortable

(13) To what extent do you agree that there should be specialized teaching in your school. That is, some teachers should teach Science Subjects, Some Arts, some Languages e.t.c.

Disagree Slightly Disagree Undecided Agree Extremely agree