



Student Teachers' Conception and Perception of a Conducive Learning Environment: A Case of Great Zimbabwe University Students on Teaching Practice

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to help student teachers improve the classroom learning environment in order to make it conducive, this research sought to establish the student teachers' perception and conception of a conducive learning environment. It also aimed at unraveling their rationale for displaying charts, mounting mobiles, setting up of learning centers and displaying children's work. The questionnaire, interview and observation were the main modes of data gathering. The findings point to the fact that student teachers are aware of the need to create a conducive learning environment but are somehow incapacitated. In most cases they lack the resources and at times are overwhelmed by the numbers that constitute their classes. Another challenge that was observed is that the student teachers are not well equipped with the skills and knowledge required for such a task and do not see any link of this with their day today teaching. For them whatever displays and settings they put up are actually for assessment purposes. The researchers therefore strongly recommend that the Great Zimbabwe University Department of Teacher Development introduce and take seriously courses in Educational and Media Technology in order to fully equip the student teachers with the much needed skills. Student teachers also need support in the provision of resources through schools linking with the Curriculum Development Unit among other recommendations made.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

On visiting student teachers from Great Zimbabwe University's Department of Teacher Development on teaching practice, the researchers were challenged to carry out this research having seen that most of the students were always found wanting when it came to the section on learning environment, yet it is awarded quite a sizeable chunk of marks on the Teaching Practice Assessment Instrument. In some cases the walls were either completely bare, or had a few old charts hanging. In terms of mobiles, (that is displays hung from the rafters that move and turn at different angles and learners can read them overhead) there was very little if not none, even in a situation where the student teacher had the whole classroom to him/herself. Even in situations where classrooms are shared due to hot sitting, each mentor and his/her student teacher still have a designated wall for charts and area for displays of children's work, that is work produced by learners themselves displayed to benefit other learners as well. There is also room for learning centers, that is subject specific special corners where learners can get information on that particular subject. These learning centers are specially designed places that contain carefully planned activities and materials prepared to facilitate learning outcomes (Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000). Students can congregate around these areas in small groups to accomplish given learning tasks independently giving the teacher the opportunity to attend to, say learners who need remediation.

However, in spite of the importance of the various aspects mentioned above, one would still find the learning centers missing or present but being of very poor standard. Also, even in infant classes where it is believed that "Children learn better when they are surrounded by a concrete learning environment" (Chisaka and Mavundutse 2003:17), one would still find heavy reliance on the chalkboard, which given in any teaching situation, pointing to lack of innovativeness on the part of the student teachers. Displays of children's work were also too far apart or even outdated for some, while in other cases there were none. Such a scenario then, is clearly indicative of a yawning gap if not a loud call for attention in this area; yet research has shown that the teacher is expected to play a key role in setting up a conducive learning environment (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

A conducive learning environment is somewhere favorable for education and varies from student to student (<http://www.highlands.schools-virtualib.org.uk/lit/inclusive/enjoyable/enviro.htm> Accessed 2010/03/01). Keen, Pennell, Muspratt and Poed (2011) define it as an environment that effectively engages young children in order for positive learning

outcomes to be achieved. It is an environment that allows pupils space and time to interact not only among themselves, but also with teaching and learning materials that enhance their mastery of content taught and allows them to quench their curiosity as they discover new knowledge or reinforce what they already know (De Corte, Verschfel and Masui 2004, Pollard and Tann 1993, Farrant 1980). It is an atmosphere both concrete and abstract that allows a free flow of ideas, an environment where learners can exercise the brain and mind while at the same time infusing their own experiences from home and school (Bransford, Brown and Cocking [eds] 2000).

It is such an environment that is one of the prerequisites for positive teaching and learning to take place. Once learners are immersed in an environment that oozes with educational materials, it is believed that they are bound to benefit from it educationally in one way or the other. Hence former US Department of Education, Teacher-in-Residence, Mary Berth Blegan once remarked thus, "the most important action an effective teacher takes at the beginning of the year is creating the right climate for learning" (<http://www.ohsnews.com.feature> 2010/03/01 Are classrooms conducive to learning?/ accessed 06/06/2011). Who then creates this climate for learning? It becomes quite implicit from the remark that the teacher plays a central role in the creation of such a climate for the benefit of the learners.

This is not an easy task as it requires planning, arranging the classroom and selection of relevant materials which is just as important as planning for the instruction proper (Isenberg and Jalongo 1993). So Farrant's assertion is that, "The classroom is an educational laboratory" (1980:204), cannot be wrong, for in order to create and maintain the conducive learning environment the teacher also tests his/her ideas and tries to prove which methods are efficient, which materials are relevant and effective, which materials appeal to the learners' five senses and how he/she can make the learners become active participators and independent discoverers in the teaching learning process. This, Isenberg and Jalongo, (1993:174), argue can be possible since if carefully planned and supervised, "A creative environment (i.e. conducive learning environment) encourages children's self-expression, builds upon children's curiosity and joy of learning and allows personal initiative to flourish..."

As has been mentioned earlier on, this conducive learning environment is two-fold, abstract and concrete. The abstract environment has to do with how the teacher interacts with the learners, freedom for learners to interact among themselves, gender sensitivity, provision of opportunities to participate and attention to individual differences among other factors (Great Zimbabwe University Teaching Practice Instrument pg 1). From the aspects mentioned above, it becomes clear that, the abstract environment has to do with those intangible aspects that create a free

environment for learners to enjoy and benefit from the teaching learning situation. It has more to do with how they feel and relate within the classroom setting. Beaty (1992:3) emphasizes the role of a conducive learning environment in catering for individual differences when he posits that: "If we are to provide a curriculum that speaks to the needs of individual children, of various ages and stages, we must let the learning environment do the teaching." This is in line with Keen, Pennell, Muspratt and Poed (2011)'s view that a conducive learning environment is a critical step towards achieving positive learning outcomes.

The concrete environment has to do with tangible visual displays that are put around the room to highlight key topics and concepts (Farrant, 1980:297). This includes charts, mobiles, learning centers and displays of children's work, among others. In this area things like color, font relevance and placement are of great importance since this physical setting has an impact on all classroom interactions. Hohmann and Weikart (1995:6) succinctly point this out when they argue that, "The physical environment has a strong impact on the behavior of children..., the emphasis should therefore be on planning the layout of the classroom and selecting appropriate materials." Thus it is important to be orderly in creating this conducive environment since it should immerse learners into learning wherever they look within the confines of the classroom. The need for a lively, interactive and meaningful learning environment cannot be ignored since even psychologists like Bruner in his theory of instruction emphasize the need for various modes of representation beginning with the enactive mode where learners interact with real objects, followed by the iconic mode where they interact pictures or illustrations as well as the real object and finally the symbolic mode where symbols only can be used. (<http://www.psychology.nottingham.ac.uk/...>)[downloaded 15/05/2012] This is in order to cater for the students' levels of development and different learning styles.

It is in the context of the various views highlighted above that this research was deemed necessary as the researchers tried to find out whether students are informed or guided by any theory in their efforts to create a conducive learning environment for their learners, and whether they are aware of the relevance of this in the teaching learning situation and finally whether they see the need or have other reasons for trying to create such an environment.

Purpose of the Study

The research sought to address the following major research question: How can student teachers be assisted to create and maintain a conducive learning environment?

From the main research question the following sub questions were drawn:

(i) What are the student teachers' perceptions of a conducive learning environment?

(ii) What is their rationale for mounting learning centers and mobiles?

(iii) What are their reasons for displaying /not displaying charts and children's work?

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Three modes of data gathering were used in this research, namely observation, the interview and the questionnaire. Thirty student teachers on attachment teaching practice, from Great Zimbabwe University, were involved in the research. Their mentors (30) by virtue of having student teachers being attached to them were purposefully selected for involvement in the research. All the thirty mentors and thirty student teachers responded to the questionnaires. However, not all were interviewed, the researchers interviewed 15 mentors and 15 student teachers who were randomly selected using the following criteria: 5 student teachers whose classrooms were poorest in terms of conduciveness of the learning environment, 5 students whose learning performance were average and 5 other students whose learning were viewed as good. If a student was selected their mentor automatically was in, for purposes of verifying information.

OBSERVATION

Although observation is not an easy mode of gathering data, it has been argued that if properly done, it can result in data being captured comprehensively, in its natural setting especially where human interactions are involved (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Borg and Gall, 1993; Best and Kahn' 1993; Bell, 1993). Thus, in this case, it was found appropriate since the classroom situation was the hunting ground for the researchers and many human interactions go on there.

The researchers had an observation guide to ensure that components for observation remained the same even if the classrooms were different. The intention was to be as systematic as possible as pointed out by Best and Kahn (1993: 223) "Observation as a research technique must always be systematic, directed by a specific purpose, carefully focused and thoroughly recorded". Thus the observation guide focused the following aspects:

- Charts: font ,color, content and relevance
- Mobiles: font, creativity and relevance
- Displays of children's work: relevance, currency and placement
- Learning Centers: meaningfulness of displays, interactiveness, guiding themes/concepts and relevance

So in assessing the learning environment, the researchers would closely focus on the said aspects and note comments for discussion later.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to complement the other modes of data gathering, that is the interview and observation. This allowed for a fuller picture of the data to be accessed by approaching it from more than one angle (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, Smith 2008, Best and Kahn 1993). Questionnaires also allowed for anonymity which gave the respondents the freedom to give responses without any prejudice. This is in line with Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2010) and Christensen (1994)'s view that since a questionnaire is anonymous, it increases the chances of receiving responses that are genuinely representative of a person's beliefs or feelings. Thus the questionnaire was responded first, and then interviews followed later for clarification of issues that might have looked vague. Two sets of questionnaires were used: one for the student teachers and another for the mentors.

The Interview

The interview was quite useful in that it accorded the researchers an opportunity to follow up on certain trends that were not very clear from observation and in the questionnaires. The interview was a good way of accessing the student teachers' and mentors' perspectives on issues under investigation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011, Patton, 1990). Even new trends that arose during the course of the interview were quite easy to follow up, since it was a face-to-face situation with the interviewees.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Definition of a Conducive Learning Environment

Findings from questionnaires and interviews indicated that both mentors and student teachers are aware of what constitutes a conducive learning environment. This is clearly evidenced by the following responses they gave as to what a conducive learning environment is:

- An environment that promotes effective teaching and learning in terms of both the physical appearance and social atmosphere i.e. teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relations.
- It is an environment where all materials necessary for teaching and learning are available in the classroom.
- An environment which is stimulating through charts, mobiles, learning centers, children's work displays, clean floors, well ventilated rooms and enough textbooks.
- A situation where children learn freely, interacting with a variety of learning experiences and rapport between them; the teacher and among themselves is good.

From the above responses, it becomes clear that both student teachers and mentors highlight important aspects of a conducive learning environment; that it should: be stimulating, expose learners to various learning materials to interact with freely; is both concrete and abstract; is not restrictive in any way but is a barrier-free environment in which learners are immersed in learning materials. Bradford et al (2000) call such an environment one that has all the four elements of effective learning, that is being learner centered, (there is room for learners to explore), knowledge centered (learners are immersed in knowledge wherever they look they benefit), assessment centered (learners can test what they have grasped or not as they interact with the information around them) and community centered (the environment allows a free flow of ideas in a family like set up as learners interact among themselves and with the teacher sharing information or asking questions when stuck). This is typical of what Clegg and Billington (1994) call "an environment which is specifically designed as a place where a teacher's ideas about teaching and learning will bear fruit" (in Pollard and Tann 1993:197)

Another aspect that both the mentors and mentees highlighted as contributing to a conducive learning environment is the teacher-pupil ratio which they indicated should not be prohibitive when it comes to attending to individual differences. The argument put forward is that smaller classes offer teachers the chance to devote more time to individual learners which is not possible where the ratio is too high.

Learning Centers

From the questionnaire responses by student teachers, learning centers were defined as follows:

- Special areas that are created in the classroom to promote learning.
- Centers which enable pupils to learn as they interact on their own during spare time.
- Specific places located in the classroom where materials are stored e.g. balls for Physical Education, Skills for Environmental Science etc.
- Areas in the classroom, which pupils can use for independent learning without the assistance of the teacher.
- Informative areas created in the classroom to concretize learning
- Discovery centers in the classroom for pupils to explore and find out concepts for themselves.
- Areas designed by teachers and children found in classrooms and have relevant information used for teaching and learning.

It is clear from the student teachers' definition of learning centers that, in the main, they view them as areas where

children learn on their own, yet they too can use these during their own teaching to reinforce, explore and demonstrate key concepts. The centers should be viewed as part and parcel of their daily teaching-learning process (Clegg and Billington 1994), yet from one definition above, there are some who even view them as storage areas for balls, and objects like skull etc, they might have used as teaching-learning aids, after which they are dumped in the classroom corners then termed learning centers.

On the types of learning centers they set up, the student teachers overallly mentioned the following: Science corner, Shop, Discovery Corner, Physical Education, Music, Art, Maths and Library corners. Observations and interviews however revealed that several student teachers only had or stated 2 or 3 centers e.g. Science, Shop and Music or Science, Shop and PE. It was also interesting to note that a few student teachers thought that every subject should have a centre and stated more than 10 centers (but in reality these were not set up). A unique case was that of one student teacher who included a prayer corner among the centers stated. This seems to be an indication of not being clear of the purpose of what a learning centre is meant to achieve.

Rationale for setting up learning centers

From both questionnaires and interviews, the student teachers highlighted a number of justifications for setting up learning centers, some of which are as follows:

- To help concretize concepts so that learners do not easily forget
- So that learners learn to discover things for themselves
- To keep learners occupied during free time
- To stimulate, motivate and arouse learners' imaginations
- To beautify the classroom
- They are a prerequisite during observation by university supervisors.
- Can be used as media during the teaching-learning process.

Out of the 30 student teachers who filled in the questionnaire, the majority, 25 (83%) had beautifying the classroom environment as their major reasons for mounting the learning centers. Only 5 (17%) did not have the two reasons on their list. This shows that, while they are aware of the various reasons for setting up these learning centers, at the back of their mind, supervision and getting a good mark are what drives them. This was confirmed during interviews with the (15) selected students who all (100%) pointed this out. From the interviews with mentors, they also confirmed this when they pointed out that while they are aware of all the other good reasons for setting these up; in the main they want to pass Teaching Practice. All the 15

mentors (100%) pointed out that in most cases, learners are not allowed to interact with the centers lest they disturb the order. This was confirmed by one respondent's remark during interviews: "I rarely allow the children to work at the learning centers, especially in my absence, I do not allow them. They will interfere with the neatness of the arrangement". In this case the student teacher is more worried about the neatness of the arrangement, instead of encouraging learners to interact with the centers and benefit educationally. One wonders then, whether the centers are learning centers or just ornamental? In this case, then, they have become more of display centers not learning centers as they do not serve the purpose for which they are set.

A further observation made, concerning the centers, is that during teaching, the student teachers rarely referred to these centers, except in the case of 3 out of 15 student teachers observed, who fused their teaching by making reference to the centers. These asked learners to take materials from the centers, used them to illustrate, demonstrate or reinforce certain concepts. In some cases they also referred to charts and mobiles that were mounted, making these relevant to the learning situation, thus preventing what Alexander (1992) cited in Pollard and Tann (1993:201) calls "surface rather than substance", when mounting materials to create a conducive learning environment, so that it enhances effective learning rather than simply making the room look nice.

However, generally, while the student teachers have the knowledge (i.e. know the importance of setting these up), in practice they do not link this with their teaching. Thus all efforts made will come to naught if they do not contribute positively to learning.

Reasons for displaying charts, mobiles and children's work

The student teachers gave a number of reasons for mounting the above displays. Charts and mobiles for the majority, were meant to decorate the classroom for revision purposes, as points of reference, to create an atmosphere for serious learning and to display one's creativity. Apart from pleasing the school head and supervisors, the rest of the reasons given are all relevant to the creation of a conducive learning environment.

Displays of children's work were considered important for the following reasons: so that learners can benefit from their peers' work, as a motivation strategy for both the gifted and the not so gifted learners, to challenge learners to compete positively vying for their work to be displayed too and finally for supervision purposes.

The idea of the above displays being a requirement seems to continue cropping up at every stage. This then seems to be the driving force, even though other reasons are raised. This, the researchers, confirmed during observations, when in most cases, outdated charts would be found mounted. For example, in one classroom visited, there was no link between the

charts mounted and the concepts schemed, for that term. For social studies, charts on transport and communication were still up, yet the concept had been dealt with six months before.

Displays of children's work in some cases were only for one subject area e.g. Mathematics, yet they are also expected for core subjects like English and Shona and even other subjects to accommodate individual differences. In one classroom children's work displays were stuck one on top of the other, a sure sign to show whoever came in, that they had been displayed over a long period of time, but if they are piled like that; how will the pupils benefit when they cannot read what is underneath? The purpose of piling them up is simply to impress assessors and not to benefit the learners. In cases where displays were far apart, work for January/February could still be found stuck on the walls as late as June/July, in which case relevance to the situation prevailing in the teaching/learning process would be questionable.

Problems Encountered in Creating a Conducive Learning Environment

Concrete Environment

From both questionnaire and interview findings, several problems relating to the setting up a conducive concrete learning environment were given by the students' teachers. Among them were the following:

- Lack of resources since they were not being paid Teaching Practice allowances.
- Finding it difficult to condense material for charts in some subjects
- Finding it difficult to use the right font, shape letters properly, mix colors.
- Mounting learning centers preparing charts and mobiles were found to be time consuming
- Not being sure of which corners to mount/set up.
- Not sure of what to include and exclude

Responses from the interviews with mentors also indicated that there are some student teachers who just lack the interest. They pointed out that some these student teachers did not even bother to make group work cards but always gave learners group work orally. Secondly, the mentors pointed out that other student teachers lack the initiative and skills to prepare mobiles, charts and what to display and when to set up learning centers; resulting in too many items being dumped in the corners making them untidy. "Some student teachers are just not resourceful", as one mentor put it during an interview.

Lack of practical experience on matters relating to creating a conducive learning environment was also cited by the mentors as a big problem. To put it in one of the respondents' words, "They are only gaining theory

at college. They are deployed empty-handed". The implication of this response is that the student teachers need to be more equipped with the practical skills apart from the theory that they get while still at university, so that when they get to the classroom situation they are well armed.

The majority of the mentors, 28 out of 30 (93%) however, pointed out that in most cases the mentors make a conscious effort to create a conducive learning environment, in spite of the limitations cited above. This is evidenced by the effort made at making charts (which might be very few and not so well written), requesting for assistance from the mentor on how to set up learning centers, improvising for some unavailable items, maintaining neat floors and displays of children's work. However, the mentors indicated that, the desire to pass teaching practice seems to be the driving force more than anything else, since during teaching and learning their mentees rarely refer to the centers or charts. Only 2 mentors (7%) out of the 30 who responded to the questionnaire indicated that their mentees do not make a conscious effort to create a conducive learning environment because they lack interest and have to be pushed to mount charts and display children's work.

The mentors also made some recommendations on how to help student teachers in this area; that:

- The students be given enough practice on preparation of charts especially using the Nelson script. According to these mentors, this should be done at the university before students are sent for Teaching Practice.
- Students be provided with materials such as markers, manilla, glue, stick-stuff etc, by the school where they operate.
- Government to ensure that student teachers get allowances for their upkeep and for buying teaching-learning resources during Teaching Practice.

Abstract Environment

From the interviews and questionnaire responses both the mentors and mentees cited a number of hindrances to the creation of the ideal abstract learning environment. Among them were the following:

- Due to the large classes in most cases, attention to individual differences becomes a challenge. Student teachers are overwhelmed by the large numbers resulting in interaction with the learners at individual level being minimal, if not impossible.
- Rapport with the learners is also negatively affected due to lack of resources in which case, a learner might not have access to some textbooks or learning aids up to end of term. In some cases the teacher resorts to asking learners to always do tasks in groups, an unfair practice to some

learners who might want to do certain activities individually.

- Learners have different learning styles, and if these are not catered for, learners might find the learning environment threatening hence label it as being not conducive to their learning. Thus, if learners do not get the chance to do what they know best, they may not benefit from the learning environment at all. Pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil relations are a huge factor in the creation of a conducive learning environment; hence these relations need to be positively enhanced all the time.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The teacher-pupil ratio needs attention as this research established that large classes hinder the creation of a conducive learning environment.
- The research has also concluded that, while student teachers make an effort to create a conducive learning environment, factors such as lack of resources and experience, lack of material support among others militate against their efforts.
- There is need therefore, for the university to place more emphasis on practical aspects of teaching during Applied Education in all subject areas, instead of waiting for the brief micro-teaching stint during the semester. (All subject areas have a course on teaching that particular subject at primary school level).
- While mentors make an effort to support and encourage their mentees in this area, sometimes space and the teacher-pupil ratio militate against their efforts.
- Introduction of an Educational Media and Technology course by the responsible department in the university would be a welcome move. However, the course should be very comprehensive with a bias towards practical work as opposed to theory.
- The varied number of learning centers mounted by the student teachers on Teaching Practice shows that, there is need for standardisation of these, so that they are meaningful and effective, instead of them being display or dumping corners for learning centers should be truly learning centers in terms of content and relevance.
- Before going on Teaching Practice, students should be taken on a familiarization tour of real classroom situations so that they appreciate how conducive learning environments are created and what they look like.
- It is also the researchers' view that, the area of conducive learning environment is fertile ground

for more researches for the benefit of both the student teachers and learners.

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