RESEARCH ARTICLE

Influence of quality assurance practices on student's performance in advanced level learning at a selected high school in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the influence of quality assurance practices on students' performance in Advanced Level learning at the selected high school. Qualitative approach guided the data generation, analysis and discussion. Sample comprised of 10 teachers and 4 school-based supervisors who were purposively selected. Data generated through literature method and interviews were analysed according to emerging themes. The participants conceptualised quality assurance as those practices that are used in monitoring the quality of learning in Advanced Level. In addition, the findings advanced how the identified quality assurance practices can be used in monitoring the quality of Advanced Level learning process. Some challenges faced when infusing quality assurance practices in Advanced Level learning process were extracted from participants' contributions. Based on these findings it was concluded that in spite of the existence of the challenges faced, quality assurance practices to a larger extent influences students' performance in Advanced Level learning process at the selected high school. We recommend that teacher capacity development programmes be organised so as to bridge the identified gaps around the infusion of quality assurance practices into teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Advanced Level Learning, High School, Performance, Quality Assurance Practices, Students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, where industrialisation and modernization are on top of the developmental agenda of most countries [1]. This calls for education systems that fosters quality human capital formation in learning institutions [2]. Thus, quality education is the epitome of the teaching and learning activities as the students thrive to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and values. In this regard, the education system provides students with relevant competencies needed for them to be functional in the socio-economic life of their society and even beyond [3]. Therefore, in education, should put in place mechanisms (i.e., quality assurance practices) that enhance learning institutions to provide quality service and products [4, 5]. This is done through the infusion of systematic actions targeted at boosting confidence in both the internal and external customers of the education system. It is in this context that the Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has placed quality assurance at the centre of its 'Heritage-Based Education'

curriculum framework under the guise of one-size-fits-all philosophy in learning activities [6]. This is targeted at exposing both primary and high school students to a systematic student-centred approach to learning process [7]. In all this process, students' performance in learning processes has always been a topic of interest to all stakeholders (i.e., policy makers, teachers, parents, students, etc.).

However, there is limited literature [8 - 10] dwelling on the extent to which quality assurance practices enhances the quality of instruction in Advanced Level teaching and learning process in Zimbabwe. This can be buttressed by the fact that at the selected high school the performance of most of the students in their Advanced Level learning processes were in lower grades ranging from 59% and below [11]. This was so, despite the current curriculum framework assuring the measurement of students' performance through both formative and summative assessment. It is against this background

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that this paper sought to contribute towards the closure of the identified gap through providing possible answers to the following question: To what extent do quality assurance practices influence students' performance in Advanced Level learning process?

2. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH STUDY

This section articulates the research environment through highlighting the research approach, sample selection procedure, and data analysis.

2.1 Research Approach

Since this paper was centred on the participants' lived experiences that were non-quantifiable, we opted for the qualitative approach. In other words, this enabled us to comprehend the participants' lived experiences by capturing their viewpoints in a natural setting to later on create a detailed, holistic standpoint in the form of words. This was done with the view to gain a deeper understanding of how quality assurance practices are perceived and experienced in the educational context. This resulted in us having a deeper understanding from the participants' perspective about the influence of quality assurance practices on students' performance in Advanced Level learning at the selected high school.

2.2 Sample Design

In selecting the participants from the relevant population, the we applied the purposive sampling procedure. This procedure enabled us to select 10 teachers and 4 school-based supervisors based on their experience and expertise on the infusion of quality assurance practices into Advanced Level learning process at the selected high school. Thus, this procedure enabled the us to the possible rich sources of information and this led to the yielding of pertinent and valuable information.

2.3 Methods

Literature method was used to make sense from multiple sources of evidence, in a bid find convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources (i.e., policy documents, students' note books, test exercise books, teachers' record books, past examinations papers, etc.). in addition, interviews were conducted with the selected participants with the view to explore their experiences, views, opinions, and ideas around the issues derived from the crafted main research question. The interview was guided by the following themes: conceptualisation of quality assurance, articulation of how these practices were infused into learning process, and challenges that are faced when infusing these practices into Advanced Level learning process.

2.4 Data Analysis

This section involved the identifying, and scrutinizing patterns and themes in the generated textual data. This was done with the view to gain an insight into how these themes and patterns facilitated in understanding of an issue and ultimately addressing the research question at hand.

3. RESULTS

The generated data was presented and analysed in different phases and this facilitated the drawing of answers to the question around which this study was centred. In this regard, this section centres on the following themes:

3.1 Conceptualisation of quality assurance practices in the context of Advanced Level learning

Under this theme, we interrogated the participants' understanding of quality assurance in the context of Advanced Level learning process. In this regard one of the participants revealed that:

Quality assurance is taken as those measures and procedures that the school or teachers put in place to ensure that the learning activities are within certain procedures or standards of quality (Teacher 3).

From another angle a participant indicated that:

These practices aim to improve the overall quality of instruction in learning process, so as to enhance students' performance. It also promotes transparency and accountability in learning activities (Teacher 10).

During an interview of the participants noted that:

It all about internal practices such as peer reviews during learning, clinical supervision activities that are undertaken by the school-based supervisors [heads of departments, deputy school head or school head] to identify areas that need to be improved (School-Based Supervisor D).

One of the participants conceptualised quality assurance as:

All that is involved in Advanced Level teaching and learning activities such as the selection of instructional methods, student engagement, type of activities given to students and assessment practices (Teacher 8).

In support, one of the participants highlighted that:

This issue of quality assurance centres around having in place all the necessary resources [qualified teachers, teaching materials, facilities, etc.] to improve the quality of instruction in Advanced Level learning (School-Based Supervisor B).

In the same vein, one of the participants contributed that:

This centres on the stakeholders' involvement in [Advanced Level] learning activities. They provide input and feedback in their interactions through identifying areas that need attention in the learning process (Teacher 5).

From the above contributions it can be acknowledged that the participants had varied views on what constituted quality assurance in Advanced Level learning process. It includes dimensions such as academic quality (i.e., instructional methodologies, assessment practices, etc.) and non-academic quality (i.e., student support, supervision structures). These elements were expected to guarantee students' exposure to expected procedures and standards for effective learning process [12, 13]. Thus, it involves frameworks that help to ensure consistency, accountability and continuous improvement. In addition, it touches on issues to do with the assessment of instructional methods and students' performance in learning process (i.e., peer reviews, student feedback, etc.). It is in this sense, that we noted that the participants conceptualised quality assurance as a process that can lead to the improvement of Advanced Level learning practices. This concurs with [14] who postulated that quality assurance enhances students' learning experiences and betters the learning outcomes. Thus, quality assurance ensures that the selected school provides students with effective and high-quality Advanced Level learning experiences. Hence, quality assurance from the participants' perspective can be acknowledged as a multifaceted, thereby involving many aspects of the learning process, which includes monitoring the curriculum implementation, quality of instruction, materials used, assessment, and evaluation [15 - 17].

3.2 Quality assurance practices and their infusion into Advanced Level learning process

In this section, we set out to gain insight into how the articulate the influence the identified quality assurance practices influence Advanced Level learning process at the selected high school. One of the participants during the organised interview revealed that:

At our school we have suggestion boxes dotted around the school to facilitate students to give their opinions pertaining to the goings-on in the learning activities. However, some of the teachers consider it as a witch-hunting activity targeting teachers (School-Based Supervisor A).

In support a participant indicated that:

After my Advanced Level learning activities, I ask the students to give feedback concerning the way things went on [teaching strategies] mostly their experiences (Teacher 1).

From another angle, it was revealed that:

After the introduction of new curriculum [Heritage-Based Education 5.0], various activities were lined up [seminars, workshops, trainings] to gear us up to the expected level of facilitating the Advanced Leve learning activities (Teacher 4).

In cementing the above a participant indicated that:

The introduction of this new curriculum, which calls for use of educational technologies brought with it, the need to sharpen our pedagogical knowledge and skills through subject-specific advancements (School-Based Supervisor B).

From the participants' contributions highlighted that student feedback was one of the practices that was being infused into Advanced Level learning process with the view to generate empirical evidence to act as the basis for informed improvements in terms of teaching methodologies, technology integration, etc. In addition, teacher development activities such as workshops, seminars, teacher capacity development programmes were acknowledged as another practice that was adopted to enhance the teachers' proficiency in facilitating effectively Advanced Level learning process. This concurs with [18, 19] who postulated that professional development programmes as being essential in helping teachers acquire new teaching methodologies and subject-content. In support [20 - 23] effective peer review or clinical supervision can significantly improve teaching quality by identifying areas where teachers need support and professional assistance. This brings to the fore the need for Advanced Level teachers to adhere to educational standards through consistent monitoring and control. In another interview, it was revealed by one of the participants that:

Due to the demands of the new curriculum framework, we were forced to develop clear and fair assessment formats to gauge the students' rate of knowledge and skills acquisition through the examination, presentations, assigned tasks or research projects (Teacher 7).

Thus, these assessments help in identifying learning gaps early, allowing for timely feedbacks and interventions. This creates actionable insights to facilitate the Advanced Level students' improvement in their learning. This concurs with [24, 25] who highlighted on the need for schools to give emphasis on giving quality feedback to students such they can be motivated and engaged in the learning process. In addition, a participant acknowledged that:

We had to put in place practices [peer review, collaboration, etc.] to push for the sharing of experiences, practices, and innovative teaching strategies amongst the Advanced Level teachers (School-Based Supervisor C).

A participant highlighted the view that:

In order to create a conducive learning environment, as teachers we have been advocating for the acquisition of relevant learning material and new infrastructure that is in line with the demands of the new curriculum framework (Teacher 10).

From the above quotations it can be noted that assessment and evaluation was one of the practices that was used at the selected high school monitor and

control the quality of Advanced Level students learning. It was also highlighted that teachers were involved in peer review and collaborations so as to share ideas on how best to tackle the needs of the students in line with requirements of the curriculum framework in a conducive environment. This concurs with [26, 27] who advanced that involvement of different stakeholders in decision making fosters the creation of a supportive learning environment and enhances the production quality outcomes from the Advanced Level learning process. This can also be perpetuated by the collaboration between teachers through learning experience and encouraging active participation in facilitating learning activities [28 - 30].

3.3 Challenges faced when infusing quality assurance practices into Advanced Level learning

In this section were report on some of the challenges that were faced by the participants in their bid to infuse quality assurance practices into Advanced Level learning process. Thus, the infusion of quality assurance practices into learning can be relatively challenging. In this context one of the participants noted that:

It is very difficult to share and manage limited resources. This in a way goes against quality assurance, which demands a lot of resources [time, funding, qualified teachers, etc.] for the learning process to be effective (School-Based Supervisor A).

In support, it was revealed by another participant that:

Most teachers are showing signs of lacking interest in implementing the new curriculum framework. This requires continuous improvement; it has brought with it extra workload on us as teacher and its unbearable (Teacher 10).

During an interview one of the participants highlighted that:

The demands of the new curriculum in terms of assessment, which is required to be standardized across the different subjects, has been a challenge to the teachers. This has a bearing on balancing innovation and standardization (School-Based Supervisor C).

From the quotations it can be noted that resource constraints were considered a challenge when infusing quality practices into Advanced Level learning process. Thus, the selected high school has been struggling with this challenge as teachers, students, among other stakeholders were failing to constantly maintain the quality assurance standards. This concurs with [31] who advanced the idea that inadequate resources can hinder the effective implementation of quality assurance practices in learning process. In support, [32 - 34] postulated that the presence of underqualified and incompetent in an institution can be a threat to the quality of instruction that students are exposed to in

the learning process. This lack of competences of the part of the teachers to balance between innovation and standards can result in them being resistant to change, which ultimately hinders the effective infusion of quality assurance practices into Advanced Level learning process. This concurs with [35 - 38] who acknowledged that while the quality assurance practices are aimed at maintain high standards, at times it stifles innovation in instructional strategies. Thus, teachers find it difficult to strike a balance between maintaining quality and encouraging innovative practices in Advanced Level learning process.

4. DISCUSSION

From the results presented and analysed above we deduced that quality assurance in the context of Advanced Level learning process, involves use of practices, which ensures that educational standards, procedures and outcomes are in accordance with the stipulated regulated criteria. This includes regular assessments and evaluations, feedback mechanisms and continuous improvements in instructional strategies [39]. In other words, quality assurance practices influence Advanced Level learning through encouraging teachers to adopt innovative and effective instructional strategies so as to enhance students' understanding and information retention [40, 41]. In addition, effective quality assurance in Advanced Level learning process includes robust assessment and feedback systems to assist students in identifying their strengths and areas of need. In this case, this acts as a platform that helps teachers to create strategies that can be used to work on the identified grey areas, resulting in the improvement of students' performance in Advanced Level learning process. In other words, this advances the culture of accountability, thereby motivating both the teachers and students to strive for quality outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

We acknowledged that the participants had a diverse understanding of quality assurance and its relevance to Advanced Level learning process. In addition, it was noted that despite facing challenges such as resource constraints, resistance to change, standardization issues, etc., the benefits to Advanced Level learning process are significant. It is against this background that the infusion of quality assurance practices into Advanced Level learning process can significantly influence students' performance. Thus, its positive influence includes enhanced learning outcomes as the instructional strategies, and curricula are consistently looked at, consistency and fairness, continuous improvement and accountability. This leads to the betterment of students' performance and deeper understanding of concepts, principles,

theories and procedures. Hence, the potential for improved Advanced Level learning standards, students' performance equity and fairness, which makes it worthwhile to infuse quality assurance into Advanced Level learning process. In other words, this can lead to a more robust and effective learning process capable of better preparing Advanced Level students for future academic and professional endeavors.

6. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present research can be extended to all high schools in the district with aim of measuring the impact of Total Quality Management practices on quality of instruction in teaching and learning process.

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