Demystifying the Image of Philosophy of Education in Zimbabwean Teachers’ Colleges

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Abstract

This study explored the challenges that are encountered in the teaching and learning of Philosophy of Education in the institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe. The study established that ‘philophobia’ or the fear of philosophy emanates from a number of attributes. The manner in which lecturers introduce new philosophical concepts, subject matter, assessment procedures and lecturers’ general attitude towards the subject have been cited as some of the major causes of the fear of Philosophy of Education. This paper, therefore, suggests the methods that lecturers may implement to demystify and transform the image of Philosophy of Education as well as reconsidering the methods of instruction for effective teaching and learning to be realized.

Key words: Demystifying, image, philosophy of education, Zimbabwean, Teachers’ Colleges

Introduction

Etymologically the term philosophy was derived from two Greek words ‘philos’ and ‘sophia’ which mean love and wisdom respectively. It then automatically follows that if these two terms are combined they form a phrase ‘love of wisdom’. Different scholars have provided varied definitions to the term philosophy.

Lawhead (2007) has provided two definitions to philosophy that it is one’s general outlook of life and an attempt to provide arguments or good reasons for the conclusions that are given by the people. He believes that it is an attempt because no adequate answers have been given to the various philosophical enquiries and even the notable ideas that have been given need modification time and again. Coplestone (2005) has defined philosophy as a search for truth and knowledge. This illustrates that in philosophy there are always new challenges that pop up and there are old problems that need to be addressed in the modern ways.
According to Akinpelu (1995), philosophy is conceived of as an academic discipline to which scholars devote their time and energy. Again, it is characterised by logical, consistent and systematic thinking in order to reach conclusions that are sound, coherent and intelligible.

From a traditional African perspective, the term philosophy could be used to refer to the profound sayings of the elders and those words were pregnant with pragmatic ideas (Barker, 1986). That wisdom from the elders was realised in the form of proverbs, riddles, folk-stories, poems, prophetic sayings and legends.

It is essential to note that all the definitions provided by different scholars on the subject though seemingly different but have one aspect in common, that philosophy is a quest for knowledge. Philosophy of Education as a discipline refers to the application of philosophical aspects in the practice of education. Basically, the subject matter is educational while the methods used to study it are philosophical. In short one may assert that in the Philosophy of Education, philosophy is the vehicle that is used to solve problems that are encountered in educational enterprise.

Bearing in mind the idea that philosophy is a quest for knowledge, then that makes it a prerequisite for all prospective teachers. At teachers’ colleges philosophy of education is housed in the Theory of Education Department, while at the universities it is taught in the Faculty of Education. It is important to highlight that Philosophy of Education is a compulsory course both at teachers’ colleges and universities’ faculties of education to the beginners. This study is meant to investigate the challenges that are encountered in the teaching and learning of Philosophy of Education focusing at both primary and secondary teachers’ colleges. The study will unveil the reasons why Philosophy of Education is feared, shunned and regarded as tick by the student teachers.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is informed by the Pragmatist School of thought which argues that for effective teaching and learning to be realised theory should be married to practice (Stumpf, 2008). Pragmatism took shape at the end of the 19th Century being introduced by Peirce, then James and later on perfected by Dewey. To a large extent pragmatism was informed by empiricism, utilitarianism and science. As such, for philosophy of education to be regarded as a discipline worth teaching and learning at teachers’ colleges, it should bear the qualities that make it a discipline with utilitarian value to the learners during and after college life.

**Statement of the Problem**

Students in teachers’ colleges have a negative attitude towards Philosophy of Education as a subject.
Research Questions

- Which strategies are employed in the teaching and learning of Philosophy of Education?
- What impact do assessment procedures have in the teaching and learning of Philosophy of Education?
- What are the attitudes of lecturers in the Department of Theory of Education toward Philosophy of Education?
- To what extent are the skills attained in the study of Philosophy of Education useful to the students during and after college life.

Purpose of the Study

There is a strong feeling that most students in the teachers’ colleges are obsessed with ‘philophobia’ or the fear of philosophy. This study seeks to reveal the inner feelings of recent college graduates toward Philosophy of Education as a subject. It is also the intention of this paper to explicitly demonstrate what these college graduates feel should be done to improve the image of that discipline. It is the researcher’s assumption that such a group of people may disseminate independent views on the ways in which this subject is taught at teachers’ colleges. Above all, the paper will recommend possible ways that can be explored by the stakeholders to alleviate challenges associated with Philosophy of Education and at the same time improving its image.

Delimitation of the Study

The study was carried out in four private schools of Masvingo urban and peri-urban areas. The research was confined to teachers with less than three years of experience at work, the assumption being that such teachers could still remember what they were taught at different teachers’ colleges and provide an independent opinion. These teachers were expected to respond to various questions which sought their independent assessment of how Philosophy of Education is taught in teachers’ colleges and at the same time suggesting ways of improving the teaching techniques.

Population and Sample

The four private schools, Paramount Academy, Kyle College, Morgenster Central Primary School and Kyle primary School have a total teacher population of ninety-two (Schools Reports, 2012). Out of approximately 30 teachers with less than three years of experience at work at these four schools, the researcher purposely sampled 20 respondents for the study as follows: 6 from Paramount Academy, 4 from Kyle College, 6 from Morgenster Central Primary School and 4 from Kyle Primary school.
Research Methodology

The researcher made use of the interview and questionnaire as research tools in this study. Neuman (2002) defines an interview as a short-term social interaction between two people who are normally strangers with the explicit purpose of obtaining specific information from the other. The interview was selected because it attempts to clarify vague statements and the interviewer may rephrase questions so that the respondent understands what is meant by particular questions (Gall, 2006).

On the other hand a questionnaire is a document that asks the same questions to all individuals in the sample and if properly administered it serves as the most appropriate data gathering device in research (Best and Khan, 2003). Each participant was asked 6 oral questions about their opinion on Philosophy of Education and they were also tasked to complete 6 open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are basically anchored on the four sub-headings, whereby answers to the research questions are provided as follows:

- Strategies that are employed in the teaching of Philosophy of Education.
- Assessment procedures that are used and their impact.
- Attitudes of lecturers toward the subject.
- Utility of Philosophy of Education during and after college life.

Strategies that are employed in the teaching of Philosophy of Education

Fifty-percent of the interviewees indicated that the manner in which Philosophy of Education is introduced during the first year leaves a lot to be desired. They further elaborated that lecturers’ diction tended to frighten and frustrate the first year student teachers, that is to say new terms like epistemology, axiology, metaphysics, aesthetics and logic are usually introduced during the first lecture. As a result student teachers would regard Philosophy of Education as a hard nut to crack.

Eighty-percent of the respondents indicated that the lecture method dominates in the teaching of Philosophy of Education. They further elaborated that lecturers normally come to the lecture with a hand-out that he or she dictates to the students.

However, 20% of the respondents asserted that lecturers rarely call for group discussions, whereby students would be expected to discuss in pairs for five or ten minutes before providing the feedback to the class. Ten-percent of the interviewees indicated that most lecturers employ both lecture method and democratic methods of teaching which call for independent learning on the part of the students such as the project, Socratic Method,
seminar presentations and group discussion. However, the majority of respondents regarded the manner in which that subject is taught as the major source of ‘philophobia’.

Assessment Procedures and their Impact

All the respondents expounded that lecturers assess students’ work through written essays both in coursework and examination. Eighty-percent of the respondents indicated that the lecturer would take up to two months before providing the feed-back. Seventy-percent of the respondents indicated that such a feed-back would be ill-timed in the sense that the students would have forgotten some of the critical ideas discussed in group discussions.

Lecturers’ attitudes toward Philosophy of Education

It was revealed by 60% of the respondents that generally, lecturers in the Theory of Education Department seem to look down on the subject. This was supported by the fact that in most cases during the first two weeks of the first year, Educational Psychology is slotted into the timetable and the following two weeks are then reserved for Sociology of Education while Philosophy of Education is taught during the fifth and sixth weeks of the first year. The same group of respondents asserted that an Educational Psychology assignment is usually given during the first term, followed by Sociology, then Philosophy of Education in the third term and the same order is followed when they come for third year studies from teaching practice.

Seventy-percent of the respondents indicated that some of the lecturers who teach philosophy of Education are doing it for convenience, in fact they have specialised in other fields of studies. A further investigation into the matter revealed that some of the lecturers would have specialised in the Curriculum Theory, Educational Psychology or Sociology of Education.

Utility of Philosophy of Education during and after College Life

All the respondents indicated that they have in one way or another realised the relevance of Philosophy of Education during and after their stay at the college. A certain respondent, Mr Dube (pseudonym) stipulated that the study of Philosophy of Education has developed his intellectual muscles, since the subject attempts to present ideas that are challenging and usually unfamiliar. He further illustrated that Philosophy of education has equipped him with decision making skills, hence he can now easily decide on what to do and what not to do as a teacher.

Sixty-percent of the respondents expounded that the study of Philosophy of Education has equipped them with judgement skills. They further elaborated that Philosophy of education has instilled in them a sense of tolerance and respect for other people at the college and in the teaching field where they are currently occupied.
Conclusion

From the findings discussed above, it can be deduced that most lecturers of Philosophy of Education in the different teachers colleges in Zimbabwe are faced with an array of challenges that need to be attended to. Quite a large number of them employ the lecture method which is characterised by teacher dominated learning. In most cases, as has been revealed lecturers employ the banking concept, whereby they seem to be depositing information to the students in the same manner they deposit money in the banks. (Freire, 2000)

The study has also revealed that lecturers take a long time before they provide feedback on the students’ assignments. It has been revealed that Philosophy of Education is usually ranked at the third position at teachers’ colleges and is normally given the last preference. The study has also established that Philosophy of Education as a discipline equips student teachers with the skills that are essential for survival during college life and after. These skills include critical thinking, correct interpretation of ideas and making rational judgements. It has also been noted that the ill-timing of new words and concepts has had a negative impact on the student teachers.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may be followed in an attempt to rejuvenate the image of Philosophy of Education in the teachers’ colleges:

- Lecturers of Philosophy of Education in the teachers’ colleges should employ a wide range of teaching methods which may include mass lectures, plenary sessions, tutorials, seminar presentations, resource persons, projects and lead papers among others.
- New terms and concepts should be introduced gradually, especially to the first year students to enable them to cope up with the demands of this new subject.
- Lecturers should avoid unnecessary delays in the provision of feedback to the students, so that they may easily realise where they would have gone wrong and rectify the problem.
- There is need for lecturers in the Theory of Education Department to treat the three foundation subjects, Educational Psychology, Philosophy of Education and Sociology of Education equally.
- The attitude of lecturers who teach theory of education should be changed towards promoting equal development of these three subjects.
- Suitably qualified personnel should be given the opportunity to teach Philosophy of Education rather than picking anybody to teach it.
- Both lecturers and students of Philosophy of Education should preach the good gospel about their subject, since it inculcates essential skills that are necessary to the student teacher at the college and in the teaching field.
• If the above referred recommendations are closely adhered to by lecturers in various teachers’ colleges, sustainable development of Philosophy of Education not as an abstract and docile discipline, but as a practical and live subject may be realised.

References