

Barriers to Geography Teachers' Engagement with Research in Selected Secondary Schools of Serenje District in Central Zambia

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to establish the barriers to geography teachers' engagement with research in selected secondary schools of Serenje district. Interviews were conducted with fourteen geography teachers, two heads of social sciences departments, and one official each from Provincial Resource Centre (PRC) and District Resource centre (DRC) respectively. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. Two focus group discussions were also conducted with teachers of geography. Data was analysed thematically. Findings showed that teacher engagement with research was constrained by barriers such as lack of time, lack of support from administrators, financial constraints, lack of access to relevant research literature, and societal and organizational culture. Therefore, to establish and sustain research engagements of geography teachers in the district attention is needed in the following areas: policy, job description and schedules of the teachers, school culture, libraries, and funding for research.

Key Words: Reading culture, Engagement with research, Barriers

I. INTRODUCTION

The nation's overall vision for education enshrined in vision 2030 is "innovative and productive lifelong education and training for all by 2030" (Government of the Republic of Zambia, Ministry of National Development and Planning, 2006: 38). To have quality education, we need teachers who are critical and have high order thinking skills necessary in the creation of knowledge, problem solving and dealing with information bombardment (United Nation Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2005). In line with this, Mayne (2014:48), states "improving all aspects of quality of education is dependent on preparing teachers to become critical citizens." The Zambian curriculum has shifted from content based to competency-based so that learners can develop higher order thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Mulenga and Kabombwe, 2019) hence the need for teachers to have high order thinking skills.

Moreover, the senior secondary school Geography curriculum has included field work following its revision in 2000. For this inclusion to be implemented, geography teachers should possess research skills and theoretical knowledge about research. The teachers' research skills and competencies such as awareness, perception, and analysis should be enhanced

and perfected first before teachers can hope to give support to their learners who are trying to do the same (Lambert and Balderstone, 2000). At diploma level, geography teachers do not undergo research training. It is only at higher levels of training that research is taught and again not all institutions offer research training at degree level. Diploma holders therefore, have to learn research on the job.

In addition, Geography is not a static subject, therefore teachers should continuously research and should help create Geographical knowledge because as Long and Robertson (1966:128) explain, 'Geographies are written records of original field investigations.' Teachers should not be mere consumers but co-creators of research evidence (Firth, 2016). Researchers have confirmed that researching helps Teachers to become competent in that it builds and rebuild skills as well as improve cognitive capabilities, critical and logical thinking which teachers can transmit to their learners (Elton, 2008; Khan, 2017). Apart from that Biesta, 2007 revealed the potential of research to improve and inform practice in that it presents to the teacher the different ways in which educational activities can be interpreted and understood (Biesta, 2007 as cited in Mehrani, 2015:85).

Competence is not attained in a single training as that is insufficient to sustain teachers for life. The educational policy document posits that teachers have a responsibility to themselves and their profession to deepen and extend their knowledge and professional skills and attend to their own personal development in chosen areas of specialization in addition to ongoing professional development (MOE, 1996). Among the reasons for this are that: knowledge is not static and is ever increasing; that initial teacher training, sound though it might be, is not sufficient for life; that the education system changes with change in societal needs and expectations; and that because 'teaching is a learned and a learning profession' teachers should be lifelong learners (MOE, 1996). Institutions of learning from preschool up to university, therefore, should be places where research take place so as to have quality education (MOE, 1996). Research engagement therefore is in line with the idea of lifelong learning for teachers which is always available to them (MOE, 1996). However, despite the benefits of research to Geography teaching and learning there seemed to be lack of study on the barriers to geography teachers' engagement with

research in secondary schools of Serenje district, a gap this study attempts to bridge.

1. *Aim*: the purpose of this study was to establish the barriers to geography teachers' engagement with research and to suggest possible solutions to the barriers.
2. *Research Questions*: To address the aim, the following questions were asked:
 - a. What are the barriers to geography teachers' engagement with research?
 - b. What are the possible mitigation measures that can be proposed to address the barriers?

II. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

This study made use of the deliberate practice theory framework propounded by Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Rome (1993). This theory posits that the rarity of excellence is due to optional training environments and the years needed to develop the complex mediating mechanism that support expertise. Expertise is gradually attained through engaging in extended amounts of designed deliberate practice over time. Deliberate practice may be described as domain specific activities that gives optimal opportunity for acquiring skills and knowledge and therefore are highly necessary to improving performance despite that they may require significant effort on the part of an individual to initiate and sustain them overtime. These tasks may not be enjoyable but if performed frequently, they can enable one adapt and restructure their performance for the better. It is therefore important that these tasks are recognized by the performers as highly relevant to improving performance.

Becoming an expert involve prolonged efforts to improve performance while negotiating motivational and external constraints. Even Highly experienced individuals, through deliberate efforts to improve practice can further increase their performance. Optimizing practice requires that the individual have resources such as good teachers and suitable facilities. It can be argued that reading research is a domain specific task teachers should engage in to improve practice. However, as the theory posits one needs resources, good facilities and good teachers to engage in deliberate practice. Optional training environments are important for deliberate practice. In this case one needs comprehensive library facilities within an outside school and also a school culture that supports reading so as to engage in extended amounts of reading. This theory helped explain whether geography teachers in Serenje district had access to suitable facilities and resources required for them to engage with research.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several researchers identified barriers to teacher engagement with research such as lack of time, lack of research literature, complex discourse of research publications and poor reading culture as follows:

(a)Time

In most of the studies that have been conducted on teacher engagement in research, time has been found to be one of the major factors of teacher research engagement (Drill et al, 2012; Bilgili, 2005; Ellis, and Longhand, 2016: Soe, 2014; Borg, 2006; Firth, 2016). Often teachers complain that time is lacking due to the teaching load they have and the pressure of completing the syllabus (Ellis, and Longhand, 2016: Soe, 2014; Bilgili, 2005). The teachers also expressed willingness to engage in and with research if the administrators sanctioned some time for research (Drill et al, 2012). In the study conducted by Drill et al (2012), majority of the teachers suggested that if research findings were to be presented briefly such as in bulleted point, in form of a brief synopsis, or in audio-visual media form they could serve teachers some time to attend to their learners' needs. In addition to that, Drill et al (2012) was of the view that if a section of the school library was to be set apart and stocked with relevant research articles, books, and digital media that are useful to teachers, it can make research more easily accessible to busy teachers.

(b) Financial Resources

Drill et al (2012) and Firth, (2016), identified financial resources as one of the factors of teacher research engagement. Since journal subscriptions, books, and workshops come at a cost, teacher engagement with research is hindered (Drill et al 2012). Though Firth, (2016), acknowledged that teacher research engagement is costly on schools and the government, he sees the cost as worthwhile and justified in that the end results are highly skilled teachers and hence quality education. He recommended that a small scale research funding be established to fund teacher research activities. Drill et al (2012) called on Local and state-level policymakers to find ways and means of reducing or eliminating the financial cost associated with teacher research engagement so as to promote teachers' access to knowledge that is vital to improving student learning.

(c) Complex discourse of research

Mehrani's (2015) study established that teachers especially those lacking research skills preferred web based materials because they were brief, non-technical and written in plain language unlike academic research journal reports which had complex discourse and were length. Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, (2003) suggest reducing academic jargons in research as a way of facilitating teacher research engagement. In the study by Drill et al, (2012) teachers expressed willingness to engage with research if research findings are presented in brief synopsis, as a bulleted list, or even as audiovisual media.

(d) Lack of relevant research literature

Studies by Mehrani (2015) and Drill et al, (2012) shows that reading research is hindered by lack of relevant research literature. Teachers could only engage with something they perceived is useful or relating to their work (Mehrani's (2015). Hancock (1997) investigated the reasons for teachers'

reluctance to become researchers and found that the mismatch between many available research methodologies and teachers' professional ways of working in classrooms was one of the barriers to teacher research engagement. Working in collaboration with academics might assist in bridging the gap between theory, thus promoting teacher research engagement (Mehrani, 2015). Lack of access to reading materials is a hindrance to reading especially in countries like Zambia which lack comprehensive library facilities and where most secondary schools have no library facilities (MOE,1996). Ronnas (2009) identified poor access to information, poor resource mobilization, lack of value and appreciation of information at all levels in society and poor regional and international cooperation as the problems with library services in Zambia. She further explains that these services due to high costs and poor funding were poorly stocked and were mainly in urban areas. To increase access to research literature, Drill et al (2012) recommended that policy makers and administrators should consider setting up research libraries in districts.

(e) Societal culture

Elley (2001) of the University at Canterbury linked reading culture to the attitude of society towards reading and the availability of what to read. To explain this point, he drew the readers' attention to the Nordic countries which had high levels of reading competencies because they had adequate libraries, bookshops, and role models to ensure that good reading habits were supported and transmitted in the next generation. Mulindwa, (2001) and Sangkeo (1999) revealed that African societies were chatting societies that lacked a reading culture (Mulindwa, 2001; Sangkeo, 1999. In Nalusiba, 2010). Oral literature is therefore more dominant than written forms in African societies (Nalusiba, 2010). Toteimeyer, 1999 also concluded that in African societies reading stops upon completion of formal education because people find more pleasure in oral traditions and practices rather than from written forms. Ronnås (2009) also related reading to the culture of the people. According to her in Zambia because the issues of literature and reading were alien to the culture, and were just brought into the country through a foreign language medium, it had been difficult to develop a good reading culture. She quoted Sturges, and Neill, (1998:135) who stated, "The colonial education system inherited by Africa and expanded since independence, presented reading as something to be learned, rather than a means of enjoyment. Books are often associated with study and you read to pass your exams". According to her, many within the educated elite are non-readers. Hachintu (2017) expressed the need to move beyond mere imparting of reading skills to inculcating the reading and research culture in learners. Teachers must read and research even if it is under duress because their job demands that they do so (Aina et al, 2011).

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative employing descriptive study design so as to get different views, beliefs, attitudes and perception of participants regarding barriers to geography teachers' engagement with research and also because the research sought to describe the phenomenon under study. Interviews were conducted with 14 geography teachers, two heads of social sciences departments, and one official each from PRC and DRC respectively. Two focus group discussions were also conducted with teachers of geography. Data was analysed thematically.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Barriers to engagement with research of geography teachers in selected schools of Serenje district

Barriers to engagement with research of geography teachers in selected schools of Serenje district are present and discussed as follows:

(a) Lack of access to relevant research publications

The major hindrance to reading research that teachers identified was lack of access to relevant research publications. Two important things came out regarding this issue: relevance and access. Of the participants that were interviewed 13 out of 14 cited lack of access to research literature as one of the barriers to reading research. This was echoed in both focus discussions groups. School libraries were not serving the purpose for which they existed because they had outdated books and did not stock relevant research works. Concerning this teacher B1 said:

Concerning Geography, the library is poorly stocked, so both teachers and learners who go there benefit very little.... To the best of my knowledge, I have not seen any research article or journal in our school library (B1, school B: 21/07/2020).

Of the schools that were included in the research, only one had a few copies of research works and then these were insufficient and were deemed to be shallow by teachers.

Teachers who had visited DRC and PRC claimed that there were no research works available there. Although the PRC personnel claimed that there were a few copies of research works, non were available at the time data was being collected. The PRC and DRC personnel moreover did confirm the claim of teachers that in terms of Geography there were no books, let alone published research works. According to PRC personnel, teachers were being advised to access research works on line using their gadgets such as phones, tablets and laptops. However, at PRC there was only one desk top which unfortunately was not connected to internet. One teacher said:

I have been at our nearest PRC several times. Installations are there but there is no internet there. What I expect from there is that they should have Wi-Fi (A1, school A: 11/08/2020).

Therefore, there was no chance of teachers accessing research works online from PRC. Their schools also lacked Wi-Fi connections, though some schools had computers laboratories, so access to research works on line in schools was not possible either. Teacher B1 said:

The school library has no internet from where you can access online materials

The issue of inaccessibility of research work was also a complaint among English language teachers in Iran (Mehrani and Behzadnia, 2013). Some schools in Serenje district didn't even have libraries. As MOE (1996:86) posits "library facilities in Zambia are scarce, at both institutional and public levels: ...most secondary schools have no libraries". Developing a reading culture in institutions that lack comprehensive library facilities is almost impossible.

The only available option for teachers to access research works was through their phones and laptops using their own data bundles and making journal subscriptions themselves. Therefore, reading research proved to be costly on the part of the teacher as some complained of the harsh economy making it difficult for them to read research. This is consistent with Drill et.al (2012) who said that since journal subscriptions, books, and workshops come at a cost, teacher engagement with research is hindered (Drill et al 2012). Firth (2016) had also identified lack of comprehensive library facilities and limited accessibility to research journals as barriers to research engagement.

For one to read something, it has to be relevant and motivating to them. One teacher said he did not read research because he had not found any motivating research works. Another teacher C2 said she was hindered from reading research due to "Unavailability of research works which are relevant to what I'm teaching" (C2, school C:23/07/2020). This supports Mehrani's view that teachers will only engage with something they perceive is useful or relating to their work (Mehrani, 2015). The issue of relevance of research works to teachers' work was a factor identified even in the study by Mehrani and Bhzadnia (2013). Block (2000) and Nasaji (2012) criticised academic research as being irrelevant to the teacher's interest and that it cannot be placed in the teachers' context. Hancock (1997) and Mehrani and Bhzadnia (2013) established that the mismatch between many available research methodologies and the teachers' professional ways of working in the classroom was one of the barriers to teacher research engagement. Given the prevailing conditions in the selected secondary schools and Serenje district, if what the teachers find on line is not relevant to their work, then they may not be willing to buy data bundles to access such.

(b) Lack of time

Like in other studies (Firth, 2016; Ellis, and Longhand, 2016; Soe, 2014; Drill et al, 2012; Borg, 2006; Bilgili, 2005), time had been found to be one of the major factor of research engagement. All but one of the teachers interviewed

mentioned time as a major barrier to reading research. A teacher from school C said: "*finding time to read is a challenge*" (teacher C3, school C:23/07/2020). Doing research requires a lot of time. Teachers said they were constrained by workload, marking, a lot of paper work, administrative responsibilities and pressure of completing the syllabus. This substantiates findings of other researches that often teachers complain that time is lacking due to the teaching load they have and the pressure of completing the syllabus (Ellis, and Longhand, 2016; Soe, 2014; Bilgili, 2005). The pressure of completing the syllabus was due to the 'examination syndrome'. Teacher C2 simply said:

Teachers are very busy and have big workload, because of that, they just present to learners what is in the textbooks just for the sake of exams. I think what is killing us is failure to see beyond exams (C2, school C: 23/07/2020).

It is expected of a teacher that all their pupils pass the exams and therefore, teachers have to align their teaching to what comes in the examinations and must complete the syllabus making it difficult for them to find time to read research especially where the available research works seem irrelevant to their work. Teaching had therefore, become exam driven and not inquiry driven. In addition, teacher found the education system not flexible enough to encourage research. During the focus discussion with group 2 the following statement was said:

The system itself does not even allow us to research because it is overloaded with a lot of activities. Teachers are overwhelmed, so they have got no time to research that is why our job description is purely teaching not researching. The research component is not accommodated (FDG 2: 14/08/2020).

Time was also one of the factors in Iranian English language teacher engagement with research (Mehrani, 2015; Mehrani and Behzadnia, 2013). It has also been cited by many other researchers. Gore and Giltin (2004) and Borg (2009) had also stated that the teacher's life does not easily allow them find time to read research. Making the education system flexible enough to allow research might encourage teachers to read research. More so, it seems time factor affects most of the activities happening in schools in general. In his research on school safety and health, Mubita (2016) also noted that time was a factor that affected teachers because of multitasking.

(c) Financial constraints

Findings revealed that financial challenges were one of the major hindrances to reading research. Teachers said they had financial challenges making it difficult for them to buy data bundles and journals and to make journal subscriptions and even to find time to read research works. Teacher B4 had this to say:

It is the harsh economy. Teachers after work would rather do gardening and other activities that will give them some

income, so the time for reading is not there” (teacher B4, School B: 22/07/2020).

At school C, two teachers also mentioned that schools and resource centres were constrained financially and funding to schools was less and erratic. Concerning this issue in focus discussion with group 1 the following was said,

“...the major problem with many institutions is that funding has become scarce. Such things [internet and Wi-Fi connectivity] are never even budgeted for because they are never taken seriously by the funders” (FDG1:11/08/2020). This was echoed by teacher B4 who said; *“Schools do not have money to buy journals and other research related materials, so school libraries have become just a stock of old outdated books which are not very helpful to both teachers and pupils”*

(teacher B4, school B:22/07/2020). Schools therefore, could not afford journal subscriptions and even providing free internet access to teachers and pupils within the schools. Due to lack of funds, certain things such as journals, Wi-Fi connectivity it seemed were not prioritized in institutions though they are important to teaching and learning. Financial constraints therefore reduce access to research publications in institutions of learning. This is consistent with Drill et.al (2012) who said reading is hindered by the cost of journal subscription. For as long as schools are constrained financially and funding is erratic, building a culture of research among teachers of Geography and indeed other teachers could be a difficult thing to do. Financial problems were also noted by Mubita (2016) as one of the factors that generally affects school management. Schools would rather spend on buying books, desks and other tangible and basic materials as opposed to funding research activities.

(d) Poor reading culture

Participants did mention that Zambian societies had poor reading culture. When asked to mention the hindrances to reading research, one of the teachers said: *Attitude which goes back to our reading culture which is poor”* (C2; 23/07/2020). Another teacher said: *It is culture, we have no reading and research culture most of us. We rely on hearsay”* (B4, school B:22/07/2020).

This suggests that reading is related to societal culture. The study by Ronnås (2009) also linked reading to the culture of the people. According to her, in Zambia because the issues of literature and reading were foreign to the culture, and were just brought into the country through a foreign language medium, it had been difficult to develop a good reading culture. This might also explain why there are few local writers of books in Zambia and also why books on Zambia and the sub region were scarce in schools. It also might serve as a crew to why there is scanty information about the Geography of Zambia and the sub region even online. Sentiments from teachers such as lack of interest and motivation to read all points to poor reading culture. One

teacher even mentioned that Zambian societies generally were more into listening and talking than reading and writing. This is consistent with Toteimeyer’s (1999) assertion that in African societies reading stops immediately one completes formal education because people find more pleasure in oral traditions and practices than in written forms. It is also in line with the assertions by Mulindwa, (2001) and Sangkeo (1999) that African societies are not reading societies but are rather a chatting or narrating societies that lack a culture of reading. One teacher even said that there was a tendency for teachers to ignore long posts on wats app platforms.

Culture explains attitude towards reading and research works. Some participants did mention that such activities as reading research and doing research were only common when one was studying. Earlier researchers had established that in Africa, reading was mainly done for passing examinations. Toteimeyer (1999) also asserts that in African societies reading stops upon completion of formal education because people find more pleasure in oral traditions and practices rather than from written forms. This may also substantiate some teachers’ claim that some had graduated without research skills and knowledge to impart on pupils. It is likely that some were reading research not to understand and use it but just to pass the research course. In such cases rote learning is what is active and once one writes the examination, they cannot remember what they read and therefore cannot share the knowledge with anybody. This situation might have something to do with the way literature and reading were introduced in Zambia. According to Sturges and Neill, (1998:135), “The colonial education system inherited by Africa and expanded since independence, presented reading as something to be learned, rather than a means of enjoyment. Books are often associated with study and you read to pass your exams”. If written literature and reading were part of the Zambian culture, Zambians could not be reading only for the sake of passing exams. Had reading been presented as a means of enjoyment, it might have been easier to inculcate a positive attitude towards reading. This situation may offer some explanation as to why engagement with research of Geography teachers in the district was moderate.

Another issue that came out was that schools were not long term oriented judging from geography teachers’ sentiments that field research for learners was not receiving the attention it deserved because administrators would rather spend money on things or activities that could give them immediate benefits than on research. One teacher actually mentioned that the administrators were short sighted. This might give a crew as to why research related materials were lacking in schools. Unless this situation changes establishing and sustaining teacher research engagement would be elusive because as Brew (2010) posited, the idea of teaching and research integration stand a better chance of being accepted in societies that welcome innovation and are long-term oriented than in societies that are not.

5.2 Proposed solutions to address barriers to teacher engagement with research in selected secondary schools in Serenje district.

- a. Since teacher engagement with research was impeded by absence of funds and relevant research works there should be a slot in the national budget specifically for teacher research engagement and ensuring that schools and resource centres have comprehensive library facilities. Research in education should be aligned to what teachers teach and do since relevance of research works was one of the major factor of reading research. The directorate of social sciences should identify areas in the Geography subject area that require research and avail these to Geography teachers to research on. It should also encourage teachers to come up with researches that are related to the teaching and learning of Geography so as to create geographical knowledge and improve the teaching and learning of Geography. This is because schools and resource centers lacked adequate Geography books and research publications relevant to geography teachers. Aligning research to what is needed in the subject area could make research relevant and meaningful to teachers. It could also ensure that libraries have relevant research materials if published and even textbooks can be written using records of field research because as (Long and Robertson, 1966) put it, ‘geographies are written records of field investigations.’ Apart from that, there should be a peer reviewed journal specifically for researches done by teachers of Geography and publishing in this journal should be sponsored. This might also reduce the problem of unavailability of relevant research works.
- b. Government and school administrators should create enabling environments for teacher research engagement and allocating time in the time table for reading research etcetera since teachers complained of the lack of time to read. In other words, the educational system should be made flexible enough to allow teachers do and read research since teachers complained of lack of time to read due to being overloaded and the pressure of completing the syllabus.
- c. Teacher group meetings, CPD meetings, SOSTAZ conferences should help in raising awareness of the importance of teacher engagement with research since much of the reading by teachers was done when they were studying because they were required to do so. In addition, government should put a little bit more emphasis on teacher engagement with research by way of enshrining it in the educational policy document and in the teacher’s job description and schedules since teachers felt research engagement was not expected of them.

VI. CONCLUSION

Teacher engagement with research is very important to the teaching and learning of geography. It results in highly skilled and knowledgeable teachers and therefore can result in quality and lifelong education. Despite this, geography teacher engagement with research in Serenje district had been impeded by lack of time, lack of support from administrators and the ministry, lack of funding and institutional and societal cultures. However, the possibility that geography teacher engagement with research could be established and sustained was there judging from the positive views Geography teachers had regarding teaching and research integration i.e. making research part of their job description. Therefore, to establish and sustain research engagements of geography teachers in the district attention is needed in the following areas: policy, job description and schedules of the teachers, school culture, libraries, and funding for research.

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