

To What Extent Do Classroom Teachers Benefit from Academic Research Outputs from Higher Institutions in Africa? Implications for Quality Teacher Education Programmes

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Abstract: Quality of teaching in African schools is expected to be enhanced by the quality of researches from faculties in various universities all over the continent. The essence of academic research is to make contribution to educational knowledge that informs school reform efforts and professional development of teachers. Every year tons and tons of research are carried out in these universities, a majority of which outcomes are published in academic journals and other outlets. However, academic journals still remain the most powerful and reliable outlet for publishing research outcomes. Expectedly, findings from these researches are to influence classroom practices of school teachers (both primary and secondary). This study, therefore reports a study that determined the extent to which primary school teachers in Botswana benefit from academic research outputs, especially those published in journals. Two hundred primary and junior secondary schools teachers constitute the sample for the study. They were randomly selected from a group of in-service teachers who are on their bachelor of education degree programme in the University of Botswana. A questionnaire targeted “Teachers’ Perceptions of Benefits Derived from Academic Journals” with a reliability coefficient of 0.96 using Cronbach alpha constituted the only instrument used for data collection. Five research questions were raised and answered in the study. Major findings include: A very low percentage of teachers ever consulted a journal in solving academic problems (less than 50% of the sample), no gender difference in the perceptions of teachers of the usefulness of academic journals, also the level of teaching (i.e., primary or secondary) had no influence on the sample perceptions. The implications of the findings were discussed, especially as it affects quality of teachers in Botswana specifically and Africa in general. The findings have implications for re-orienting our teacher education programmes to cater for the research phobia of school teachers in Africa.

Key words: Academic journals, research, tertiary institutions, quality teacher education, classroom teachers, Botswana, Africa

INTRODUCTION

The increasing role of research in universities derived primarily within the common universities particularly since the beginning of the 20th century (Halsey, 1992). Today the university is seen as both a teaching and research institution. The gap between academic researchers in African tertiary institutions and their classroom counterparts are ever widening. Whereas this gap seems very narrow in developed world, where there have been so many collaborations between the two sides over the years, in Africa the same can not be reported. In fact teachers in developed countries are increasingly taking a proactive role as producers of research (Denscombe, 1995). In Africa, there are still so many things to be done to restructure the social relations and political economy of knowledge production in educational research. This study

will focus on the extent to which classroom teachers’ benefit from academic research outputs from tertiary institutions in the continent through the perceptions of the teachers of academic journals. The focus on journals was premised on the fact that journals still remain the most credible means for academics to communicate their research findings. This exercise may be considered important because as academics we often fail to acknowledge that it is we and our career and not the world beyond that receives most of the benefit of our works (Zeichner, 1995).

Literature is replete with many researches regarding the awkward relationship between academic researchers and classroom teachers. Zeichner (1995) observed that educational research has been strangely very uneducational. According to him, more often than not, knowledge presented to teachers generated through

academic educational research is presented in a reified form which does not invite teachers to engage with it intellectually.

Sarland (2001), for example, in a paper which focuses on the similarities of the features embodied in a teacher-initiated local curriculum development project in the seventies and the findings of the ESRC Teachers as Researchers (TAR) project in the mid-nineties, examined the relationship of the teachers engaged in action research in their schools and classrooms with outsiders and outside contributions. He alerts us to the 'complexity inherent in teacher research and teacher involvement in change and development' suggesting that these complexities are 'all too often ignored in the literature'. He cites two features requiring scrutiny in particular, 'the important involvement of outsider support' and the consequent feature, if we read him correctly, of 'the problematic of the teacher as 'authentic' voice'. Winkler (2001) in her paper on the role of 'reflection and theory' in teacher development articulates one of these traps well when describing how 'my obligation to honour the experience of teachers limits my own critical engagement with the purpose of the task'. (2001). Notwithstanding the tacit existence of such shadowy dilemmas, inevitably inherent in the relationships between practice and theory and between academics and teachers, more explicit dilemmas felt real enough when, in spite of similar starting places, fault lines in NASC partners' agendas began to emerge more distinctly.

Somekh (2000) in her discussion on Straddling discourse boundaries, where she writes: 'The practical and case-specific discursive narratives of the classroom are quite different from the analytical textual style of research reports that claim to present knowledge and understanding that is generalizable to a wide range of contexts. The two discourses are quite distinct, so much so that academics gain little credit towards career advancement for writing in "professional" journals and teachers seldom read articles in 'academic' journals'. Teachers did want to write about and disseminate their research, but they reported that they wished to do so in a manner that other teachers would find of practical worth and direct application to their schools and classrooms. Zamorski (2004) pointed out that this was not true of all the teachers as a small minority did wish to write, publish and present to an academic audience. But during the second phase, in line with the other shifts of responsibility, the overall management of the writing moved into the hands of University staff, who necessarily had a dual audience in mind on all occasions when doing so.

In most instances, teachers normally consider some of the findings and recommendations from academic research as prescriptive program for teachers to implement, some of which they considered antithetical to normal classroom practices. This has led to the phenomenon of "research says" according to Little (1993), a syndrome which Zeichner (1995) observed has increasingly become a means of exercising institutional authority over researchers rather than for informing teachers' judgments. These observations were put in a more perspective by Atkins (1994) when he attempted to summarize the condition where academic educational research largely proceeds along almost independently of what happens in schools and the world at large and I quote: "I have come to believe that educational research as we view it today is not an enterprise that makes much of a difference on actual educational events, either in classrooms or in forums where decisions are made about the directions and workings of the educational enterprise". This statement credited to Atkins (1994) actually described the situation in most African countries. Where it is not only the teachers who do not reflect research finding in their classrooms, but even educational policy makers in our governments take decisions without taking cognizance of existing research findings in the area. Therefore, a lot of research findings in our universities is just being wasted on their shelves gathering dust. Even when these findings are published in 'reputable' academic journals they seldom impact on practices in classrooms and policy decision-making.

Zeichner (1995) made the following observations about the dichotomy between academics and teachers:

We must have the courage to take these risks and form new alliances with teachers. Unless we begin to make the kind of changes to establish dialogues about our research, to form genuine research collaborations with teachers, academic educational research will continue to be flayed by teachers and policy makers.

These observations remain valid for African academics and teachers today. As noted by Gipps, (1993), the current isolation of teachers and academics from each other and the way both academics and teachers have been subject in some countries to reactionary government policies have undermined the goals of equity and social justice and ignored discussion, debate and research evidence of any kind. However, as observed by Denscombe (1995) teachers, like any audience, have certain preferences and dispositions. "They are not blank sheets waiting to receive enlightenment through research

findings. They have pre-existing attitudes and opinions, views and preferences on 'intellectual baggage' shaping their receptiveness to research. In most instances, academic researchers enter into the schools for their studies even without the prior knowledge of the teachers. This brings about a lot of resentments from the teachers; to the extent a great majority of the teachers do not see the need for them to read products of such studies. This situation still persists.

Although there has been a considerable emphasis on university teachers publishing their research findings in academic journals, both on -shore and off shore, little attention has been given to the extent to which the supposed beneficiaries of such findings, really do benefit from them. Therefore, the major focus of this study was to determine the extent to which primary and junior secondary school teachers in Botswana benefit from academic outputs from tertiary institutions, especially those published in journals. The study then examined the perceptions of the teachers of academic journal articles, in terms of their accessibility; usage in solving classroom problems, difficulty in language used in writing journal articles and the influence of research reports on teachers' classroom practices generally? Specifically, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

- What is the general perception of teachers of academic journals?
- What is the level of accessibility of academic journals to primary and junior secondary school teachers in Botswana?
- Will there be a difference in the perceptions of teacher based on gender?
- Will the level of teaching (primary or junior secondary) influence teachers perceptions of usefulness of journal articles?
- Will there be a difference in teachers' preference for academic journals and textbooks?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is essentially a survey study. The focus was just to obtain information from the selected sample on their perspective of usefulness or otherwise of the academic journals to classroom teachers. Two hundred primary and junior secondary teachers constituted the sample for the study. They were randomly selected from a group of in-service teachers who are on their bachelor of education degree programme in the department of primary education, University of Botswana. The sample consisted of 124 primary school teachers (87.4%) and 25 secondary school teacher (i.e. 12.6%); with 46 male (i.e. 23.0%) and 154

female teachers (i.e. 77.0%). Also the years of teaching experience of the sample were distributed as follows: 0-5years (4.0%), 6-10years (22.0%), 11-15 years (26.0%), 16-20 years (932.0%) and 21 years and above (16%). A questionnaire targeted "Teachers Perceptions of Benefit Derived from Academic Journals" with a reliability coefficient of 0.96 using Cronbach Alpha constituted the only instrument used for data collection. The questionnaires were administered to the sample in a normal classroom setting and collected back immediately. The completed questionnaires were collected, collated and analyzed using mainly the descriptive statistics; frequency and percentages and the chi square statistics to determine the significance of the observed frequencies.

RESULTS

The first question we asked the teachers was to indicate if they are members of professional organization and bodies. Only 25 (i.e., 12.5%) of the sample indicated they belong to one professional group or the other, while a whopping size, 175 (i.e. 87.5%) indicated that they do not belong to any professional group. To determine the teachers' familiarity with academic journals, they were asked whether they ever researched a classroom problem through reading of academic journals. About 85 (i.e. 42.5%) of our sample indicated they ever consulted a journal for solving any classroom problem, while 115 (i.e. 57.5%) said they never consulted a journal for tackling classroom problems. For those who indicated they used academic journals, they were asked when last they consulted a journal in solving problems. A large percentage, i.e. 59.5% indicated it was a long time ago, 31.0% indicated recently, while only 9.5% indicated they did very recently. As part of their professional development, the teachers were asked whether they ever attended an academic conference in their field of specialization. While only 69 (i.e. 34.5%) indicated yes, a large percentage, 131 (i.e. 65.5%) indicated they never attended any conference.

When asked about when last they read a journal article in tackling classroom problem, only 85 (i.e. 47.5%) indicated that they ever consulted a journal in solving classroom problem, whereas, the larger percentage i.e. 115 (58.5%) indicated they never consulted a journal article for solving classroom problems or any educational problem for that matter. Another interesting part of the finding was with regards to acquisition of academic journals by both the individual classroom teachers and their school libraries. With regards to individual teachers, about 98.6% of the sample indicated they have never subscribed to any academic journal, while 1.4% indicated they do

Table 1: Classroom teachers' rating of academic journals

| | SA | A | D | SD |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Academic journals are difficult to understand | 10(5.0) | 70(35.0) | 83(41.5) | 37(18.5) |
| The language used in writing papers in academic journals is too technical for me to understand. | 13(6.5) | 68(34.0) | 86(43.0) | 33(16.5) |
| Articles in academic journals do not reflect practical classroom realities. | 20(10.0) | 67(33.5) | 78(39.0) | 35(17.5) |
| I try to use ideas from academic journals in my field. | 30(15.0) | 95(47.5) | 50(25.0) | 25(12.5) |
| I try most often to use new ideas from academic papers in journals in my areas for my professional enhancement. | 24(12.0) | 82(42.0) | 56(28.0) | 31(15.5) |
| Too much data and the use of rigorous statistics make academic papers difficult to understand. | 29(14.5) | 84(42.0) | 56(28.0) | 31(15.5) |
| I prefer to read books to reading academic journals. | 53(26.5) | 89(44.5) | 34(17.0) | 24(12.0) |
| Books are easier to understand than papers in academic journals. | 43(21.5) | 86(43.0) | 47(23.5) | 24(12.0) |
| I get more relevant materials from books than from academic journals. | 46(23.0) | 82(41.0) | 54(27.0) | 18(9.0) |
| Author of articles in academic journals do not have the classroom teacher in mind in writing their papers. | 30(15.0) | 54(27.0) | 72(36.0) | 44(22.0) |

subscribe to some journals, however, when probed further it was discovered that what they called journals are like the associations' newsletters and bulletins. With regard to school libraries' acquisition of academic journals, only a negligible fair of the teachers (i.e. about 4.6% of the sample) indicate that their schools do subscribe to some form of academic journals, newsletters and bulletins. The larger majority (about 95.4%) reported that their schools do not subscribe to any.

Table 1 describes the teachers' feelings and perceptions regarding academic journals generally. Question 1 asks the teachers about the level of difficulty of academic journals. A large majority of the sample who has read academic journals (60%) indicated that academic journals are not difficult to understand. In the same vein, 59.5% of the sample indicated that the language used in writing articles in academic journals is not too technical for them to understand, while 48.5% said the language used is too technical for them to comprehend. On the relevance of journals to practical classroom problems, 56.5% of the respondents indicated that articles in academic journals have relevance to classroom realities, while 44.5% did not agreed with that view, they feel articles in academic journals do not reflect practical classroom problems. When further probed if they use idea from academic journals in their field in their teaching, 52.5% indicated a positive response while 47.5% said they do not.

Similarly, 53.0% of the respondents reported that they rely on new ideas from academic papers in journals in their area for professional enhancement while 47.0% indicated they do not need journal articles for their professional enhancement.

On the difficulty encountered in reading academic journals, 56.5% of the respondents identified too much data and use of rigorous statistics in reporting findings in academic journals as one of the most difficult things for teachers. It is then not surprising that 71.0% of the sample

then indicated that they prefer reading books to academic journals. This may be because; books do not have too many statistical jargons as compared with academic journals. According to 64.5% of our sample, books are easier to understand than papers in academic journals. In the same vein, a large proportion of the sample (64.0%) indicated that they get more relevant materials from books than from academic journals. The respondents however did not agree with the view that authors of academic papers in journals do not have classroom teachers in mind (while only 42.0% said they agreed, 58.0% said no).

The quantitative data was further completed with some qualitative responses, using the in-depth interviews. A few of those teachers who completed the questionnaires were selected for the interviews. There views are summarized here. In order to determine their research background, the teachers were asked if they have been exposed to courses in educational research methods. A majority of them indicated that they were never taught research methods in college. This finding actually provides a justification for the low level of patronage of academic journals among the teachers. With a poor background in research methods, it could be difficult for these teachers to make use of research outputs published in journals. More importantly, the results section and data presentation may pose a big difficulty to the teachers. The group was further asked if they will require training in research methods to enhance their competence and they all agreed to a need for refresher courses for primary and secondary school teachers on research techniques to remediate for the poor background in the area. It was very interesting to note that classroom teachers are beginning to appreciate the need for them to be able to conduct small action researches in their classrooms, especially to solve local instructional problems. It is therefore, pertinent that in-service programmes be mounted for the teachers in the area of research.

DISCUSSION

The major focus of this study is on how to improve the teacher quality in Africa by breaking the barrier between classroom teachers and the utilization of research outputs from tertiary institutions in Africa. Findings from this study have further demonstrated the authenticity of the noticeable gap between classroom teachers and researchers in tertiary institutions. The teachers' low perception of academic journals is a demonstration of their lack of regard for the research findings from our tertiary institutions. If we intend to engender quality of our teachers and education, we need to re-orient the school teachers to imbibe the culture of reading academic journal articles in their area of specialization. As we noted in the earlier part of this study a lot of researches are being carried out in our tertiary institutions annually. However, the concern is that findings from these studies are not translated to any beneficial effect within the classroom situation. The classroom teachers keep aloof of the current and innovative findings emerging from our tertiary institutions. It is therefore highly imperative that a nexus be developed between classroom teachers and the academics to engender effective interaction that could lead to productive efforts between the two. One major way to foster this symbiotic relationship between academics and classroom teachers is for academics to begin to involve teachers and pupils in their studies, not just as research subjects but as collaborators. When we begin to initiate more collaboration between academics and school teachers they too will start to appreciate the nature and usefulness of research and this will stimulate in them a sense of appreciation for academic research. This will remove Zeichner (1995) observation that educational research has been strangely very uneducational. With more teachers involved in collaborative works, then they get familiar with research language and interpretation of data. This will increase the level of usage of research findings from our tertiary institutions.

Another way to break the barrier is by incorporating research methods in our teacher preparation programmes. The dynamics in our society demands teachers who will not only be able to do research but those who will be able to apply useful research findings into their classroom practice. Research is a very tedious job; hence, pre-service teachers should be equipped with the relevant research skills and knowledge, while in training.

Ultimately, this will result in their improved competence in research. We have been able to examine the impact of research on teacher quality, through the window of the teachers' perceptions of usefulness of academic journals. What is evident from the study reported here is that there is still a great aversion for academic journals among classroom teachers, in Botswana and perhaps Africa in general. Teachers do not place necessary/due value on findings reported in journals. In fact, they could not see immediate relevance of academic journal articles and the variety of findings in them to their classroom and school practice. Therefore, to address the challenges of the sustainability of the educational changes in Africa and the need to produce quality teachers, we must factor in the issue of teacher usage of research findings.

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