



Vocationalising the School Curriculum for Blacks in Pre-Independent Zimbabwe: A Weak or Firm Foundation for Current Voc-Tech Education

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore attempts made by the pre-independent Zimbabwean government at vocationalising the black African education system. The paper further examines the provision of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in view of the new curriculum in Zimbabwe. It observes that while TVET has been on the school curriculum since the colonial times, education continues to be criticized for being irrelevant to the needs of industry. The introduction of the F2 schools for African children before the attainment of political independence in 1980, the education with production (EWP) which was introduced soon after independence, the current thrust on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and the inclusion of design and technology in the new curriculum reflect continuous efforts to bridge the gap between education and the world of work. The article suggests a reconceptualization of TVET in line with the rapid developments in information and communication technology (ICT) and changing demands in industry. There is need to move from traditional notions of TVET which focus on practical skills that are imparted through rote learning and practical drills. The new curriculum has identified problem-solving and competency based education as key elements of the new learning areas. The curriculum is intended to address national aspirations as encapsulated in developmental plans and programmes such as the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET). Before independence, the education in Zimbabwean schools was characterized by a dual system; one for whites and the other for blacks. Besides inequalities in educational opportunities between the races, there were disparities in the nature of the curricula followed by the two systems of education. Only 12,5 percent of the African population had access to academic secondary education and 37,3 percent to practically-oriented education, with the remaining 50 percent being left with no education beyond that acquired at primary education. The financing of African education was pegged at 2 percent of the Gross National Product.

Keywords: Curriculum, pre-independent, attempts, vocational, F2, Tech-Voc

1. NATURE OF CURRICULUM WHICH SCHOOLS SHOULD OFFER

There is controversy on the nature of curricula that should be offered to schools in developing economies like Zimbabwe. Dore (1996) discusses the two main perspectives. He says, the vocationalist perspective asserts that schools exist as part of a broader system of socialization designed to develop people who are able to meet the demands that society places on its members. Education is considered an end in itself since its major objective is the immediate utility of the school product. The vocationalist view assumes that spending on education should produce results by showing increased productivity among educated workers. Vocational school graduates should acquire a strong work culture and be disciplined.

On the other hand, Dore (1996) also asserts that the academist perspective believes that students should be given a general academic function on which any subsequent training, vocational or technical could be easily built. Education in this perspective is seen as a preparation for living and should concern itself with the transfer of learning principles for the application of knowledge as opposed to the transfer of specific skills. Dore (1996:118) says, "this type of education creates educational parasites from our students as well as school leavers who are economic lepers".

The academist curriculum is the one that is mainly offered by Zimbabwean Secondary schools. It had perhaps been too readily assumed that offering this curriculum would more than pay for itself by the economic activity it would generate. As a result, there was phenomenal expansion of secondary education in the country. As Lewis (2005:125) pointed out, “in the circumstances of a poor country the amount of education which will pay for itself in economic terms is bound to be limited because of the limited absorptive capacity of the economy”. This implies that education systems can very easily produce more educated people than the economy can profitably employ. However, Harves (1979) observes that, “one of the major reasons for this situation is that the education system may be producing people with the “wrong” kind of skills for a developing economy. The consequence of this observation is that it is not uncommonly found that large numbers of educated people are unemployed, whilst employers complain that they are unable to recruit people with the skills they need.

Lewis (2005:187) further argues that, “this is a consequence of the classical, literary or academic tradition which has prevailed in the schools”. One reason put forward by Lewis why such traditions have survived despite the constant efforts to introduce into schools a more practical and vocationally oriented form of curriculum is that in the past it was the more literary and general forms of education which led directly into the kinds of employment which are available (these being of a clerical or administrative nature). Findings by Hawes (1979) corroborated by Schumacher (1998) and Thompson (2000) found that in most African countries the lawyer, the doctor and the administrator rank highest in public esteem above the engineer and the agriculturist, the industrialist and the trade. Even at the intermediate levels of employment, clerical occupations rank higher than technical and commercial occupations.

Consequently, well-intentioned efforts to diversify the school curriculum and to produce skilled people for technical and craft occupations have tended to wither away, mainly because pupils and their parents saw vocationally biased courses as leading to dead-ends by comparison with the academic courses which offered entry to higher education and thence to more rewarding occupations (Hawes (1979) says, “as a result, the status of vocational subjects, and indeed of teachers responsible for teaching them, tended to remain low and to attract the lower-ability pupils and failures from the academic streams”.

In another study, Foster (1981:203) argued that “the role that education played, was not likely to be a powerful agency of changing if all we meant by education was the development of specialized vocational or proto vocational educational education in agriculture”. Griffiths (1986) has also stressed that more important than learning elementary skills, was the acquisition of certain attitudes of mind and the bases for understanding and co-operating in change. Adding to the quantity of factual knowledge is not the problem but changing the quality of thinking very much was. Griffiths adds that these attitudes and understandings are not to be taught by adding to the curriculum isolated subjects such as elementary agriculture or building, but through permeating all teaching with the desired attitudes, knowledge and qualities of thinking. Anderson (1997) has warned of the dangers of developing too strong a practical and distinctively vocational orientation in schools.

2. ATTEMPTS OF INTRODUCING VOCATIONAL CURRICULUM IN PRE-INDEPENDENT ZIMBABWE

In 1966, at the Secondary School level, a policy of a dual educational system for Africans was introduced. The normal Forms to six secondary schools became known as Senior Secondary School. A new Junior Secondary School was introduced to teach Grades 8 to 11. The curriculum of Senior Secondary Schools was traditionally academic leading on to professional training and on to University for those who would have survived the intellectual ambushes at Grade 7, Form II, Form IV and Form VI.

According to Mugomba (1980:78), “the curriculum of the Junior Secondary Schools (F2) was a watered-down hybrid of academic and practical subjects”. The aim of such a curriculum was to prepare school graduates for the type of employment likely to be available at the end of four years. The final choice of subjects offered in a school depended upon the activities suited to the area in which the school was situated.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL POLICY (F2 SCHOOLS)

According to findings by Mumbengegwi (1980), Mugomba (1980) and Meredith (1980), it was very difficult to find evidence showing the success of Junior Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe. The F2 schools did not create employable graduates since the choice of subjects was governed by the school's environment. This meant a kind of bond of the school leavers to the school's locality. Schools in rural areas would naturally offer agricultural activities, but the overcrowded and impoverished rural areas could not offer employment to these graduates. Those in urban areas who did metalwork and woodwork were upstaged by their European counterparts who did more job-oriented courses geared to apprenticeship training.

Apart from failing to get employment in their vicinity, the Junior Secondary School leavers were not given education for mobility, since those from rural schools were not trained in urban industrial skills, while those from urban schools were also trained in agricultural skills. Mugomba (1980:79) says, "it can therefore be argued that Junior Secondary Schools (F2) prepared African children for a life of frustration, immobility and unemployment.

4. PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF F2 SCHOOLS

In 1980 Meredith (1980) after analysing material gathered from both Africans and Europeans about the F2 schools, concluded that these schools were lowly esteemed because there was no employment at the end of Grade Eleven. The Rhodesian African Teachers Association (RATA) attacked the lower qualifications of teachers of F2 schools. Thus, from both the educational and employment points of view, the public were against F2 secondary schools because they were dumping grounds for academic rejects, and because Europeans did not have such schools. Africans saw the system as unrealistic and insensitive to their need for status and employment opportunities on the same terms as Europeans. Meredith (1980:68) says, "it was a system geared to create second class citizens who could never compete for jobs with Europeans even though they spent the same number of years".

5. CONCLUSION

The pre-independent government of Zimbabwe's attempt to introduce a vocational curriculum failed dismally because the blacks were very suspicious about the political intentions of the government. The so called vocational curriculum was a watered-down hybrid of academic and practical subjects that was meant to prepare school graduates for the type of employment likely to make the products play second fiddle to their white counterparts. Africans so the curriculum as unrealistic and insensitive to their need for status and employment opportunities on the same terms as Europeans. Thus, when the new government took over in 1980, abandoning the F2 system was one of its top priorities.

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