Reflective Practice as a Tool for Quality Assurance in Professional Development of Primary School Teachers

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The purpose of this article is to advocate for the institutionalisation and implementation of reflective practice in the Zambian education system so that quality assurance among primary school teachers is achieved. Reflective practice is a common phenomenon in successive and effective educational systems and teachers in the world. It has been regarded as one of the characteristics successive and quality educational systems and teachers in the world (Rarieya, 2005). This means that the quality of any educational system and teachers can be measured by their engagement in reflective practice.

From the above it can be said that reflective practice is closely related to quality assurance in that the quality of any educational system and teachers is to a larger extent affected by the presence or absence of reflective practice. Researchers (Stanton, 1990; Braun & Crampler, 2005) have indicated that primary school teachers who do not engage in reflective practice their teaching become haphazardly, accidentally and superficially done. Such primary school teachers are more likely to teach in the same way they were taught and this would result into the repetition of the same ineffective strategies and this automatically affect the quality assurance of the educational system.

Quality assurance according to Harvey and Green (1993:19-20) is about "ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to insure that the desired quality however defined and measured delivered. The assumption implicit in the development of quality assurance is that if mechanisms exists, quality can be assured."

From the above definition, it is important to note that before society can demand quality from the education system and from our primary school teachers there is need to ensure that mechanisms, procedures and processes are put in place. Reflective practice is among the procedures, mechanisms and processes that can enhance quality assurance.

Since its inception reflective practice has been defined and conceptualised in many different ways by different researchers and educationalists. However, despite disagreements on the concept of reflective practice, there is worldwide acknowledgement of the importance of reflective practice. Reflective practice has been institutionalised in many educational systems in western countries; but few in African countries. This paper therefore focuses on the Zambian educational system. This is because the systemic practice of reflective practice by primary school teachers in Zambia is still scant and have remained unchecked and underestimated as evidently shown by poor academic performance of learners at primary school level in all grades and all curriculum areas and little research concerning reflective practice. The scarcity of information on primary school teachers’ reflective practice in Zambia is regrettable because it is this kind of evidence that curriculum developers, teacher trainers and teachers appear to be requiring so as to insure quality assurance in the education sector.

I. THE CURRENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN ZAMBIA

The current structure of the education system in Zambia consists of 7-5-4 structure. The seven years is for primary education from grades one to seven and the five years is for secondary education. The four years are for tertiary education which would include college or university education.

In Zambia, learners’ academic performance at primary school level in all grade levels and all curriculum areas has been persistently poor (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2006 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015; 2016; Shumba, 2013). For example Kelly (2000) showed that there is poor academic performance at primary school level when he indicated that learners are usually behind by two grades in their academic performance. According to Kelly (2000)’s study a learner in grade six performed at the level of a grade four learner, and those in grade five performed at the level of pupils in grade three while those in grade four performed at the level of learners in grade two. When Kelly (2000)’s analysis is put into consideration, first years at college would be considered to be performing at the level of a grade eleven pupils and this explains the type of graduate teachers that colleges are offloading into the teaching profession. This means that learners proceed to the next grade level with poor skills and knowledge because schools have failed to equip them with essential skills and knowledge despite heavy investment in education (Beyani, 2013).
II. DEFINITION OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE
Reflective practice has been defined in several ways by different scholars based on their philosophies and other connotations. For example, Campoy (2010) cited by Aldahmash, Alshmrani and Almufti (2017) looked at reflective practice as thinking critically about what is happening in the classroom where the teacher is teaching. In addition Dewey (1933:6) as cited by Aldahmash et al (2017) indicated reflective practice as: “Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the ground that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” This means that reflective teacher’s teaching process depends on reasoned principles than acting routinely and following of instructions without questioning (Aldahmash, Alshmrani and Almufti 2017). Bartelheim (1993) considered reflective practice as a decision making theory that defines a set of components professionals might use to resolve unique or complex problems as they arise. This means that reflective practice is the integration of professional experience with theory and research to formulate solutions to problems at hand (Bartelheim, 1993). In this paper reflective practice is defined as a classroom instructional practice that involves the meditation on a problematic or complex classroom situation so that reasoned and appropriate solutions to that particular classroom situation or problem are arrived at.

It is clear from the above definitions of reflective practice that no one single definition can suffice however; the main idea of reflective practice is that it is a classroom instructional practice that needs a teacher to think critically about the problematic situation and then make reasoned and appropriate solutions so as to improve the classroom situation. When reflective practice is taken in this manner, then it becomes an important tool that can be used to support the professional knowledge and skills of teachers and this would lead to the improvement of quality in education.

III. PURPOSE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE
As noted above, reflective practice is a classroom instructional practice involving thinking critically on a problematic situation and the establishment of reasoned and appropriate solutions that need to be supported by clearly defined school goals and policies for the sole purpose of improving the quality of education. This therefore means that reflective practice would act as a magnifying glass or microscope that would provide teachers with an opportunity to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their classroom instructional practice. As teachers identify the strengths and weaknesses in their classroom instructional practice they would be able to make reasoned and appropriate adjustments and this would lead to improvement in the quality of education. This means that reflective practice is a tool for quality assurance.

Zalipour (2015) presented the following as the purposes of reflective practice

i. Reflective practice is a tool for self-knowledge
ii. Reflective practice as a tool for professional development
iii. Reflective practice aids research on teaching
iv. It enhances learners’ learning experience
v. Reflective act as a tool for teaching and assessment (reflective Journal)

IV. CHALLENGES FACED BY PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS WITH REGARD TO ENGAGEMENT IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE
In a study conducted by Likando (2019) that focused on reflective practice among primary school teachers in Lukulu and Mongu districts of Western province in Zambia, one of the objectives focused on identifying challenges primary school teachers in Lukulu and Mongu faced in practicing reflective teaching. The accessible sample for this study was 32 primary school teachers and was drawn from different schools within the two districts of Western province. During the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions held with the respondents it was discovered that the respondents faced a number of challenges with regard to their engagement in reflective practice.

All the 32 participants involved in the study indicated that lack of training as the major challenge to their engagement in reflective practice. The primary school teachers indicated in this study that they had not received any training in reflective practice either at college during their pre-service education or in professional learning communities as in-service teachers. This finding is similar to the finding that White (2015) observed in line with social workers. In White (2015)'s study the participants lamented that they had not received any formal training with regard to reflective practice. This was also observed by Posthuma (2010)'s study in which it was acknowledged that the respondents had inadequacies in their training in reflective practice thus they failed to articulate reflective practice in conceptually and theoretically terms.

Lack of training in reflective practice has numerous consequences for the teacher, learner and educational system. For instance, the lack of conceptual and theoretical understanding about reflective practice may be attributed to the lack of training with regards to reflective practice. This is evidently seen from the responses obtained during the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted by Likando (2019). Primary school teachers in this study failed to express their conceptual and theoretical understanding of reflective practice. Moreover, all the respondents clearly failed to bring out definitions of reflective practice that were supported by conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

When primary school teachers are not trained in reflective practice, they are not expected to be reflective in their practice. However, the common tendency by those in authority is to assume that primary school teachers can become reflective practitioners by trial and error without in
training in reflective practice. It should be noted that primary school teachers cannot become reflective practitioners by trial and error. For primary school teachers to become reflective practitioners they need to undergo training in reflective practice. The training in reflective practice would equip primary school teachers with knowledge and skills in different conceptual and theoretical frameworks, reflective methodology or models and various aspects of reflective practice. Equipped with the knowledge and skills in reflective practice, primary school teachers would be aware of and easily articulate an understanding of reflective practice. They will be able to make distinctions between effective and ineffective practices.

Without training in reflective practice, it entails that all efforts aimed at a quality assurance and paradigm shift from traditional-oriented model of knowledge and skills transmission to reflective model would be in vein. This means that primary school teachers would continue being exposed to technical-focused type of training in which they would be viewed as technicians. In the technical model of training the focus is on technical issues such as classroom management, classroom teaching, learners' behavioural issues, teaching techniques and subject content (Zeichner and Liston, 1996). The focus on technical issues as noted by Zeichner and Liston (1996) was evidently seen in the primary school teachers involved in this study. Primary school teachers under this type of training relied heavily on routine behaviour and impulse, traditions and authority as noted by Posner (1989) cited by White (2015).

The implication for training primary school teachers as technicians is that there will be a perpetuation of teacher centered methodologies in which learners passively receive knowledge and skills that have been decided upon by others without questioning the status quo. This is the type of education that Freire (1974) criticised and referred to as banking education.

Another challenge identified by primary school teachers in this study was time. All the primary school teachers involved in this study indicated that they were constrained to engage in reflective practice because of time. This finding is in line with White (2015)'s study in which the respondents indicated that they were so busy with their work that they could not find time for regular or consistent reflection. This issue of lack of time was more pronounced in the study conducted by Khan (2012). In Khan (2012) the majority of the respondents regarded lack of time as the major challenge to their engagement in reflective practice.

The lack of time for reflective practice may be attributed to many factors. These would be the rigidity of the school time table and workload experienced by primary school teachers. The school time is allocated in such a way that it does not allow for reflections and flexibility by the teacher. During the teaching process in primary schools, when one lesson ends the other lesson immediately begins leaving no time for the teacher to either prepare for the next lesson or conduct reflective practice.

The lack of collaboration among primary school teachers was another challenge identified by the respondents in the study by Likando (2019). It should be noted that colleagues within the school can prevent their fellow teachers from engaging in reflective practice therefore colleagues in school can be part of the unsupportive school working environment. According to Ur (1996) cited in Zehra (2012) Primary school teachers at times usually have feelings of professional rivalry amongst themselves. The sense of professional rivalry among primary school teachers in primary schools may lead to lack of collaboration. The lack of collaboration among primary school teachers means that primary school teachers may be afraid to share their professional challenges with one another.

The lack of collaboration among primary school teachers may be attributed to the type of training, over-burdened and personal experiences encountered in the working environment. With regard to the type of training, it is necessary to note that most of our primary teachers colleges of education promote competitiveness among the student teachers than cooperation or collaboration. The examinations and different assignments given to the student teachers are all aligned to competition among students. The student teachers are trained to work in isolation as they acquire the knowledge and skills for actual teaching. This spirit of competitiveness is brought along with them as they start the actual teaching process and would want to be grade as best teachers in school. With such behaviour from teachers, it is more unlikely that they would engage in collaboration with their colleagues thus create an environment in the school that is not supportive and cooperative.

Additionally, primary school teachers may be over burden with a lot of work and may not have any spare time to attend to challenges brought by their colleagues. This creates unsupportive and uncooperative school working environment. Some primary school teachers may have had bad experiences during their teaching lifetime with colleagues. As noted above, sometimes primary school teachers are professional enemies and may not be willing to support each other in times when one has professional challenges. They would rather look down upon each other in times of professional challenges and this would eventuate to a situation where primary school teachers become afraid to share the professional challenges with colleagues for fear of being labeled incompetent or lazy teachers. These experiences create an environment that is not supportive and cooperative, thus primary school teachers would prefer working in isolation to collaboration.

Primary school teachers were asked to indicate whether they had heard or read of a policy on reflective practice. Based on the analysis of data from the responses provided by the respondents during the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and through document analysis, it was revealed that there was no policy on reflective practice.
Policy is of great importance as it influences and informs the uptake of reflective practice by primary school teachers. This is because policy acts as a medium through which the philosophical ideologies are transmitted. Therefore, according to White (2015) having an inherent policy on reflective practice is significant in that it can instill a reflective outlook and approach in the context of practice. The existence of a policy on reflective practice is a significant pre-condition to the development of an effective reflective practice and an important variable in perpetuating the transformative application of reflective practice by primary school teachers (White, 2015).

The non-existence of a policy on reflective practice as revealed in this study by primary school teachers has many consequences. Without a policy on reflective practice, it means that there would be no supportive mechanisms, strategies, systems, procedures or methods that would be used to structure an effective reflective training programme. This means that primary school teachers would not be trained in reflective practice and the lack of training in reflective practice among primary school teachers is visible. The lack of training in reflective practice is evidently seen in primary school teachers’ failure to clearly express their understanding and ill-defining reflective practice. This therefore, symbolises the lack of knowledge and skills in reflective practice. When a policy on reflective practice is in place even the supportive factors would be in place and this in return would make primary school teachers engage in reflective practice.

When there is no policy on reflective practice in place, primary school teachers may not receive any training in reflective practice, therefore, primary school teachers may not be expected to be reflective practitioners. Additionally, primary schools may not be expected to have policies in place that promote a reflective culture in the school. This is so because policies at school level are usually derived from the national policy. This means that primary school teachers cannot develop into reflective practitioners by themselves or chance but there is need for guiding principles as Larrivee (2008) states that “the general accepted position is that without carefully constructed guidance, prospective and novice teachers as well as more experienced teachers seem unable to engage in pedagogical and critical reflection to enhance their practice.” However, the tendency by those in power is to force primary school teachers to engage in pedagogical and critical reflection without providing policy guidance to the teachers.

V. STRATEGIES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

a) There is need for the development of a localized model on the training of teachers in reflective practice. This would equip primary school teachers with the knowledge and skills in reflective practice.

b) Potential college and university lecturers need to be trained and equipped with the knowledge and skills in reflective practice as part of the implementation strategy of the national policy on reflective practice of primary school teachers.

c) The curriculum in primary teachers’ college of education need to be revised so that it move away from the technical type of educating teachers to a reflective teacher training programme. In this way it would promote participatory teachers and the movement of teacher training from theoretical orientation to practical.

d) There should capacity building training for in-service teachers so as to build their reflective knowledge and skills.

e) There is need to change the generic lesson plan format. This would involve replacing the evaluation part of the lesson plan with reflection or self-reflection. This would make teachers reflect more on their lessons unlike the focus on evaluation of lessons.

f) There should be time created within the primary school timetable for teacher to reflect on their lessons. This should be done in such a way that 5 minutes is allocated at the end of every lesson for reflection by the teacher.

g) There should be deliberate efforts that need to be encouraged, supported and enhanced so that collaboration between the teachers in the area of collaborative reflection takes place. This would help primary school teachers share best practices, their weaknesses and strengths.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear now that there is need for the institutionalisation and implementation of reflective practice in the Zambian education system if quality assurance is to be achieved. This is because there is a strong relationship between reflective practice and quality assurance. Without reflective practice among primary school teachers, the quest for quality education will remain unattained and illusionary. However, if reflective practice becomes institutionalised there are a lot of benefits that the education system may accrue. Therefore if we are to improve the quality of the educational system in Zambia there is urgent need to institutionalised reflective practice.

REFERENCES


