



## **The Role Of School Climate In Quality Assessment: A Case Of Home Economics Subjects In Masvingo, Zimbabwe**

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### ***Abstract:***

*Teachers' effectiveness in quality assessment is enhanced by the whole school climate which includes the administration management style, the social environment and resources. Reforms in the Zimbabwean education systems emphasise on skill based subjects and coursework which is continuous assessment. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the role of the school climate in the quality of assessment. A qualitative paradigm and a descriptive survey design were chosen to realize the research objectives. Purposive sampling was used to select six schools from a district with a population of fifteen. Validated questionnaires and document analysis were used to collect relevant data from teachers and pupils of grades four to seven. Data were presented in descriptive and narrative forms and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that most school environments which included management and supervision systems were not conducive for effective quality assessment of Home Economics practical subjects therefore negatively affected the quality of assessment. It was therefore recommended that the government, stake holders and the school management systems work together in order to minimize the challenges faced by institutions which negatively affect quality assessment.*

**Key words:** *Assessment, Quality assessment, School climate, Effective, Teaching, Learning.*

### **1.Introduction And Background To The Study**

The study explored the factors which influence the credibility of assessment in Home Economics (H/E) subjects which put more emphasis on continuous assessment since these subjects are practically oriented. Many researches done in Zimbabwe, including those by UNESCO-IBE 2010/11, Chakanyuka, Chung & Stevenson, 2009 and Kanyongo, 2005 focused on assessment purposes, uses and assessment related decisions and very little attention was given to what makes assessment efficient and feasible.

The pride of educational system depends not just on the assessment criteria, but more importantly on the quality of its products at all levels which also is dependant on the nature of school climate. Definitions of school climate may vary, but in most cases it is connected to the quality and character of school (Chakanyuka, Chung and Stevenson, 2009). Educators have recognized the importance of school climate in the learning and teaching process for over a hundred years (Centre for Social and Emotional Education, 2011). Although assessment has always been part of teaching and learning process, too often, it is not fully understood and not used as a springboard for learning (Adenaike and Olaniyi, 2010). The assessment issue that is at stake here, with its forms and methods of assessment is the principle that whenever possible, the form of assessment should be consistent with the modality of the learning outcomes for the subject being taught and the school climate being supportive.

Peer-reviewed educational research has consistently demonstrated that a positive school climate is associated with good academic achievement, effective risk prevention efforts, positive overall child development, constructive teacher supervision and quality assessment. School climate is based on patterns of student's, parent's and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, organizational structures, teaching and learning practices as well as assessment criteria (American National School Climate Center, 2012). If the learning outcomes involve performance, then observation, skills tests or even simulation is preferable to questioning hence the need of the availability of adequate and appropriate resources. The aim is to use assessments that make the process as authentic (real-life) as possible (Athanasou and Lamprianou, 2009). Hence the need for a sustainable, positive school climate which fosters child development and learning necessary for a productive, satisfying and contributing to life in a democratic society.

Assessment is the process of collecting and organising information from purposeful activities (e.g. tests on performance or learning) with a view of drawing inferences about teaching and learning (UNESCO-IBE, 2010/11). People can also make comparisons against established criteria using assessments if the school environments enable quality assessment to prevail. This means that assessment is principally a professional process of collation, comparison, judgement and inferences are drawn as a result of the process. High quality assessment rests on strong educational foundations (Ross, 2006). These educational foundations include organising schools to meet the learning needs of all their students, understanding how students learn, establishing high standards for students learning and providing equitable and adequate opportunity for learning. Teacher competency and efficacy depend on strong educational foundations. It has been observed that, the problem of poor quality assessment has been responsible for producing students who remain half-baked and could not assist themselves and the society (Erinle and Abioye, 2003 cited in Adenaike and Olaniyi, 2010).

In recent years and world wide, assessment has been a fundamental component of everyday life in primary, secondary and tertiary education as well as in industrial and commercial training (UNESCO-IBE, 2010/11). The history of assessment can be tracked back as far as 2200BC when the Mandrins set up a civil service testing program (Athanasou and Lamprianou, 2009). In practical fields, there were examples of competency assessments of the middle ages, where an apprentice was required to complete a master piece before acceptance into a guild (Shavelson, 2007 & Athanasou and Lamprianou, 2009). Gwarinda (2001) in Jinga, Ndamba & Manwa (2010) asserts that practical/technical subject learning should take place through praxis which entails marrying theory and practice hence the need of cooperative school climates. The advent of computers gave the opportunity to develop new assessments with desirable characteristics that are more realistic and easy to administer (Shavelson, 2007). The many landmarks in the history of educational assessment indicate the continual development of this field and that assessment practices have reflected the prevailing educational policies therefore educational environments should also be technologically advanced.

In all fields of education, assessment results are used to decide about students (that is, students' progression), to decide about teaching and learning (curriculum decisions) and increasingly linked with certification of competence (Kanyongo, 2005). Assessment can be linked to educational purposes like diagnosis, prediction, evaluation, selecting,

grading, guidance or administration. When assessment is conducted appropriately, it helps learners in a way that is meaningful and motivates them to learn. It provides important feedback on progress and help pupils to realise their strengths and weaknesses without being judgemental (Nthiga and Magete, 2010; Kanyongo, 2005 & McMillan, 2000). Assessment should therefore be for learning not of learning thus it must contribute to learning beyond the immediate task, meet the needs of the present and prepare pupils to meet their own future needs.

Reforms in the Zimbabwean education systems emphasise skill based subjects. The intended Home Economics (H/E) curriculum seeks to equip pupils with life-long practical skills (Oliatan and Ogusiobo, 1981; Dewey, 1984; Maravanyika, 1995; Marovatsanga, 1995). These skills can only be acquired through practice. H/E subjects aims to provide students with skills for living which are vital in the preparation of every child and young person for the opportunities and challenges which they will meet in the course of their lives. It provides a wide range of educational experiences in the aesthetic, creative, physical, scientific, social and environmental domains (NCCA, 2008; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003). H/E teacher, having a supportive school climate can play an important role in developing empowered, autonomous and reflective pupils who plan and assess their own progress now and in the future. It is therefore important that pupils enjoy H/E, see its relevance to their everyday needs and recognise the benefits it offers in improving the quality of life (McMillan, 2006).

Quality assessment is determined by a number of factors, including what can be termed the “software” of education, comprising the content and processes of education and the “hardware” of education comprising of infrastructure, equipment, teaching and learning materials and many others in the learning environment (Chakanyuka et al, 2009). Quality is also determined through learning achievements. The provision of adequate environment (space), equipment, materials, time and adequate supervision of the learning and teaching process enable assessment for learning. Assessment for learning is a tool that encourages active engagement and autonomy of pupils in managing their own learning. In support for ensuring quality educational experience and quality assessment, the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture (2000:v) prescribes strict adherence to the ‘hands-on’ approach as it emphasizes that, “A hands-on approach enables pupils to develop manipulative skills needed in the preparation and cooking of food, securing ... and cleaning the living environment”. Thus assessment for learning involves mapping and communicating the learning process to the pupils as well as providing resources.

Performance-based assessments (assessment activity) typically centre on authentic activities that involve mixing knowledge, skills and attitudes in a realistic context (Ross, 2006). Practical subjects require holistic and authentic approach to assessment. Holistic assessment integrates the assessment of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Students create products or perform demonstrations to provide evidence of their knowledge and skills. UNESCO-IBE 2010/11 states that assessment should be valid and reliable. In H/E, it is very important and essential to be able to demonstrate both knowledge and skill through performance hence the need of adequate equipment and materials (Mc Sweeney, 2008; Tableman, 2004). H/E subjects skills are life skills therefore the need to be acquired through enough practice as practice makes perfect. In the teaching of Home Economics subjects, the learning environment is of very considerable importance.

It is against this background that lead to the study of the role of school climate in quality assessment with special reference to H/E subjects. The study was prompted by the nature of most primary schools environments and the economic status of the country which one may wonder whether assessment for H/E subjects is assessment for learning or assessment of learning.

In extending our knowledge of how school climate can impact on quality assessment and academic outcomes, the study examined the school support for quality assessment in H/E subjects. The following two questions guided the study:

- To what extend do factors related to school climate influence quality assessment in Home Economics subjects?
- What are the effects of school climate on quality assessment?

## **2.Methodology**

### *2.1.Research Design*

In this research which assessed the role of school climate in quality assessment, a qualitative approach was used. A qualitative approach was used in order to gain entry into the world of schools (natural settings) under investigation in attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people brought to researchers (Marshall and Rossman, 2008). Understanding the nature of school climates and their role in quality assessment of Home Economics subjects required the researchers to interact with the participants. A descriptive survey design was chosen to realize the research objectives.

This method focused on description or exposure of the salient aspects of the situations in schools in relation to quality assessment with a focus on the patterns that emerged (Sidhu, 2003; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

### *2.2. Sample*

Purposive sampling was used to select six schools from a district with a population of fifteen. The sampling technique subdivided the population into groups according to their specific characteristics (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996; Upadhya and Singh, 2010). The district have different responsible authorities hence two schools were chosen from each i.e. government owned, private and council schools.

### *2.3. Instruments*

Validated open-ended questionnaires and document analysis were used to collect relevant data from teachers and pupils of grades four to seven. Document analysis gave evidence to the questionnaire contributions and helped to obtain behavioural and environmental data (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Open-ended questionnaire was found to be the most ideal data collecting instrument for the relatively large sample (Marshall & Rossman, 2008).

Data were presented in descriptive and narrative forms and analysed thematically.

## **3. Findings And Discussion**

Forty teachers who participated in the study were those teaching grades three to seven classes. Twenty-five were females while fifteen were males and were all qualified primary school teachers. Most of them were degreed but only ten were specialised in Home Economics during their training. Their teaching experience ranged from five to twenty-seven years. This indicates that all the teachers were aware of the assessment criteria and procedures in Home Economics subjects.

### *3.1. The Influence Of Factors Related To The School Climate On Quality Assessment*

The study found out that, generally all schools were affected by lack of resources. Most schools did not have base rooms for H/E teachers. Teachers operated in classrooms which are under equipped. Lack of base rooms was a cause of concern to many H/E teachers who teach in council schools. In most schools, the accommodation provided for theoretical and practical work was inadequate hence affecting quality of assessment. One

teacher stated that it is difficult to operate without a specific room since practical lessons need to be prepared for in time, with some of the processes needing preliminary preparations. Lack of equipment was one of the things mentioned which cause distress among H/E teachers. Tableman (2004) states that lack of resources do not affect only the teaching and learning of practical subjects, but also the quality of assessment.

On whether they had adequate materials and consumables, very few teachers had adequate consumables, in fact, only teachers from a private school had consumables to their disposal every term. Some teachers lamented that it is very difficult to explain concepts which can be easily demonstrated to students then pupils do the practice and assessed. Pupils are motivated when they learn skills and produce something which they can show to their parents. Chakanyuka et al, (2009) state that quality of assessments also depend on learning achievements. One of the participants stated that it is difficult to get parental support because they never saw teachers' capability in helping their children to produce a finished product at any level. Practical subjects are best taught through marrying theory and practice hence the need of adequate resources to carry out practical lessons so as to assess what the pupils have grasped and plan for the next activities (Adenaike and Olaniyi, 2010). There was also evidence from the study findings that slow learners failed to finish articles within the same grade year especially if materials were bought a bit late. These compromised the quality of assessment since many teachers ended up 'cooking' marks so that they have something to record.

It was established that most schools asked pupils to bring consumables from their homes so that practical work can be carried out. This affected pupils from poor backgrounds and those with parents who did not support the subject hence the need of adequate equipment and materials in schools (Mc Sweeney, 2008; Tableman, 2004). Pupils who failed to bring something ended up being de-motivated and stressed when it came to practical work. A good number of teachers' record books had gaps here and there. When they were asked to explain the reasons for the gaps, all had the same answer that the pupils concerned did not brought fabrics or food stuffs so that they do the coursework. This simply means some pupils were said to be learning H/E subjects while virtually nothing was happening. UNESCO-IBE 2010/11 states that assessment should be valid and reliable. It is therefore very important and essential that pupils be able to demonstrate both knowledge and skill through performance.

On technological changes, most of the schools used old equipments which lead to a mismatch of some pupils' homes and schools. Schools should be technologically

advanced so that pupils use machines and equipment which are available in the society. Very few schools had up-to-date books and other learning resources. These impacted on the quality of assessment since most pupils were exposed to out-dated information which may lead to failure in examinations even in life situations. McMillan (2006) argues that assessments in practical skills should have relevance to pupils' everyday needs so that they recognise the benefits they offer in improving the quality of life.

The findings revealed that teacher competency was negatively affected by lack of resources since most teachers were no longer motivated to teach the subjects. Some teachers stated that it is impossible to show that you are able to teach the subjects if there is no proof. One participant said, "Teaching of practical subjects is only evident when pupils can produce something. Can one demonstrate in the air, cook or sew it?" The participant was almost angry when trying to explain that teaching H/E subjects is so difficult when there are no resources. One teacher also expressed unfairness on this matter by stating that at the end of the day they are required to have a pupil's progress record book showing how far each child has acquired the skills. Crowe (2008) and Powell (2006) state that some teachers' capabilities and efficacy is crippled by lack of resources. The majority of H/E teachers shared the same sentiments that imparting and assessing skill acquisition was practically impossible if the school administration did not support by providing resources.

According to most H/E specialist teachers, since they were deployed in schools after completion of their diplomas and degrees, they never had a chance to produce finished products with their pupils. One of them was very sorrowful when she was narrating their situation. She almost cried when stating that their head had asked them to reduce number of classes who do H/E. This implied one of them was going to transfer or given a full class to teach all primary school subjects thus devaluing their existence or worthiness in schools. These findings indicate that teachers' experience and proficiency was also affected by lack of resources (Crowe, 2008; Tableman, 2004; Pickeral, Evans, Hughes & Hutchison, 2009). This showed the extent which school climate can negatively affect quality assessment in H/E subjects. A possible explanation to this may be the economic situation in the country which most schools are failing to meet the basic requirements for teaching and learning.

Most H/E teachers perceived their school climate as unsupportive of H/E subjects. They argued that the issue of lack of money was known but the administration's priority was sometimes unfair. Some teachers said their administration preferred to buy sports



uniform than H/E equipment or consumables. According to H/E teachers, they had to shout daily for their bids to be considered. A good number of teachers indicated that every term they expect squabbles with the administration on the same issue. Teachers need financial and social support if they are to work efficiently. When teachers are supported, they become motivated that they can go extra miles with their work in an effort to achieve quality assessment. Mc Sweeney (2008) and Stobart (2007) state that self-motivated teachers can improvise wherever possible and some will need little or no supervision.

Findings from documents analysed indicated that most schools did not have appropriate range of assessment methods. This impacted negatively on quality assessment since skills can only be acquired through different procedures (Gwarinda, 2001 in Jinga, Ndamba & Manwa (2010). Most assessment procedures for group work did not take into account individual contributions. The reason being that of lack of resources, teachers ended up grouping pupils into large groups which were difficult to allocate marks for each process. Most teachers indicated that they no longer considered quality in assessment because they could not afford to have individual practical work even in groups of two. H/E subjects should be learnt through praxis which entails marrying theory and practice to enhance skill acquisition hence quality assessment.

Respondents were asked to state how often they were supervised by their superiors. Half of the respondents indicated that they were supervised theory lessons only. The views shared by the majority of teachers were that they should be supervised practical lessons also so that the supervisors may see how difficulty it is to do practical lessons without adequate resources. Marking procedures were thoroughly done in most schools with detailed written comments. Those who were rarely supervised had scanty marking procedures with most books having no comments. These findings indicate that staff supervision impact on quality assessment. Crowe (2008) state that supervision is ideal to make sure the work is done perfectly and resources appropriately used.

### *3.2. Effects Of School Environmental Factors On Quality Assessment*

Findings revealed that unsupportive school environment leads to a number of problems. These included mismatch of skills, half-baked students, teacher incompetence and indiscipline. Lack of resources lead to lack of student practice therefore negatively impacted on quality assessment. Stobart (2007) state that if students lack practice, they get out of school half-baked. This means they would not be able to meet the societal

challenges especially if equipment used at school is different from those at home and in the industry.

When pupils and teachers are not supervised, usually become undisciplined. DeVilliers (2006) points out that indiscipline is one of the unique features of a school with a negative school climate.

Supportive environment leads to good student achievements through quality assessment, teacher and pupil motivation, teacher competence, staff and pupils discipline and teacher and pupil inventiveness. This was evidenced by some elder teachers who had small gardens on the back of their classroom and some even reared chicken. Motivated teachers do all they can to promote quality assessment through improvisation (Athanasou and Lamprianou, 2009).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The research revealed that most schools had no adequate resources, thus compromising quality assessment. There was evidence from the findings that most pupils were half-baked and were not prepared to meet the life challenges in the society. Impartation of inadequate theoretical and practical knowledge may lead to pupils failing to transfer learnt knowledge to real life situations for problem solving (McMillan, 2000).

The appropriate assessments methods were sometimes employed, but were not effectively useful as pupils' participation was often compromised due to lack of resources. The nature of assessments influences what is learned and the degree of meaningful engagement by students in the learning process (McMillan, 2000). The level of support and provision of resources are important to consider for good and efficient assessment (Pickeral et al, 2009).

From the established findings, it could be safely concluded that in terms of facilities, there was a great difference between council, government and private schools. Government schools had base rooms specially build for H/E and fully equipped though some of the equipments are not technologically outdated. Council and private schools had improvised classrooms which were under equipped. Teachers from council schools suffered most since they depended on practical fees paid by students only which were very little amounts.

**5.Recommendations**

The study recommended that all stakeholders should work together to address the provision of facilities, equipment and consumables in primary schools to support the teaching and learning of H/E subjects. There is need for schools to build facilities for effective H/E teaching and learning. Procurement of consumables should be done by both the school and the parents to avoid the situation where practical activities fail to materialise.

School heads and education officers from district to provincial levels need to supervise the teaching and learning of H/E in order to have an insight into the limitations that may be militating against the expected quality assessment.

To achieve quality assessment in H/E subjects, it is recommended that schools and community put hands together and do projects like nutrition gardens and rearing projects of chickens, rabbits, and goats may also help to get cheaper supply of foodstuffs. Sales from these projects may help to get other consumables and equipment.

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