

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' VIEWS ON HANDLING LARGE CLASSES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN UGANDA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper presents part of a research on teaching in large classes in primary schools in Uganda. The purpose of the study was to investigate the administrators, teachers and pupils' views and practices on teaching large classes. Twenty school administrators (14 males and 6 females) from two districts in central Uganda participated in the study. Data were collected through interviews and documentary analysis. The data were analysed using quasi-grounded theory approach involving the constant comparative method. The findings of the study show that schools face such challenges as understaffing, management of class discipline and heavy marking loads. The administrators have in place plans that include equipping teachers with new skills through in-service programmes and employment of more teachers for dealing with large classes. In light of the findings, this study highlights the need to modify practical teacher practices, teacher preparation and educational research to address teacher preparation programs in teacher education and calls for policy changes on lessons duration and more action research with teachers teaching in large classes is suggested to inform decision making.

Introduction

The phenomenon of large classes in Uganda appears to have come to stay, given the advent of Universal Primary Education [UPE] and Universal Secondary Education [USE] policies introduced in 1997 and 2007 respectively. These policies bring the country in the fold of other nations that did so earlier such as Nigeria (Onwu, 1998). Nigeria, with the highest enrolment numbers in Africa introduced UPE about 30 years ago. Large classes, in the context of Uganda, are defined as classes with learners in excess of 70 learners in the same classroom (Nakabugo, et al., 2007). The number of 70 is much higher than the defined large classes of between 25 and 30 learners in the United Kingdom (UK) (Smith & Warburton, 1997), or more than 35 learners in the United States (US) (O'Sullivan, 2006). But it certainly reflects a lower value of the large classes of more than 100 learners in other developing countries (Michealowa, 2001). It is therefore imperative that the focus of studies should be to determine the modalities for mediating efficient learning in such large classes. The prominent question often asked about teachers is that do teachers in small or large classes use different approaches? In fact, early research literature seems to indicate that "teachers' methods and styles remain the same regardless of whether they are teaching large or small classes" (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 28); and yet, it has been argued that "the quality of teaching is directly related to the number of pupils in the class" (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 24), although this can be debateable. But, Ives (2000) has posited that a single way to teach large classes does not exist, rather, one has always to consider a number of factors, including but not limited to the following: (1) ones' teaching style; (2) the

characteristics of the students; and (3) the goals and objectives of the course as a basic minimum requirement.

Meanwhile, the current pattern of teacher education in Uganda is that teacher preparation is structured into three levels: the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Table 1 shows the institutions, admission requirements, course duration, the awards and the target posting for each level. Primary school teachers are prepared in three institutions: 1) Primary Teachers' Colleges (PTCs), over a period of two years; 2) the National Teachers Colleges (NTCs) as up-graders, for a period of two years; and 3) universities for over a three year period. Primary teachers qualify with Grade III teaching certificates from PTCs or Diploma in Education (Primary) from NTCs or Bachelors of Education degree from the universities. These graduates are then posted to teach in any primary school in any district across the country where vacancies exist (Opolot-Okurut, 2005). Primary school teachers are all general teachers who are expected to teach any subject. They are engaged almost the whole day for a minimum of eight periods. The performance of these teachers in their classrooms has not been thoroughly investigated.

Table 1: Structure Requirements of Teacher Preparation at various Levels

Level	Training Institution	Admission requirement	Course duration	Award	Teaching Posting
Primary	PTCs	S.4 & S6 leavers	2 years	Grade III Certificate	Primary schools
Secondary	NTCs	Grade III & S6 leavers	2 years	Grade V - Diploma	Primary schools, Secondary schools, PTCs
Tertiary	Universities	Grade V, S6 leavers & Graduates	1-3 years	PGDE, Bachelors Degrees	Primary & Secondary schools; PTCs, NTCs & Universities

Several studies have been conducted to investigate stakeholders' views on teaching and learning in large size classes. For example, Bennett (1996) conducted a survey study in England and Wales to determine governors, head teachers, parents and teachers' views on the effects of class size. He found that the head teachers, as expected, were more anxious about the quality of pedagogic outcomes and classroom practices, while the teachers were concerned about assessment of children's work; their inability to provide individual attention to the pupils, and fear of it being problematic to manage pupil behaviour. Furthermore, Nakabugo, et al. (2007) conducted a baseline study of primary teachers' instructional strategies in large classes in Uganda. They used a sample of 35 teachers (4 males and 31 females) in twenty schools using interviews, observation and documentary analysis. They found that teachers studied used group work, team teaching and attention attracting methods to handle large classes. Meanwhile, Valerian (1991) has advocated for the teaching of large classes through peer-teaching, where "peer tutoring places responsibility of teaching in the hands of the able, knowledgeable and well prepared students whom the regular teacher would have trained" (Nakabugo, et al. 2007. p. 195). In addition, The Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence (1992) has suggested focussing on three issues: (i) creating a small class atmosphere in a large-class setting; (ii) encouraging class participations; and (iii) promoting active learning through the use of appropriate activities as a

way to handle large class teaching. However, there is conflicting evidence about the quality of teaching and learning in small classes. Blatchford, Edmonds, and Martin, (2002) have argued that there is higher quality in small classes. But, some studies in Asian countries indicate that “large class size does not impact negatively on pupil achievement” (O’Sullivan, 2006, p. 28).

The recent statistics from the Ministry of Education and Sports ([MoES], 2006) show that in 2004 there were on average 147,291 primary school teachers and 7,377,292 pupils (3,732,928 boys and 3,644,364 girls; with a National Enrolment Ratio of 7,065,265 (90.01%)) indicating a teacher-pupil ratio of about 1:50, enrolled in 13,371 primary schools in the country. However, this ratio is basically theoretical and is not translated on the ground, especially in the rural schools where classes of over 100 pupils are recorded (Nakabugo, et al., 2007). The demand for formal education and the concomitant increase in school enrolment has resulted in a dramatic increase in class size with resultant high teacher-pupil ratios. This pattern appears to reflect the experience of most developing countries especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Research has not fully addressed the question of teaching in large classes in Uganda, especially with regard to investigating the views of the head teachers of schools, the parents, and the teachers in schools. Previous studies appear to have paid little attention to the effect of large class sizes on teacher practices, pupils’ achievement and the management of schools. Most of the available research has focussed on factors affecting school effectiveness (Carasco, et al. 1996) and teacher work experiences and pupils schooling experience in primary schools (Munene, et al. 1997). There has been an urgent call for research into large class size in developing countries that emphasise on the classroom practices in large classes in primary schools (O’Sullivan, 2006).

An investigation of school administrators’ views on large classes in primary schools in Uganda is a necessary first step towards the improvement and strengthening of teacher education in the country. Such a study would provide empirical data as a basis for making decisions on how teacher programs could be improved so as to address the issue of large classes in schools. The results of the study are envisaged to benefit the policy makers, teacher educators, parents, teachers and researchers. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to determine administrators’ and teachers’ views on large class teaching. Specifically this study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are teachers’ views regarding the teaching of large classes?
2. What challenges do schools face in teaching large classes?
3. Are there any institutional plans to ensure quality teaching and learning in large classes?
4. What are your suggestions for dealing with the issue of large classes?

Methodology

Based on a survey research design, this study was conducted in 2006 on a sample of 20 school administrators from 20 government aided primary schools in Kampala and Wakiso districts. The schools were mixed and day (17); and day/boarding (three) located in an urban (seven), peri-urban (nine) and rural (four) areas. The participants of the study were selected through convenience purposive sampling. The sample consisted of 14 male and 6 female administrators. The administrators were of the following academic qualifications: Grade V (25%), Bachelors in Education (65%) and Masters Degrees (10%) with teaching experience ranging from nine to 36 years and administration experience ranging from two to 20 years.

Data were collected through interviews and documentary analysis. The interview guide tool consisted of a total of 23 items in three sections to draw information on the respondent’s

demographic information (five items), school information (12 items) and research specific questions (six items). The administrators and their teachers' opinions were sought on how they viewed the classes and the teaching of large classes in their school; the challenges teachers faced and their responses on teaching large classes; the plans institutions had in place to ensure quality teaching in large classes; and suggestions for teaching large classes. The interviews were held in the administrator's office and field notes were made. The data were analysed using quasi-grounded theory approach involving the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that involves a continual process of comparing pieces of data and identifying similarities and differences between them for generating patterns or categories from the data. Comparisons were made across administrators from rural and urban schools and across the different types of data collection instruments.

Findings and Discussion

The data from this study would seem to suggest that teachers have varied views about teaching large classes. The teachers also face quite a variety of challenges in dealing with large classes. A number of schools have put in place some institutional plans to try to address the identified challenges to handle large classes.

1. *What are teachers' views regarding the teaching of large classes?*

The administrators' responses can be categorized into two. First, teachers raised complaints about the large classes; and second, they suggested the use of co-teaching approach. For example, the teachers raised the following complaints:

- They cannot teach as expected because they cannot reach all the pupils due to crowded classrooms.
- They are not able to attend to individual differences because of the large classes: the marking and distribution of exercise books is a problem and takes time. For example, one administrator reported that "*teachers give just very little work to make marking a bit easy*"
- They have not been trained in methodology to handle large classes.
- Teaching materials are inadequate to be supplied to all pupils.
- They are poorly remunerated for all the hard work they do.
- Most school teachers are not familiar with handling large classes and need training to be able to do so.

The complaints raised could be looked at as genuine as there is no way that one can reasonably manage a class of more than 70 pupils and be able to provide individual attention. Teachers are expected to assign work each day and mark the pupils' books in addition to having a full day's load of teaching, which is a near impossible task.

2. *What challenges does your school face in teaching large classes?*

Basically, the findings reveal that there was no single school without a challenge. Schools appear to have differences in the type of challenges they faced according to their geographical location. In other words, urban schools faced slightly different challenges from the rural schools. The challenges varied in magnitude and type from shortage of instructional materials, management

and organisation of classes as well as understaffing. According to the administrators schools faced such challenges as:

- Inadequacy of instructional materials and furniture was mentioned by 35% of the administrators. It appears that government effort to provide furniture and scholastic materials to schools has been compromised by corruption as substandard materials are supplied in reduced quantities.
- Excessive marking and correction of pupils' work was mentioned by 25% of the administrators. For example, one administrator reported that *"teachers give just very little work to make marking a bit easy"*
- Teachers' inability to give individual attention was mentioned by 25% of the administrators.
- Difficult class organization, control and discipline was mentioned by 15% of the administrators.
- Huge teacher-pupil ratio and overcrowding was mentioned by 10% of the administrators.
- Few teachers on the government payroll was mentioned by 10% of the administrators. The government has fewer teachers in schools than they need. The few teachers who are trained leave teaching if they find better paying alternative jobs. The few teachers who remain are poorly remunerated, have low morale and feel neglected. For example, one administrator expressed it thus *"however much government increases textbooks, nothing will change when the teachers' welfare is [remains] poor."*
- Continuous admission of new pupils throughout the year, thus making it difficult to make the pupils be at per.

Apparently, the small classrooms that were earlier built to accommodate 30-40 pupils now accommodate over 100 pupils in some schools that have lead to overcrowding. The lesson time of 30 minutes is used for administrative chores such as roll call, returning marked and corrected books and the correction of previous work done, which leaves no or little time for the actual teaching and introduction of new content. The government policy on distribution of textbooks is hampered by school administrative arrangements. Sometimes the textbooks are not distributed to the pupils but kept under lock and key. The teacher unfortunately appears to be the most poorly paid civil servant, a situation that is even worse for the primary school teachers.

3. *Are there any institutional plans to ensure that quality teaching and learning takes place in large classes?*

The study revealed several approaches that were suggested as being used to try to provide quality education in large classes. Representative views from the interview data obtained from the administrators centred on holding seminars and workshops for teachers, engaging more teachers by private arrangement to help with the teaching were expressed thus:

- Teachers' continuous development through in-service training, seminars and workshops. This means teachers should be equipped with new skills for handling large classes.
- Involve parents in educational activities.
- Hold regular departmental and collegial teacher meetings to share views on pupils' progress.
- Have pupil assessment and feedback on a regular basis. At the same time provide remedial work for the weaker pupils, if time allows.
- Encourage group work and pupil grouping according to ability.

- Institute mentoring and coaching teachers: observe teachers, identify their strengths and weaknesses, then have after lesson conferencing with the teachers, then follow-up with mentoring or coaching the teacher on how to get it done better.
- Reduce the class size to a maximum of 50 pupils per class with increased number of streams and more teachers. But, one could argue that simply reducing the number of learners in a class does not guarantee the improvement of instruction.
- Increase the lesson duration from the official 30 minutes period to allow for more time.
- School development strategies include construction of more classrooms, provision of more textbooks, and employment of more teachers outside the payroll.
- Employ more teachers to handle smaller numbers of pupils.

The schools struggled to provide quality education under all odds. The little financial and other few resources provided by government were totally inadequate. The UPE and USE policies will continue to suffer if the number of teachers remains low.

4. *What suggestions do you have for dealing with the issue of large classes?*

The suggestions that were made appear to have been specifically addressed to solving the challenges that were identified by a particular administrator and subsequently the particular school. This means that there was also variety of approaches advanced. In general, the suggestions that were made included:

- Teachers should acquire new methods of handling large classes (25%).
- Government should provide incentives to teachers who teach in excessive large classes (25%). Employ more teachers with better pay packages.
- Introduce team-teaching for teachers to share classes and lessons (20%).
- Encourage the use of group work (15%).
- Provide more instructional materials, space and furniture (15%).
- Clearly define teachers' work expectations in departments.
- Revisit policy on lesson duration of 30 minutes.
- Time management should be emphasized by pupils, teachers and administrators.

Thus, four important findings that emerge from this study are: First, the class size in the majority of schools is huge and overwhelming. This is not surprising given the government policy of universal primary education for school-going age children in the country. However, the huge enrolment seems to have compromised the quality of education. Second, teachers presented a number of genuine complaints about the nature of their work and poor remuneration, which unfortunately seems to be receiving little attention. Third, the methodology of teaching large classes remains elusive as teachers have not been prepared to handle such classes and the small number of teachers on the ground in schools poses a formidable challenge. Fourth, the school administrators struggle to sustain the system through self-sacrifice and commitment to their professional roles.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the research questions: What are teachers' views regarding the teaching of large classes? What challenges do schools face in teaching large classes? Are there any institutional plans to ensure quality teaching and learning in large classes? And what are

your suggestions for dealing with the issue of large classes? So, what have we learnt from this study? Basing our analysis on the administrators' opinions we found that, first, teachers are complaining about the amount of work they have to do in large classes. This affects their output, but their voices appear not to be heard coupled with poor pay. These results support earlier findings (Bennett, 1996) in the UK among their head teachers and teachers. The situation in Uganda therefore does not appear unique. The teachers are also concerned about not being trained to handle large classes during their training. This brings into focus the nature of the entire teacher preparation programmes being followed.

Second, schools face several challenges such as understaffing. Despite the effort government is making to recruit more teachers, the effort appears to be a drop in the ocean. This teacher shortage compounds the already precarious situation in the schools, which renders even the suggestion of using co-teaching unattainable.

Third, some schools have identified staff professional development as a pivotal approach to improving the quality of teaching. The teachers will be able to update their pedagogic skills as well as their subject content through in-service programmes. But these programmes should first be informed by empirical research.

Implications for teacher education

The results presented here have a number of interesting implications for practical teacher practices, teacher preparation and further research. From a practical point of view three implications are apparent. First, teachers should be made aware of the suggestions and efforts that teachers in other schools have put in place to deal with the issue of large classes. For example, grouping pupils, using learner-centred methods and peer teaching to address teaching in large classes.

Second, teacher training institutions should emphasize preparation of teachers ready to handle large classes. This means the current programs need to be revised in order to effectively link theory in the training institutions to practice in the field. Teacher education programs should be tailored to addressing the challenges that teachers face in the field while teaching large classes for effective learning. For example, new assessment and evaluation techniques; learner-centred teaching techniques; and the organization and management of large class techniques should be introduced, developed and nurtured during training. At the same time, teachers who are already in the field should be provided with regular updating of the knowledge and skills through continuous professional development. During teacher professional development mentoring and coaching techniques should be emphasized, and group work and discussion techniques should be developed.

Third, in terms of additional research a couple of corresponding research questions can be investigated. First, what assessment and evaluation techniques could be developed to reduce teachers' workload on marking and correcting pupils work, and yet maintain quality? What would be the effect of such assessment techniques on pupils' achievement? Second, how might the use of Information and Communication technology (ICT) and e-learning be used to enhance pupils' learning and teachers' teaching in large classes? How, for example, might the laptop and a data projector be used for teaching large classes? It is hoped that the research reported here would stimulate the need for other research to answer these and other related questions.

Conclusion

The challenge of teaching in large classes should be faced at all fronts by the stakeholders. The challenges should not be left to school administrators and teachers alone. The government should address the issue of teachers' professional development, teachers' numbers in schools and concomitantly with their welfare to motivate them. The teacher preparation programmes need to be urgently reviewed so as to incorporate contemporary issues, prepare and equip the pre-service teachers with pedagogic skills for the reality in the field. The current mode of assessment and the emphasis on examination results needs to be changed if we are to off-load some of the burden that teachers face in marking and correcting too many pupils' exercise books in these large classes.

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