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SECONDARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM PRACTITIONERS' PERCEPTIONS ON ADOLESCENCE IN ZIMBABWE: AN INTERGENERATIONAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to unravel the differences and similarities between adolescent learners of different chronosystems. The study was situated in a secondary school context and theoretically it was oriented towards Psychology of Education. Bandura's social learning theory, Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory formed the theoretical basis of the study. The descriptive survey research design was employed with questionnaires and focus group discussions as data collection instruments. The purposive sampling method was used to generate a sample of 24 secondary school teachers with a post qualification teaching experience of at least 20 years. The study established that while the general characteristics of adolescence were consistently manifested by secondary school learners of different cohorts, there were some marked differences between the ways adolescent learners of different cohorts managed the developmental challenges associated with adolescence as a unique developmental stage. Technological advancement, the degeneration of the extended family network and parenting styles were singled out as responsible for the variability between adolescents of different generations. It was recommended that stakeholders such as parents, guardians, community leaders and teachers should monitor technological and psychosocial changes with the intention to adequately assist adolescents of each generation to safely graduate into adulthood.

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INTRODUCTION

Human development, which commences at conception and progresses till death, is characterised by a number of unique prenatal and postnatal stages. One peculiar postnatal human developmental stage is adolescence. According to Stanley G. Hall, a prominent psychologist, adolescence is a period of storm and stress in virtually all cultures and in any part of the world (Kufakunesu and Chinyoka, 2017:26; Dacey and Travers, 2002). Adolescence has attracted the attention of numerous professionals such as classroom practitioners, counsellors, health personnel, political figures, anthropologists and religious ministers (Swartz, de la Rey, Duncan, Townsend and O'Neill, 2011:87). Taking stock of the trends in the adolescent behaviours across generations can be vital to the various stakeholders.

To amplify the importance of monitoring the welfare of adolescents, Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:26) remark, "Some of the mistakes which people make during adolescence can be permanently vicious and can lead to tragic consequences such as premature death, suicide, unplanned pregnancies, early unstable marriages and addiction to drugs and alcohol". The current study explored the differences and similarities between the characteristics and attributes of adolescents of different generations from the point of view of secondary school classroom practitioners.

Background to the Study

According to Feldman (2009:423) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:26) adolescence is the stage of human development in which an individual is in the process of

changing from childhood to adulthood. The change from childhood to adulthood is usually not very smooth because the changes in hormonal composition generate a myriad of behavioural consequences on the part of the developing individual (Santrock, 2004:36; Snowman, McCown and Biehler, 2009: 56-57). Characteristically, adolescents experience mood swings and they tend to be touchy, irritable and rebellious to all forms of authority (Kufakunesu and Chinyoka, 2017:92; Feldman, 2009:423; Ozmete and Bayo-Lu, 2009:313). One notable characteristic of adolescents is their deliberate quest to liberate themselves from the shackles of adult authority both at home and at school and to lean in the direction of their peers (Steinberg and Morris, 2001:93; Erikson, 1968). Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:92) point out that although adolescence is likely to generate similar behavioural and emotional consequences in virtually all cultures, different generations of adolescents usually differ in one way or the other as a result of the permutations of the economic, political and technological contexts in which they find themselves. Such sentiments acted as the impetus for the current study. Before the advent of technological advancement, the challenges associated with adolescents were practically contained by the timely intervention of adults such as aunts, uncles and grandparents who deliberately and tactfully furnished the developing individuals till they graduated into adulthood (Kufakunesu, Ganga, Chinyoka, Hlupo and Denhere, 2013). In the traditional African society, adults were the chief fountains of information regarding development and adolescents were strongly inclined towards conforming to the norms and values of the society (Kufakunesu and Chinyoka, 2017:27; Kufakunesu *et al*, 2013: 828). A study by Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) revealed that the extended family network is no longer intact and the ideas and sentiments of adults such as uncles, grandparents and aunts are mostly branded as old fashioned by the adolescents. It was against such a background that the researcher embarked on the current study to ascertain if there are any differences between the attributes of the current crop of adolescents and those of at least two decades ago.

Secondary school teachers arguably remain a crucial component in the adolescent development equation. According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017: 92) teachers remain a crucial variable in the teaching and learning matrix because, just like parents, teachers remain unavoidable role models and guides in the lives of adolescents. This was backed by Herrero, Este'vez and Musitu (2006:674) who intimate that classroom practitioners as professional adults are very important in assisting the adolescents to deal with a variety of challenges they encounter at school. The interaction between adolescents and teachers is to some extent an extension of the parent-child relationships which the adolescent learners bring to the classroom relational schemas about the nature of social relationships and attachment patterns with adults (Herrero, *et al*, 2006:674; Kufakunesu *et al*, 2013:828). Moreover, classroom practitioners grapple with adolescents' disciplinary dispositions. More than two decades ago, the ubiquitous use of corporal punishment in schools used to curb rebellion and indiscipline among adolescent learners (Kufakunesu, 2011). The rampant use of corporal punishment curbed rebellion during adolescence. The advent of human rights and the reduced use of corporal punishment in schools coupled with the creativity of the current crop of adolescents make the enforcement of discipline quite difficult. It was through consideration the crucial role of teachers in a mutating socio-

legal environment that they were taken as the main respondents in the current study. One variable which has been crucial in distinguishing between different chronosystems is the level of technological advancement. The role of technological innovations in shaping the lifestyles of adolescents in particular and everyone in general cannot be ignored (Kufakunesu Chinyoka, 2017:93). Subong (2008) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:92) points out that the internet has brought about great convenience in virtually all facets of human existence including education, but cautiously warns that the internet unfortunately exposes adolescent minds to emotionally absorbing materials which to some extent rob their study time. This is backed by Black (2009:696) who posits that adolescents' online technological escapades are principally leisure-time pursuits which contribute minimally to their academic endeavours. Separate studies by Goldin (2008) and Monroe (2008) revealed that technological transformations can negatively influence learners' academic achievement. An allied study by Kufakunesu, Chinyoka and Ganga (2011) revealed that internet facilities, sophisticated mobile telephones, video games and movies, among other things, have all been implicated for stealing learners' study time. Consequently, it is imperative that the behavioural attributes of adolescents of different chronosystems with different technological resources at their disposal be scrutinised.

Theoretical framework

Albert Bandura is a notable cognitive behavioural psychologist who propounded the social learning theory. Based on his Bobo doll experiments, Bandura theorised that human beings learn through observational learning, that is, through imitation (Lahey, 2009). Significant others such as parents, teachers, actors, sports personalities, wrestlers, pastors and other celebrities are inevitable role models not only to adolescents but to virtually everyone. In the current study, effort was made to establish the extent to which adolescents with different role models in their respective generations exhibited the same characteristics. Erik Erikson is Neo-Freudian who propounded an eight stage a life-long theory (Feldman, 2009). In his psychosocial theory, which is based on the epigenetic principle, Erikson claimed that the individual goes through eight bipolar developmental stages in which a particular crisis has to be resolved at each stage. (Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, 2010:61; Snowman, *et. al*, 2009:54). In the current study, the researcher focused on the fifth stage, which is technically called identity versus role confusion, because it is the stage which coincides with adolescence (Santrock, 2004:71). Erikson claims that adolescents experience a compelling inherent quest to develop an identity in which they try to establish who they are and where they are going (Kufakunesu *et al*, 2013:831; Donald, *et. al*, 2010:63). Adolescents who manage to develop an identity experience identity achievement while those who fail to develop a meaningful identity wallow in identity diffusion (Kufakunesu *et al*, 2013:831). The current study was also anchored on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which uses five nested systems to explain the variables which impinge upon the development of an individual. Attention was directed at the fifth and last system called the chronosystem. According to Donald *et al* (2010) and Chinyoka and Kufakunesu (2017:12), the chronosystem encompasses the dimension of time as the events within each era and dispensation impinge upon the development an individual. More specifically, the researcher

was interested in exploring how the events of different generational episodes influenced the way adolescents conducted themselves.

Guiding Research Questions

The study was an attempt to generate responses to the following research questions:

- To what extent does the current cohort of adolescents characteristically differ from their counterparts of at least two decades ago?
- How has technological advancement impacted on the personality of adolescents over different generations?
- Which psychosocial variables account for the similarity or variability between adolescent learners of different generations?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With regard to methodology, the researcher employed the descriptive survey research design. According to Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017) a descriptive survey research design is a qualitative research design whose main thrust is to describe and interpret the existing situations in the form of processes, effects, attitudes and beliefs. The descriptive survey research design was deemed by the researcher to be appropriate in the intergenerational comparison of adolescents. Data was collected through focus group discussions and questionnaires with open-ended items. A questionnaire is a document containing methodically and meticulously structured items prepared by the researchers to solicit responses from the research informants during data collection (Kufakunesu and Chinyoka, 2017:95; Swartz *et al*, 2011:29). According to Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017:54) a focus group discussion is a special type of interview in which research data is collected from small and manageable groups. The purposive sampling method was used to generate a sample of 24 secondary school classroom practitioners with a post qualification teaching experience of at least 20 years. The sample was composed of 13 female and 11 male teachers with different areas of subject specialisations. Purposive or judgemental sampling is a non-random sampling method in which the discretion of the researcher is used in the selection of respondents on the basis of their suitability and typicality (Kufakunesu *et al*, 2013:1560; Chiromo, 2006:18). The secondary school teachers who took part in the study had an average age of 46.3 years with a variance of 135.78. Ethical principles such as informed consent, anonymity and privacy were observed as a way of protecting the research participants and the researcher. The researcher furnished the research participants with all the relevant information regarding the nature and thrust of research study before they ultimately decided to take part in the study, thereby observing the ethical principle of informed consent (Chiromo, 2006:11; Keenan, 2002:66). The identity of each secondary school teacher who took part in the study was concealed before, during and after the data collection and analysis. Therefore, the researcher tried to observe the ethical principles of anonymity by being confidential (Kufakunesu, 2011:39).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The major findings of the current study are stated below:

- The general characteristics of adolescence, particularly those attributable to hormonal and maturational changes, were found to be consistently the same across adolescence of different chronosystems.
- Seventy-nine per cent of the respondents reported that significant differences exist between the ways in which adolescents of different cohorts dealt with the challenges associated with adolescence.
- Twenty out of the 24 research participants, that is 83.3%, incriminated technological advancement for negatively impinging upon the behaviour of adolescents in the current cohort.
- Apart from technological advancement, the other variables which were implicated for spurring variability between adolescents of different generations were lacklustre parenting styles, economic dynamics and the breakdown of the extended family network.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

All the respondents indicated that for every generation, adolescence as a developmental stage remains conspicuous in one way or the other as alluded to by Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:26) and Dacey and Travers (2002). Attributes such as having erratic mood swings and the acclivity to interact with members of the opposite sex were reported to be common across all generations. According to Sigmund Freud, adolescents are at the genital stage where they seek sexual gratification from non-relatives (Lahey, 2009; Feldman, 2009). Freud claims that the sexual gratification is not necessarily attained through actual sex but through hugging, petting, kissing and caressing (Mwamwenda, 2004). The zeal to be noticed and appreciated by members of the opposite sex was reported by the respondents as an underlying characteristic across generations and it is part of identity diffusion as postulated by Erikson. The quest to gain recognition by adolescents usually stem from the realisation that the growth spurt has resulted in the development of new physical features which define new anatomical functions (Feldman, 2009). According to Kufakunesu *et al* (2013), as a result of the growth spurt, female adolescents develop breasts and enlarged hips while their male counterparts undergo genital enlargement and broadening of shoulders among other things. The generality of the respondents also reported that adolescents of different chronosystems have been remarkably hostile and rebellious especially towards teachers of the same sex. More than 15 secondary school teachers reported that it is a common phenomenon to see female adolescents challenging female teachers and treating them as rivals in the social context. Male learners also tend to rebel against male teachers and such learners have a tendency to try to identify the extent to which male teachers can stamp authority (Kufakunesu and Chinyoka, 2017:92; Feldman, 2009:423; Ozmete and Bayo-Lu, 2009:313).

Seventy-nine per cent of the secondary school teachers who took part in the study indicated that notable differences exist between the ways in which adolescents of different generations deal with the challenges associated with adolescence. The classroom practitioners pointed that adolescents of earlier generations handled themselves with more modesty than their contemporary counterparts. It was indicated by the teachers that adolescents of the current chronosystem expressed and conducted themselves with

minimum shame to the extent of soliciting the attention of members of the opposite sex more openly than what used to be the case at least 10 years ago. One area of disharmony between adolescents of previous generations and those in the current cohort from the point of view of the secondary school teachers who participated in the study was the speed with which social relations among adolescents formed and got disintegrated. They pointed out adolescents of earlier generations seemed to be good at maintaining long term general social and even love relationships while those of recent generations seem not to value group loyalty and cohesion. It was also brought to the attention of the researcher by the respondents that adolescents of the current generation are less virtuous and diligent than their predecessors. Adolescents in the earlier chronosystems were reported to be more diligent than their current equivalents. The teachers insisted that qualities such as patience, resilience, endurance and determination were prevalent among the adolescents of previous cohorts. On the contrary, adolescents nowadays were reported to be impatient, too keen to employ shortcuts and generally less industrious (Kufakunesu *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, the informants categorically intimated that current adolescents are difficult to counsel and mould in terms of personality. They reminisced of the old days when they used to guide and counsel adolescents producing life changing results. Regarding disciplinary dispositions, the respondents opined that adolescents of previous generations were comparatively more responsible and disciplined than their contemporary counterparts. Furthermore, one area of dichotomy between adolescents of different generations which was cited by the research participants was genuineness and truthfulness. Adolescents of earlier generations were rated as more authentic in terms of their personality than their current equivalents. Some teachers remarked that even their own adolescent children were quite good at feigning to be disciplined especially at home or in the school premises.

Quizzed by the researcher to attempt to explain why there is variability between the personality dispositions of adolescents of different chronosystems, 83.3% of the informants quickly pointed their fingers at the trends in technological innovations. During focus group discussions, the secondary school teachers who participated in the current study remarked that the dynamics in the arena of technological advancement exposed the adolescents to a multiplicity of lifestyles and ideas thereby rendering the educative role of parents and teachers literally useless and obsolete. The advent of digital satellite transmission and the internet has converted the whole world into a tiny village in which information is spread and exchanged at a ferocious velocity. The research informants claimed that the internet and allied forms of technological advancement have opened a new dispensation in which information about practically any aspect of human existence can be accessed with exceptional ease regardless of the fact that some of the information would be meant for adult consumption. This implies that the findings of the current study backed the views of Subong (2008) in Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:92) who remarks that although the internet has brought about great convenience in virtually all areas of human existence, it unfortunately exposes adolescent minds to emotionally absorbing materials which to some extent rob their study time. The sentiments of the respondents to a large extent supported the claim by Black (2009:696) that adolescents' online technological escapades are dominantly leisure-time pursuits which contribute minimally to their

academic endeavours. The respondents lamented that the radical and deplorable personality attributes of adolescents in recent chronosystems is to a large extent an upshot of the diverse role models they see on the various forms of digital satellite and allied internet entertainment such as YouTube and many others (Goldin, 2008; Monroe, 2008). Exposure to pornographic and violent material was incriminated for compromising the quality of personality attributes of adolescents of the contemporary generation. This agreed with the findings of Kufakunesu *et al.* (2011) who established that internet facilities, sophisticated mobile telephones, video games and movies, among other things, have a bearing on the lives of adolescents.

It was also revealed during the empirical investigation that there are other factors apart from technological innovations which give a plausible explanation to the variability between adolescents of different chronosystems. Such variables entail lacklustre parenting styles, volatile economic environments and the dysfunctional nature of the extended family network. Fifteen out of the 24 sample members revealed that the parenting styles employed by modern parents to a significant extent left adolescents at the mess of cyber culture and allied materials. The sentiments of the respondents concurred with the findings of Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:30) who empirically established that most parents nowadays have busy and hectic lifestyles which leave them with very little time to interact with their children especially in urban areas. The results of the current study also tallied with Settersten (2005) and Zarrett and Eccles (2006:20) who maintain that some adolescents hail from families in which parents are unavailable, unable, or, in some cases, unwilling to provide the support their adolescent children need thereby leaving the adolescent children to experiment with their lives. Some of the respondents lambasted some parents for being generally immature and ignorant to the extent of not having a slight hint of what would be happening in the lives of their adolescent children. This variable was again connected to the issue of technological innovations. The secondary school teachers regretted a phenomenon in which most parents lag behind their adolescent children when it comes to technological acumen. Such a scenario was viewed as regrettable because it generated adolescents who are more informed than their parents, thereby rendering the views of such parents hackneyed and obsolete. Closely linked to the issue of neglectful parenting styles is the issue of an erratic economic context.

Firstly, a volatile economic setup was blamed for stealing the time which adolescents and their parents were supposed to spend interacting and building healthy social relationships. In a turbulent economic climate, both parents and children enterprise in some way and therefore at the end of the day each individual would be devoid of energy for socialisation and cementing domestic ties. Moreover, the research participants lamented the conspicuous degeneration of the social ties among members of the same extended family as confirmed by Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017:27). Fragmented extended family ties denied adolescents the opportunity to benefit from the counsel of the elderly aunts, uncles and grandparents as used to be the case in the traditional African society (Kufakunesu *et al.*, 2013: 828). Consequently, the respondents argued that the extent of the degeneration of the extended family network was proportional to the deterioration of the personality attributes of adolescents in each successive generation.

Conclusion

The study established that the typical attributes of adolescence were manifested by adolescents across different generations. This was found to be the case for the adolescent attributes which can be ascribed to hormonal and biological maturation. The respondents categorically opined that serious differences existed between adolescents of different chronosystems mainly because of cyber culture associated with technological advancement, erratic and neglectful parenting styles, fragmentation of the extended family network and dynamics on the economic front. The differences in adolescent behaviours have implications and ramifications to stakeholders such as parents, classroom practitioners, religious ministers and counsellors.

Recommendations

On the basis of the outcomes of the current study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

- Parents need to habitually engage their adolescent children in dialogue so as to remain in touch with the existential problems of their children.
- Classroom practitioners should devise ways of containing the mutating developmental challenges of adolescence in a global and technologically advancing world.
- A systemic approach in which stakeholders such as parents, community leaders, educators, social counsellors and ministers of religion work collaboratively should be adopted to try to solve the challenges affecting adolescents.
- Other researchers should continue exploring the variables pertaining to adolescence with variations in methodology, theoretical orientation and/ or geographical location.

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