
Examining secondary school teachers' in – service training through bachelor of education degrees block release part – time programme in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Universities need to explore new curriculum formats that may offer better fit with diverse student learning needs. Intensive mode delivery (IMD) category is the block – release part – time degrees programme, which comprises conventional traditional approaches and open and distance learning aspects. This case study sought to find out if this programme offered in Zimbabwe by University R at Teachers' College M as a centre, was developing desired teacher competences. Through structured interviews, data were collected from teacher educators and in – service teachers / teacher candidates in the programme. Coding and data reduction cumulated into themes upon which interpretation was based. Findings show that the this programme is a viable option which equips in – service teachers with degree qualifications for effective secondary school teaching and learning. However participants raised concerns about lack of time for them to develop competences in using learner – centred strategies. Teacher educators' modelling of application of learner – centred teaching and learning strategies and teaching and learning media were identified as empowering in developing desired competences for in – service teachers to facilitate learning of diverse learners. However, based on findings, it is recommended that learning resources which currently lack, should be made available in this programme at University R centres, to ensure that in – service teachers are fully prepared to facilitate learning, through learner – centred strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Similar to its influence on other spheres of life, globalisation is impacting on higher education, hence changing the teaching and learning context (Davies, 2006), as universities respond to international trends. Continuous increase in demand for access to tertiary education has engendered various course delivery modes (Finger & Penney, 2001). In a study by Finger and Penney (2001), some students and academic staff presented comments which show various perspectives, tensions, and perceptions important about various modes of subject design and delivery. Methods of teaching and learning are changing in an environment undergoing rapid transformation, in ways of content delivery, to adapt to changing students demands. For instance, moves from traditional to intensive modes of teaching and learning which are flexible

in line with demands both at work and at home, are an idea whose time has come (Davies, 2006). It is true that traditional course formats still predominate in universities, but identifiable variations like intensive modes of delivery (IMD) approaches due to demands related to student needs, preferences and constraints, are increasingly being implemented. For instance, universities need to cater for mature entry and part – time students who are engaged at work, concurrently with their studies (Allen & Seaman, 2017). In addition, dramatic technological change has necessitated changes in the modes of subject delivery. Up skilling, retraining and further studies have increased demand for flexible online programmes (Beattie & James, 1997; Haider, 2018). Online intensive modes of 6 to 8 weeks are becoming common among education institutions. For instance in the USA, six million students undertook online education in 2015, of which nearly five million were studying undergraduate college (tertiary) qualification. In Austria similar trends have been observed (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

There is no agreed definition of what constitutes intensive teaching models also known as IMD. Various terminology like, but not limited to, accelerated, time – shortened, mixed – mode, flexible delivery, block format and compressed format are used to describe IMD (Davies, 2006). However, a definition of IMD around which most other definitions are organised (Davies, 2006), is that of a subject being offered in less time than when traditionally taught, and often with reduced class contact hours. Reduced contact hours for IMD are of the order of twenty hours of class time over five or eight weeks, as opposed to forty five hours of class time over sixteen weeks (Scott & Conrad, 1992; Wlodkowski, 2003). Generally in order to qualify for IMD format a programme has to be delivered in a time frame of five to eight weeks which is less than the traditional 12 – 15 weeks semester approach. From this perspective an IMD can be defined as an entire subject delivered over a shorter time frame, than the traditional semester, but with the learning and workload outcomes equivalent to traditionally delivered subject (Harvey, Power & Wilson, 2017). This definition of IMD format is consistent with, some studies (Burgess & Russell, 2003), which note no significant differences in performance of IMD format graduates and individuals who study through the traditional classroom setting. This appropriately position IMD formats as another way of appropriately providing learning opportunities.

Being more suitable to tertiary education, IMD formats usually involve compressed teaching during weekends and evening classes. From institution to institution and subject to subject, the extent of acceleration or compression varies, hence these different teaching and learning formats can be classified appropriately (Finger & Penney, 2001). For instance, block modes involve large teaching time like whole day sessions or the whole week including weekends. Mixed modes spread teaching and learning over weekends and evenings in moderately long time, but less than day – length. Sporadic modes offer teaching and learning in small time slots spread over a long period eg 20 days or 5 – 10 weeks. In sandwich modes teaching and learning is offered at the front and back end of a semester with shorter periods of traditional teaching to allow for consolidation and reflection (Davies, 2006). Therefore, while these approaches qualify as IMD formats based on short duration, they have variations due to different implementation strategies.

While some researchers claim lack of significant differences between traditional conventional degree programmes and block release part – time degree programmes, there are also some researchers who strongly criticise the block release part – time degree programmes for shortfalls like shortening time for courses which may curtail positive learning (Davies, 2006). In order to gain insight, interviews, infrastructural observation and document analysis

were used to gather data on perceptions of in – service teachers in block release part – time degree programmes with university R. The specific research questions which guided the study are: 1) What is the nature of perceptions of in – service teachers of the BED block release part – time programme on developing their competences of facilitating learning at secondary school level?; 2). How can preparation of in – service teachers through BED block release part – time programme be improved?

2. METHOD

The case study design was preferred in exploring views of BEDs block release part – time programme teacher educators and in – service teachers, since it allowed generation of comprehensive data through in – depth interviews. This design enabled different perceptions of participants on the programme to be documented, hence contributing valuable knowledge. The population of the study were in – service teachers who were upgrading their Diploma in Education qualifications in various subject areas which included ECD, Commerce, and Mathematics to BED level. The in –service teachers were teaching full time at different schools (both primary and secondary) in Zimbabwe. Since the study was concerned with broad (general) rather than subject specific issues of the BEDs block release part – time programme, both the two educators and eight in – service teachers interviewed were selected through convenience sampling.

A semi – structured interview guide developed by the researcher and validate by three teacher educators (lecturers) is the research instrument that was used to gather data. Items in the semi – structured guide focused generation of data on block duration for each degree, delivery of lectures, internet access, content coverage, methods used in in – service teachers’ classes and availability of learning resources. The semi – structured interview guide was preferred due to its ability to provide respondents opportunities to freely express their views, while keeping the interview process focused on generating data relevant to answering the research questions.

Through structured interviews, data were collected from the BEDs block release part – time programme teacher educators and in – service teachers to facilitate data triangulation, hence ensuring trustworthiness of findings. Coding and data reduction cumulated into four themes emerging which are content coverage, time, teaching and learning strategies and teaching and learning media. Data from teacher educators and in – service teachers interviews is presented and interpreted in an integrated manner for easy triangulation, hence attaching meaning to the data in the context of the research problem.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Issues that were explored in an attempt to establish effectiveness of block release BED part – time programmes are organisation of degree courses, level of satisfaction of in – service teachers with teacher educators’ performances in the programme, quantity and quality of teaching and learning resources, and competences demonstrated by in – service teachers at their schools. Emergent themes under which findings on these issues are presented are content coverage, time, teaching and learning strategies and teaching and learning media.

Content Coverage

There is an umbilical connectedness between content mastery and content coverage, To ensure that content mastery in any programme is of high quality, content coverage must be similarly of high quality. Responding to the question on the nature of content coverage in the BED Clothing and Textiles programme, in – service teacher A said:

Content coverage during lecturers is very good. Looking back on my knowledge base in this subject before the BED block release part – time degree programme and now when I am doing the programme I can see that I am by far more knowledgeable.

Chuckling, expressing excitement, in – service teacher A said “I am a guru in making” and went on to say:

We started the block yesterday and we have written a test today. I had not prepared for the test enough because of pressure at my school during the term. The block release part – time degree programme requires the ability to work under pressure, so that both the demands of the programme and teaching at my school are met.

According to the response by in – service teacher A, corroborating in – service teachers C and E’s views, good content coverage is a good quality indicator of organisation of the BED block release part – time programme, which pitches in – service teachers to the expected level. The response also reflects a lot of confidence in competences the programme develops in in – service teachers, as reflected by their perception of themselves as “gurus in making”. However, demands due to duties at schools they teach were putting pressure, such that time to do learning tasks and prepare for tests and examinations by the in – service teachers was adversely affected. For anybody who goes through a learning programme, content mastery is one indicator testimonial to good competences the learner develops. Adult learners especially in – service teachers, have the ability to reflect on the teaching and learning process in which they are learners. This strong ability to reflect is premised on their experiences as classroom practitioners at various schools they teach. Basing on this, it can be safely and confidently be concluded that the responses in – service teachers provided were authentic.

In terms of raising content mastery to the required level of first degree, in – service teacher E a BED Clothing and Textiles teacher candidate said “It is a good crush programme.” Adding in congruency with in – service teachers A, B and E, in – service teacher C opined:

The degree programme is achieving its objectives. I feel confident to handle A – Level Business Studies learners which I could not do before commencing the degree programme. I am just in the first semester of my second year, so by the time I finish the degree in the third year, I will be very competent with high content mastery. All in all, it is a very good programme which makes me competitive.

These responses are testimonial to high quality of the block release part – time degree programme as rated by the teacher candidates. However, lack of time was lamented by in – service teacher E describing it a “crush programme”. It is important to note that this sentiment was also raised by interviewees A, B, and C respectively, indicating its gravity. There is need to consolidate good aspects of the programme while improving areas of concern, hence ensuring that the programme exhibits qualities which are rated highly by its graduates, as well as other stakeholders in the field of education.

Time

Apart from other resources required for successful use of learner – centred strategies, time is critical such that without it no progress can be achieved, The day being 24 hours, which is the maximum time available for any day and as a resource neither increases nor decreases, yet knowledge to be learnt is continuously increasing every second, with the advent of information and communication technology and the worldwide web/ internet. In the 21st century learner – centred strategies like discovery learning, experiments, and investigative learning should dominate century classrooms. However, these strategies need time for practice in peer and

microteaching sessions, discussion in groups, and for teacher educators to comprehensively explain and model learner – centred teaching and learning strategies. Responding to the question on adequacy of time to prepare in – service teachers to use these strategies, concurring with A, in – service teacher B said:

Time is not enough for covering learner – centred strategies in facilitating use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool. At Diploma level enough time was available, to practise learner – centred strategies through both peer and micro – teaching. In this block release part – time programme, we neither do peer - teaching nor microteaching to develop competences in using these strategies.

Congruent with in – service teachers A and B’s responses, in – service teacher K commented:

Understanding of concepts differs even among adult learners, some need less time while others need more to understand the same concepts. In order to cater for needs of both slow and fast learners, duration for each course should be long. Currently a course is covered in 3 days (activities included are in class tests, learning and presentations), but 5 days per course is reasonable.

In – service teachers A, B and K corroborated that time allocated to in – service teachers’ classroom activities in the block – release part – time degrees programme should be revised upwards, to enable development of skills necessary to help pupils develop 21st century skills. The general time for a block was found to be 3 weeks at most, 1 week being for tests and 2 weeks for learning in various courses. Within the 2 weeks of learning, on average a course took 3 days to complete. Commenting on the availability of time to do various activities in the BED block release part – time degrees programme in – service teacher J said:

Two weeks is not enough to develop required practical skills, although content is covered well. As a nursing mother it puts me under pressure by attending both to my baby and demands of the learning programme. It is better to cover a course in six days rather than two or three, so that it is easy to cope with pressure.

While acknowledging that nursing mothers are accommodated in this block release part – time programme, but as highlighted by other in – service teachers in the programme, lack of time was a major concern. The repeated reference to shortage of time as a constraining factor in the BED block release part – time programme, is a clear indicator of the need to find ways to respond to the concern on lack of time by the in – service teachers. In – service teacher F concurred:

Time per course needs to be increased. Time to search for appropriate information pertaining to given tasks is not enough. You can be given work required to be presented in class in the next 2 hours which is not enough for one to give a comprehensive response.

It is incontrovertible time is an indispensable resource, without which success is not possible. A BED Business Studies in – service teacher C with regards to availability of time said:

Time is not enough to involve us in active learning strategies, so that we feel how it is to learn this way. In addition, our teacher educators do not model the active learning strategies they expect graduates of the programme to use because focus is on covering content in preparation for examinations. The programme has advantages in developing skills to use computers for processing information, recording, typing and so on. However lack of time inhibits thorough learning of using computers to facilitate teaching and

learning.

This was in agreement with in – service teachers B and C who showed great concern on lack of time to promote teaching and learning. Concurring on lack of time, in – service teacher D, BED Mathematics said:

A course or module takes 3 – 4 days to complete. A block is 3 weeks long. First week we write tests, then second and third weeks we focus on learning new modules. Pupil – centred approaches are covered as teaching and learning strategies, but more focus is on covering content.

Premised on the corroboration among in – service teachers A, B, C, D, E, F, J and K that time for development of comprehensive competences to use learner – centred teaching and learning strategies to be used effectively in classrooms is not enough, there is need to adjust teaching and learning in the block release part – time degrees programme to accommodate this aspect. Assisting pupils in schools is a practical process which requires teachers as facilitators with requisite competences, hence the need to develop them in both pre – service and in – service teachers. In – service teacher E a BED Clothing and Textiles teacher candidate was clear that time was not enough, suggesting the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Open and Distance teaching and learning approach as a better alternative to the current model of block release. The concerns about time raised by in – service teachers should not be brushed aside, but considered in order to find how best to create time to develop the desired competences. In as much as teachers in schools are expected to meet the needs of learners, teacher educators should respond to the needs of in – service and pre – service teachers as learners at that level.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Varied learner – centred strategies should be used in any teaching and learning environment, consistent with principle of Inclusive Education that no one should be left behind in any learning process. Varied strategies appeal to different learning tastes of learners such that they all benefit from the teaching and learning process. However, in this study, evidence of frequent use of one learner – centred strategy namely presentations in classrooms was revealed by in – service teacher A saying:

During lectures, presentations by students are the main approach used. However, because it is a crush programme time for preparing the presentations is limited. You may be expected to make a presentation after three hours of being allocated a topic to present on. Surely, within this time it would be impossible to consult all sources and come up with a very comprehensive presentation.

In a society characterised by diverse backgrounds of both adult and young learners, inclusive education is a topical issue. Some learners prefer different learning styles to cover and understand concepts, hence there is need to use varied teaching and learning strategies which cater for the needs of diverse learners. Responding to how inclusivity should be done at degree level, in – service teacher B expressed that “teaching and learning strategies should be varied to meet needs of different learners”.

When teachers reflect on each lesson they identify areas of strengths and weaknesses, making them conscious of their respective level of performance. Reacting to the question on the feeling of efficacy with regard to methodology of teaching and learning mathematics at A – Level, in – service teacher D a BED Mathematics candidate retorted:

A false assumption often made is that in – service teachers have methodology learnt at Diploma level. However the Diploma level was to teach up to O – Level, but at degree level teaching qualification one has to teach up to A – Level. The nature of student and level require new approaches to teaching and learning, hence teaching methodology at A – Level is necessary. However I am very keen to learn, so I put effort to meet new demands due to new learner needs.

In – service teacher D clearly articulates the need to adjust teaching and learning to resonate with current times and level at which learning occurs. Contrasting teaching and learning strategies required at O – Level with those required at A – Level, shows that teaching and learning is not a one size fits all. Teaching and learning strategies should be flexible to meet contextual factors, which are both learner and environmentally related.

Asked whether it was not necessary to focus on methodology just like content, interviewee E a BED Clothing and Textiles teacher candidate's reply was "...we have methodology from the Diploma training...". This was corroborated by teacher educator V, expressing a view shared with teacher educator U saying "They have methodology based on their training during the Diploma". The revelation that in – service teachers previously trained at Diploma level had enough competences at degree level based on Diploma training, is a reflection of a one size fits all approach which is at variance with in – service teacher D who articulated the need to adjust teaching and learning strategies to match both learner and environmental factors. Assumptions of this nature reflect a view of static equilibrium and permanency in teaching and learning which is not consistent with the fast changes occurring in the learning environment, especially with the advent of ICT, in the context of education for sustainable development (ESD) in the 21st century.

This further suggests that ways should be found for teacher educators to share ideas on the need to adapt teaching and learning at different levels to suit prevailing circumstances. Factors involved in teaching and learning constantly change, so methodologies for teaching and learning should change also. This is supported by in – service teacher E who on further probing on use of methodologies like digital methodologies, changed on the issue of permanency with regards using the strategies learnt at Diploma training suggesting the need to up skill instructional competences to suit current trends, and emerging changing teaching and learning methods. In – service teacher E commented:

With technology becoming a key tool for teaching and learning, there is need for both pre – service teachers and practising teachers to develop competences to use technology for teaching and learning in classrooms, as well as personal learning. The internet now allows learners to access learning materials and even doing learning programmes online.

The aspect of internet becoming an important teaching and learning tool is critical because it now provides the learner with learning materials and the teacher with materials required for facilitating teaching and learning. The internet now allows knowledge to be available all the time, so teachers should have competences to access and use it. Therefore in these BED block release part – time programmes, in – service teachers involved should be assisted to develop such competences.

Teaching and learning Media

Teaching media are critical for making concepts concrete during teaching and learning. However, there are indications that teaching and learning resources like textbooks lack in the

BED block release part – time programmes. This was revealed by interviewee B saying:

Textbooks are not enough. In some cases a textbook is shared by many students, but internet service provided by the host teachers' college is good. Overall the programme develops ECD teachers to be competent at degree level.

While materials like e – books and e – journals are available on internet, hard copies cannot be done away with for various reasons. For instance, hard copies can be used when there are challenges with internet like poor connectivity. Also, those learners who may still be developing competences in using the internet for learning, may need to use textbooks frequently to accomplish programme requirements. Another issue is that of learner preferred learning styles which among other things include types of reading material (soft copy or hard copy). Hard copies should be available to cater for the needs of those in – service teachers in the BED block release part – time programme who prefer them to frequent use of the internet. It is therefore prudent that University R makes hard copies available in the library of the host teachers' college M.

The challenges associated with ICT use in teaching and learning, specifically computers was articulated by in – service teacher B, a BED Business Studies who said:

ICT is important for making teaching and learning interesting and concepts easily understood. Although I can use computers for typing, I need specialist assistance to develop skills to effectively use them for teaching and learning. I also need assistance to access certain sites and download teaching and learning materials for later use, offline.

In – service teacher C revealed that classmates close to University R host teachers' college M, had the privilege of interacting with teacher educators during the school term for help, but this approach contradicts the principle of inclusivity since the approach excludes those far away. In – service teacher F said pertaining to this:

I work very far away from the teachers' college so I do not have the time to do face to face interactions with my lecturers during the school term, unlike some of my classmates whose schools are near. If ways of communicating with lecturers online could be established it will help in keeping all of us in touch with our lecturers.

There is need to use ICT to ensure that challenges of communication which arise due to distance as a barrier are overcome. Using ICT as media for communicating with in – service teachers (learners) in the BED block release programmes by teacher educators as modelling is good, because the chances that these in – service teachers may use similar strategies in their classrooms, at their schools will be high. Potential benefits from using such communication strategies are many ranging from immediate benefits like in – service teachers keeping in touch with teacher educators often to school graduates having high ability to use ICT as exit competence. Therefore means like e – mails of reaching out to in – service teachers in the programme should be used as alternative to keep teacher educators and learners (in – service teachers) communicating during off campus sessions

4. CONCLUSION

The BED block release part – time programmes are a viable option which helps to equip in – service teachers with degree qualifications to facilitate effective teaching and learning in schools. Participants revealed that they felt confident to teach at A – Level, a thing which they were not able to do before.

While this is the case, the participants raised concerns about lack of time to develop

competences in using learner – centred strategies to facilitate teaching and learning at secondary school level. Also, the study revealed that teacher educators need to model various teaching and learning strategies which empower in – service teachers to develop competences in using learner – centred strategies. Teaching and learning media were identified as important in developing in – service teachers competences to facilitate learning of diverse learners. From the study, it is recommended that textbooks, time and teaching and learning media should be made available in the BED block release part – time programme at University R to ensure that in – service teachers are fully prepared to facilitate learning as expected.

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