

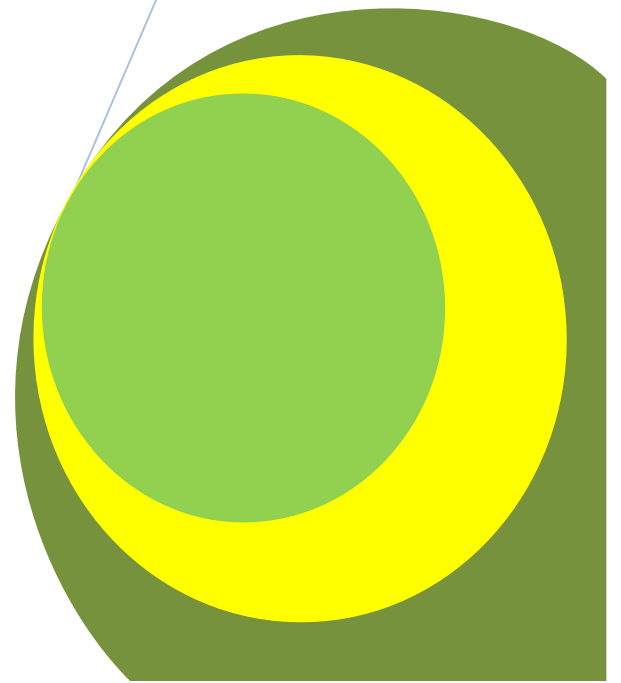
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## **Teachers' Perceptions of the Assessment Structure of the O'level History Syllabus [2167] in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Zaka District**

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*Research Article*

# Teachers' Perceptions of the Assessment Structure of the O'level History Syllabus [2167] in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Zaka District.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' perceptions of the assessment structure on the O'level History Syllabus 2167 examination in Zimbabwe. A descriptive survey approach in which 30 History teachers from 15 Zaka District secondary schools responded to a questionnaire was used. Quantitative and qualitative paradigms of data presentation were both useful in this project. Findings from the study revealed that assessment and teaching History are two sides of the same coin but dropping the Source Based Question to an option was considered to be throwing away the baby with bath water. Most teachers are no longer teaching Source Based Questions and critical higher order skills are no longer developed in History students. The essay question with its tri -segmented structure gives prominence to factual regurgitation. This study led to the conclusion that the removal of the Source Based Question from the compulsory status has prevented History students from developing genuine higher order skills in Zimbabwe. It is recommended therefore that syllabus 2166 be revisited with an aim of merging it with syllabus 2167 in order to resuscitate the development of higher order skills of analysis ,inference and evaluation among History students.

**Key Words:** Perceptions, "Knowledge that", "Knowledge how", New History.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Curriculum change in History has occurred with astonishing rapidity and intensity in post-independence Zimbabwe but with a mixed bag of results. The introduction of the Political Economy of Zimbabwe and the O' level History syllabus 2166 are classic examples and these two curriculum innovations provide a useful background to the introduction of syllabus 2167 with its new assessment structure.

The Political Economy of Zimbabwe was initiated in 1987. The syllabus was aimed at promoting Scientific Socialism. Several methods of teaching which promoted group spirit and collective consciousness were suggested but assessment procedures were not very clear. The active role of the learner and the development of hands on experience were encouraged. The Political Economy of Zimbabwe did not operate for long in Zimbabwean secondary schools. According to Chivore [1992:68], "Political Economy was stopped due to pressure group opposition and lack of political support." The pressure groups that opposed Political Economy of Zimbabwe [PEZ] were led by the Roman Catholic Church which felt that the syllabus had nothing to offer in terms of skills development but only meant to indoctrinate students with anti-religious propaganda under the guise of Scientific Socialism. The withdrawal of the syllabus was announced by the May 7, 1989, Sunday Mail.

The failure of Political Economy of Zimbabwe witnessed the introduction of History syllabus 2166. Chitape [2005] argues that the syllabus had a noble goal of developing various important skills like inference and empathy. High order skills like assessment, analysis, judgement and interpretation took the bulk of the marks.

The specification grid of syllabus 2166 shows that the project was meant to achieve the goals of the New History Approach of imparting 'knowledge how' and not only 'knowledge that' [Ibid]. According to ZIMSEC [1999:5], "The syllabus encourages a varied use of approaches to the teaching of History and discourages mere reproduction of facts." Attitudes towards syllabus 2166 however deteriorated due to a number of factors. Taruvinga and Moyo [200:17] state that, "The high failure rate in History at Ordinary Level caused pupils to have negative attitudes towards it." This position was supported by the findings of Chitape [2005] who discovered that in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe, the candidature of History syllabus 2166 was

dwindling. Chitate [2005] however attributes the demise of the syllabus to implementation problems and not to its scheme of examination. The syllabus also faced stiff competition from others like 2157, 2158 and 2160. All these syllabi were replaced by syllabus 2167 for the November 2003 examinations.

The introduction of syllabus 2167 also saw the subject being made compulsory in all secondary schools. Assessment objectives for syllabus 2167 are a replica of those for 2166 to a larger extent. Some of these include the ability by pupils to recall, select, describe, analyse, interpret and evaluate. Syllabus 2167 is examined through two papers. Paper one which is Southern Africa, is a two hour paper with a total of 100 marks. The paper consists of 22 questions with one source based question which is optional. This is different from 2166 which had a whole paper on source based questions. Paper Two is International Affairs and has 15 questions with no source based questions. Examiners reports have indicated every year that students are shunning the source based question despite its critical role in the development of high order skills. The structured essay seems to be providing History students with opportunities to score distinctions without developing requisite skills of higher order thinking.

### Statement of the Problem

This study analysed teachers' perceptions of the assessment structure of syllabus 2167. Questions which sought to be answered by the study were:

1. What are the strengths of syllabus 2167 in terms of skills acquisition over the previous relegated syllabus 2166?
2. How responsive is the Syllabus 2167 to the needs of the Zimbabwean students?
3. How effective is the change on the Source Based Question in terms of promotion of various skills in History students?

### Theoretical Framework

Educational assessment practices by and large are influenced by different perspectives. Mackellar (2011) posits that familiarity with the rationale behind each assessment practice gives us a clearer understanding of what we are trying to achieve and, given our current practice, whether or not we are likely to succeed.

It is recognized that assessment functions not only to assess learning, to diagnose, and to provide for quality assurance of institutions and individuals but it also serves to develop student learning. Different assessment practices are needed to satisfy these different purposes. Lockett and Sutherland (2000:102) point out..... If purposes of assessment remain implicit and vague, there is danger that different purposes become confused and conflated, so that assessment as a consequence fails to play an educative role.

This study is rooted from two assessment perspectives which are antithesis to each other. The first perspective is the technical, sometimes called the traditional, positivist or scientific view of the modern era. As the name implies, it draws on scientific concepts and beliefs, and applies these to social settings, such as educational and sociological contexts. Here the view of reality is that there are universal immutable truths and absolute facts, a single reality 'out there' which is the same for all people. This technical view therefore holds that knowledge is objective and value-free, i.e. it is neutral in that it does not have any significance or power beyond itself. It regards knowledge as an end product, which can be measured, as well as predicted and therefore controlled (Grundy, 1987). The purpose of assessment is to determine the degree, to which the end product has been achieved, and to grade, rank and select according to achievement.

The focus of assessment is thus on the products of the learning - a limited range of relatively easy-to-measure competencies, such as discrete facts, content knowledge and basic skills. In this traditional perspective assessment methods - usually tests and examinations - are formal, externally imposed and summative. The student is regarded as a recipient of pre-existing knowledge transmitted by the expert. Student learning focuses on memorizing information in order to give it back under pressure in a year-end three-hour examination. Memorizing without understanding and learning by rote are what Marton et al (1988); Biggs and Entwistle, (1987); Svensson, (1977), (all in Ramsden 1992) term surface learning. Thus, in this perspective assessment tools such as objective tests, which consider "knowledge that" are commonly used.

The beliefs of the second perspective, the practical or hermeneutic perspective, are largely a reaction to the conceptions of the technical perspective. In the practical perspective reality is not regarded as 'out there' but is rather seen as individually constructed, and shared within an historical, social and political context. Humans are regarded as active creators of knowledge rather than the passive recipients envisaged in the technical perspective. Since students must actively construct their own understanding, deep learning (Marton and Saljo, 1988; Biggs and Entwistle, 1987; Svensson, 1977, all in Ramsden 1992) is more likely to occur.

In the practical perspective there are thus multiple constructions of reality as each individual's understanding will be subjective and unique, colored and shaped by the individual's social, historical and personal contexts. Since objectivity is not possible, and educational practices are not value-free, individual assumptions and values need to be made explicit. This perspective encourages "deep learning" or the development of higher order skills.

## METHODOLOGY

The study found the descriptive survey method the best to capture perceptions of teachers on the assessment structure of Syllabus 2167. Oppenheim (1992) defines a case study as an intensive investigation into specific aspects of an individual or a social unit in an effort to gain deeper insights about these. In this study, the researchers were soliciting for the perceptions of teachers. Basically this study employed a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative research. The target group for the study were O'level history teachers from sixteen secondary schools in Zaka District. Twenty-four teachers- five female and nineteen males were conveniently selected from the sixteen secondary schools. These respondents were teaching History on a daily basis and some of them were examiners, hence, would offer valuable views to the study. These responded to the questionnaires which were both closed and open ended .The advantage of this type of a questionnaire was to allow respondents to substantiate their views freely without fear of eye contact associated with face to face interviews.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The collected data were presented in tables as follows:

Table 1: Gender: N=24

| Gender | No. | %   |
|--------|-----|-----|
| Female | 5   | 21  |
| Male   | 19  | 79  |
| Total  | 24  | 100 |

Twenty four respondents managed to respond to the questionnaires. The majority of the respondents were males (79%) and only 21% were females.

Table 2: Qualifications N=24

| Qualification  | No | %   |
|----------------|----|-----|
| C.E            | 1  | 4   |
| Dip in Educ    | 13 | 54  |
| BA             | 3  | 13  |
| B.Ed           | 5  | 21  |
| MA/M.Ed/M.Phil | 2  | 8   |
| Total          | 24 | 100 |

About 58% of the respondents were holders of a basic C.E or Diploma in Education qualification. 34% were holders of a first degree and only 8% held a Master's degree. The cosmopolitan grouping of the respondents allowed researchers to capture mixed views from the teachers as curriculum implementers.

Table 3: Years of History Teaching N=24

| Period(in years) | No | %    |
|------------------|----|------|
| 1-5              | 5  | 21   |
| 6-10             | 12 | 50   |
| 11-15            | 3  | 12.5 |
| 16-20            | 1  | 4    |
| 20+              | 3  | 12.5 |
| Total            | 24 | 100  |

Data revealed that a good number of respondents were senior teachers and had been teaching History for a long time(from 6-10years) with some(12.5%) having experience spanning for more than 20years.They have witnessed the transition of History syllabus from 2166 to history 2167 and hence could have informed decisions.

On how respondents perceive the assessment structure of the O'Level History 2167/1, 40% of the respondents felt that the assessment structure was satisfactory. An equal number of respondents (20%) felt it was excellent and a few (4%) thought it was poor. Reasons advanced by those who felt it was poor were that the syllabus promotes simple description of historical facts at the expense of judgment and analysis of facts. They also argued that the current paper (2167/1) hardly provides personal response opportunities. Those respondents who felt that the paper was satisfactory argued that the paper assesses a variety of skills and it also gives the candidate the opportunity to pass the examination. Most of those who regarded the paper as good or excellent also alluded to the balance of the paper in terms of skills tested. The varied views of the respondents may also be perceived in terms of the purpose served by testing or assessment –whether it is comparing performance against set criterion/standards (criterion reference) or whether it is for comparing performance against others/given cohort (norm-referenced). Those who felt the paper is fair or good because pupils can pass it may be for the latter purpose of assessment.

Table 4: Which skills are mostly developed by History syllabus 2167/1?

| skill         | No. | %   |
|---------------|-----|-----|
| Simple Recall | 16  | 66  |
| Analysis      | 3   | 12  |
| Interpretive  | 2   | 8   |
| judgment      | 2   | 8   |
| analysis      | 2   | 8   |
| All           | 2   | 8   |
| Total         | 24  | 100 |
|               |     |     |

Table 4 above indicates that a good number of respondents (67%) felt the paper develops simple recall skills, while 12% felt the paper develops analysis skill. An equal number of respondents (8%) felt that the paper develops interpretive and judgment skills respectively. Only eight respondents (24%) indicated that the current paper develops all the varied skills ranging from simple recall, analysis, interpretive and judgment. This implies that although more than half of the respondents had previously indicated that the assessment structure of the paper was satisfactory, the paper does not equip candidates with higher order History skills of analysis and judgment.

Respondents were also asked to indicate their opinion to making source based question optional or compulsory in syllabus 2167/1. The majority of the respondents felt that the source based question should be made compulsory. A number of reasons advanced ranged from: source based questions promote critical thinking and historical judgment; they adequately prepare students for Advanced level (A' Level) and they should be made compulsory because teachers are no longer teaching it. One respondent even said, "7 out of the 25 questions from sections A and B are simple descriptive." The other respondent pointed out that, "only 8 marks from the whole question call for analysis".

These views only emphasise the inadequacy of the current paper in developing higher order history skills. Respondents who viewed that the paper should remain optional argued that making it compulsory will reduce candidates' choice of questions and since the source based questions are more challenging; it will be punishing candidates for what most teachers do not know. They also pointed out that there are few textbooks on source based questions. Although most respondents felt that the current syllabus 2167/1 does not equip students with the requisite historical skills, they are also worried about the performance of their students once the source based questions are made compulsory. Students seem to perform better in the current structure where they could pass without attempting the source based question.

Respondents also made suggestions as to how they could make the current syllabus more responsive to History skills. Their views ranged from incorporating more questions for analysis so as to adequately prepare pupils for A' level and balancing source based questions with descriptive questions. Some respondents suggested that the current paper should have two sections- one for simple recall and another one on the source based.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the discussion above the researchers concluded that the majority of the respondents felt that the current History syllabus 2167/1 does not develop higher order skills among candidates and the current structure can even make a candidate pass the examination without attempting the optional source based question which develops higher order skills. It can also be concluded that most teachers support a revisit of the current

assessment syllabus structure although they felt the effects of the previous syllabus 2166 can be experienced amongst our candidates. Based on the findings and conclusions, the study recommends that syllabus 2166 be revisited with an aim of merging it with syllabus 2167 in order to resuscitate the development of higher order skills of analysis, inference and evaluation among History students. The source based question can be made compulsory. This would also make teachers teach these high order skills. The Ministry of education through the Better Schools Programme (Zimbabwe) together with subject panels should staff and develop History teachers on the source based questions. This would assist the teachers teach the subject effectively. Inter-school collaboration should be promoted and enhanced between staff and staff, school and school, school and university to promote cross pollination of ideas, now that every province in the country has a university or college.

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