



Grooming and mentoring of students at the Zimbabwe Open University: A stitch in time saves nine. A case study of Mashonaland East Regional Campus

Sarah Yeukai Matanga

Lecturer, Languages and Literature Department, Zimbabwe Open University

Email: sarahyeukai@gmail.com

Rejoice Madobi

Lecturer, Geography and Environmental Studies Department, Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract

Grooming and mentoring are important in the training and development of student teachers. This research sought to examine the dress code and the general presentation of students enrolled for the Diploma in Education (Primary) Programme at the Mashonaland East Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University bearing in mind that the programme is offered through ODL which has limited physical student-tutor interaction. Also most of the enrolled students have never been exposed to formal working environments which require formal dressing. This qualitative study adopted a case study research design because the research dealt with people's beliefs and opinions. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 research participants comprising of 20 students and 10 lecturers. Unstructured interviews and observations were used to generate data for the study. Recurrent themes were identified and interpreted from the generated data. From the findings both students and tutors stressed the importance of dress code and also the inadequacy of the course module(s) in addressing the issue. The study further revealed that though the module does not address the issue, lecturers emphasised the importance of dress code during tutorial sessions. The researchers recommend induction of students on enrolment so that student teachers become aware of the expectations and requirements of the teaching profession. The study also recommends that the ZOU Teacher Development Department should produce a handbook on the general presentation and dress code of students.

Key words: Dress code, grooming, mentoring, student teacher, professionalism

Introduction

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was established as the Centre of Distance Education in 1993 by the University of Zimbabwe under the Department of Educational Administration. In 1996 the centre became the University College of Distance Education then three years later it became Zimbabwe's first Open and Distance Learning (ODL) university through an act of parliament. The introduction of distance teacher education in Zimbabwe was to meet the critical shortage of primary school teachers (Zvobgo, 1986; Gatawa, 1986). Since 1999, the ZOU has established itself as the second largest Open and Distance Learning institution in Africa, second to UNISA (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2011).

The Zimbabwe Open University offers a variety of educational programmes and the introduction of the Diploma in Education (Primary) Programme (DEPP) was a significant development. It is the thrust of this paper to focus on this particular group of students in an ODL environment where the learners are studying in the comfort of their homes. These students are

required to go through teaching practice where they are governed by the codes of the Zimbabwe Public Service Commission.

Conventional teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe stress the need for formal dressing on a daily basis and the issue of diploma students' dressing is a critical issue at teacher training colleges. In 2010 students at Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic College (JMNPC) contested against \$1 fine for dressing informally. The Dean of students at (JMNPC) as cited in the *Newsday* October 4, 2010 commented that, "I can confirm that we are making students pay if they are not dressed formally. The reason is that we have a specified dress code especially for student teachers, so we are simply abiding by the statutory instrument and there is nothing illegal we are doing. We are training professionals so they should dress as such," This means that much attention should be put on how the students present themselves as they become professionals on the day of registration.

Despite the importance of dress code and the general presentation of student teachers, ODL institutions have limited physical student-tutor interaction and therefore there is limited or no reinforcement of dress code when the students rarely visit the regional campus. But teachers' thinking and action is a result of an interplay between the teachers' life histories, their current phase of development, classroom and school settings, broader social and political contexts in which they work (Day, 1999). This study sought therefore to examine the dress code and the general presentation of students enrolled for the DEPP at the Mashonaland East Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research Problem

Conventional teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe stress the need for formal dressing on a more regular basis and the issue of diploma students' dressing is a critical issue at these teacher training colleges. But due to the ODL nature of ZOU, the DEPP students rarely visit the campus and when they visit, there is limited or no reinforcement of dress code yet teachers' in Zimbabwe have a stipulated dress code. Owing to the limited physical student-tutor interaction which is characteristic of ODL institutions, this study sought to examine the dress code and the general presentation of students enrolled for the DEPP in Mashonaland East Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research Questions

The study sought to address the following questions:

1. To what extent are the ZOU Diploma in Education, Primary students aware of the expected dress code?
2. What are the factors affecting the dress code of the ZOU Diploma in Education, Primary students?
3. What is the effect of the dress code to the teaching fraternity?

Literature Review

Students' Awareness on Dress Code

Though there is not much literature pertaining to the issue of dress code among students going through teacher training, the issue of dress code is a critical aspect in the grooming of school teachers. There are also various feelings and perceptions regards the issue. Asaju (2013) indicates that students at Federal College of Education Zaria were aware of the dress code but his study also revealed a high rate of violation of the dress code. In another study by Kaveh, Moradi, Hesampour and Zadeh (2015), it was revealed that students' low or no information of the dress code suggests the need for reviewing the communication channels. Thus communicating and enforcing the prescribed dress code is a necessity.

Effects of the Dress Code on the Teaching Fraternity

Many authors for example, French, Robins, Homer, and Tapsell (2009) and also Fitzpatrick, Côté-Lussier and Blair (2016) tend to focus more on the link between high school students or pupils' grooming and academic performance and not necessarily on student teachers or teachers' grooming as part of professional development. Very few studies could be found by the researchers that show the

importance of teachers' grooming to the teaching profession. However, Hadfield (2017) asserts that, "understanding and practicing proper attire for the classroom can affect a teacher's relationship with students, her ability to serve as role model and authoritative figure and even her daily outlook," and this reinforces the need to have a proper dress code for effective teaching and learning. Further to that, clothing can influence the perceptions of the wearer's credibility and attractiveness as alluded to by Dunbar and Segrin (2012). The study by Dunbar and Segrin (2012) concluded that students who are not distracted by their teacher's appearance will find their teacher to be more credible and tend to remember more of what is said in class and as such teachers should strive for a moderate clothing style.

It is significant from the literature gathered that the way the teachers present themselves has a bearing on their totality as they can be judged by what they wear. The Teachers' Handbook in Malta clearly talks of dress code amongst the teachers as it states that, "As a person whom pupils look up to, you should dress as befits the dignity of your profession. You are expected to present an example to your pupils through the way you dress" (Human Resources Development Department Directorate for Educational Services, n.d.). This shows that right from the onset the new teachers have a guide that is prepared for them so that they get to know what is expected of them, in this regard the standards of the teaching profession are maintained in the country. In addition, teachers are role models as was averred by Albert Bandura's studies and ultimately his Social Learning Theory. Bandura (1977) noted that behavior is learned from the environment through observation learning. Therefore, teachers' behaviour including dress code is important.

Methodology

This study which focused on the grooming and mentoring of ZOU DEPP students employed the qualitative research paradigm. Creswell (2002) defines qualitative research methodology as a method of study which employs a systematic and pre-determined set of procedures, collects evidence and seeks to understand the phenomena under discussion from the views of the population under study rather than focusing on measuring phenomena. Qualitative research therefore occurs in a natural setting thus enabling the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experiences (Creswell, 1994 cited in Williams 2007). According to Williams (2007) qualitative research is set apart from other paradigms by the social phenomenon being investigated from the participant's viewpoint and also according to Merriam (2009) cited in Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world. While quantitative data involves ordinal data, qualitative data was used for this study because it involved or used data that did not indicate ordinal values Nkwi, Nyamongo, and Ryan (2001) in Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013). This study therefore, sought the views of both students and lecturers on the grooming and mentoring of students at the Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland East Region Regional Campus.

A case study research design was adopted for this study for it enabled the researchers to solicit students and lecturers' beliefs and opinions on the issues related to dress code among DEPP students at the Zimbabwe Open University. A research design is the structure of research that holds all the elements in a research project together (Yin, 2012). The study focused on ZOU Mashonaland East Regional Campus and also on DEPP students and lecturers.

20 students and 10 lecturers (5 from ZOU and 5 from surrounding teachers' colleges) were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method of sampling (Creswell, 2009). Palys (2008) also avers that purposive sampling is synonymous with qualitative research. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016:2) describe purposive sampling as "the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. In purposive sampling the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016:2). Purposive sampling is advocated by Creswell (2009) who notes that data gathered from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon is more reliable. In this study the researchers therefore defined the characteristics of a population of interest and the population of interest included all the DEPP students and lecturers who had detailed knowledge of grooming and mentoring of student teachers. Face to

face key informant interviews (unstructured) and observations were the main tool used to gather data from the research participants.

To analyse the data, the authors first transcribed and familiarised themselves with the generated data. The data were then organised into themes; recurrent and significant themes were identified for interpretation.

Discussion of Findings

Students' Awareness of the Dress Code for Teachers

The findings revealed that students are aware of the issue of dress code though they have never received a formal instruction on what to wear. One student had this to say "Though ZOU is a formal institution, it does not stipulate the dress code for students for the DEPP students". This therefore allowed the students to come to the campus informally dressed. Some students were of the opinion that dressing informally does not go well with them as they are aware of the requirements of other colleges where students are required to dress formally on a daily basis. The students feel that the Zimbabwe Open University should have rules and regulations on the issues to do with the presentation of student teachers. Given the fact that most of the students are not employed and that some are employed in other organisations which do not require a certain dress code, there is need for preparation when the time for Teaching Practice comes. The students further reiterated that in as much as they are ODL students, they should have a code as part of the training so that they will be able to meet the required standards.

Lecturers admitted that the module on Professional Studies that comes in the first semester of the first year of the DEPP programme does not address the issue of dressing but they indicated that a module entitled 'A guide to teaching practice' would be introduced in the second year. The present study argues that dealing with these issues at a later stage disadvantages students hence the researchers' position that, 'a stitch in time saves nine'.

Students stated that during the professional studies tutorials the tutor stressed on formal dressing. The students registered this in their minds but it lacked significance because they took the instruction as informal. In response to the question on whether they felt comfortable with what they were wearing during the interview time, some students highlighted that they are comfortable with what they are wearing although some were putting on t-shirts. It is significant to note that what is socially and culturally acceptable may not be formal wear in terms of the teaching profession. This does not go along with Dunbar and Segrin (2012) who relate the issue of dressing to credibility there the students should put on clothes that define their profession and a clearer guide on the code will guide them as is the case in Malta. Human Resources Development (Department Directorate for Educational Services, n.d.).

Factors Affecting Students' Dress Code

Financial constraints were a major limiting factor as the students indicated that they had just completed their Ordinary Level studies and most of their clothes are casual wear. Some responded that they are housewives and most of their clothes cannot be classified as formal wear. This entails that when they visit the campus they will wear what is in their wardrobes. It is however critical to point out that if these students are caught and trained right from the beginning, they will not have problems when they go in the field.

The university is silent about the issue of dress code as one student clearly stated that "*We were never told about what to wear but the module on professional studies talks about the teacher as a role model. My dressing is governed by the fact that I am a role model.*" However, there are no strict rules regarding what they should wear. The students are aware that a teacher is a role model and therefore should show even through appearance. Doing this at an earlier stage will help the university produce excellent results as student teachers' appearance and how they present themselves are also critical issues during assessment.

Students lamented that it is difficult to state what is formal and what is informal considering the current fashion trends although the Zimbabwe Public Service Commission which is the largest employer has clearly stated codes for teachers and other civil servants.

Implications of Dress Code on Teaching and Learning

The respondents were aware of the implications of dress code on teaching and learning as they noted that informal dressing attracts charges from the Zimbabwe Public Service Commission. They also agreed that teachers can also be booed by the learners if they come to work dressed improperly and this will disrupt normal learning. Having highlighted all the issues, the respondents also indicated that they did not want to be associated with such allegations and they suggested that since teaching is a profession, it should be guided by a code of conduct and that the Teacher Development Department should come up with the list of expectations for student teachers to adhere to. Students also argued that when they get into the field they do not want to be labeled as ZOU students but they want to be viewed as teachers who can fit in any environment.

Some narrated that dressing affects the performance of learners as the learners can be distracted if the teachers are not well dressed and this may ultimately bring the teaching profession into disrepute. Thus teachers are professionals and role models as Bandura (1974) notes and as such the learners look up to them. Learners emulate teachers' behaviour as asserted by Dillon and Maguire, (1998:4) that "teachers are in an extremely privileged position, educating other people's children is a critical and influential task in any society."

Conclusion

Having discussed the major issues on the dress code at the Zimbabwe Open University, it can be concluded that dress code is very important in the teaching fraternity. Students are aware of the importance of the dress code though the module responsible for addressing the issue (Professional Studies) is silent. Students at the ZOU dress informally because there are no strict regulations to that effect. This has created ambivalence on the students as they do not know what is expected. Competence complements with good presentation as Shakespeare asserts that 'clothes maketh a man.' According to Day (1999:2) "good teaching is not just a matter of being efficient, development competence, mastering technique, and possessing the right kind of knowledge." There is need for the student teachers to be taught on the dress codes right on time so that the concept is glued on their minds and they will prepare before teaching practice so that their teaching practice period does not become difficult. Further to that, the brand name of the university will be maintained as ZOU is a world class university.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the authors recommend that:

- Induction of students on enrolment be done by the Teacher Development Department.
- Tutorial letters stipulating the required dress code should also be given to students upon registration.
- The Teacher Development Department should produce a handbook on the general presentation of the students for ZOU to maintain its brand.
- ZOU should reconcile its model of teacher training with that of conventional colleges so that the final product is a good teacher who is fully recognised and competent.

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