

Zimbabwe's public education system reforms: Successes and challenges

Gibbs Y. Kanyongo

School of Education, Duquesne University kanyongog@duq.edu

The purpose of this article is to discuss Zimbabwe's public education system. First, the article provides a brief look at pre-independence education in Zimbabwe. Second, it discusses some of the reforms that took place in the Zimbabwe education system following independence. Third, it looks at the current structure of Zimbabwe's education system and fourth it discusses some of the successes and challenges faced by the education system within the context of the prevailing social, political and economic environment.

Zimbabwe, education reforms, education system, education policy, examination system

INTRODUCTION

Soon after independence, most governments of developing countries reformed their educational systems to align them with new national goals. Zimbabwe is one such country that embarked on massive reforms of its education system in 1980.

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa. It is a former British Colony formerly known as Rhodesia¹ that was annexed from the South African Company by the United Kingdom Government in 1923. A constitution that favoured the whites in power was formulated in 1961, and in 1965 the government unilaterally declared independence but the United Kingdom government did not recognise it because it wanted the Rhodesian government to give more rights to blacks. A guerrilla uprising and United Nations sanctions led to free elections and independence in 1980, leading to the election of the government of Robert Mugabe which has been in power until today.

PRE-INDEPENDENCE EDUCATION

After the arrival of European settlers in 1890, missionaries found it easier to spread their influence among the indigenous people. Mission schools were the source of formal education for Africans, with the government providing education primarily to white children. The new exchange economy introduced by the settlers created increasing demand for education among Africans. As demand for more education among Africans was increasing, the colonial government stepped in to control the provision of education and ensure that missionaries would not 'overeducate' them (Nherera, 2000). The colonial administrators were critical of the type of education that the missionaries provided the Africans. They felt the Africans had to be given education which was practical in nature; that is, related to agriculture and industry to prepare them as labourers, but not to the extent where they could compete with Europeans (Atkinson, 1972; Dorsey, 1975). According to O'Callaghan and Austin (1977), Africans were to be given education but not equal to that given to whites. Industrial training in African schools was limited to elementary knowledge of agriculture, carpentry and building.

¹ The country was known as Southern Rhodesia before it was just referred to as Rhodesia.

REFORMS OF ZIMBABWE'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

According to Riddel (1998), there are many different ways that one could categorise the different 'themes' of educational reform that have been prominent in developing countries. These can be divided broadly into three groups: (1) planning and efficiency reforms; (2) quality reforms; and (3) curricular reforms. He also points that there are no clear boundaries among these broad groups. In this article, educational reforms in Zimbabwe are discussed within the context of the above categories where possible.

At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited an education system that favoured mainly white² Zimbabwean students. Prior to 1980, very few black children had access to education. Those who had access to education found themselves in schools that were poorly funded, with very few educational resources and a separate curriculum from that offered in all-white schools. Education for black students was provided mainly by missionaries rather than by the government. Basically, two school systems existed prior to independence. The colonial government made education for white students compulsory and therefore offered universal education, spent as much as 20 times more per white student than the black student (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). The first major reform was the unification of the separate education systems to remove anomalies and inequalities. At independence, the Government adopted a socialist principle: 'Growth with equity' to redress the inequalities in access to education and other basic needs such as health services. The government's socialist principle was perceived through Karl Marx's concept of 'polytechnic education' whose main objective was to link mental and manual work and produce 'totally developed individuals' (Chung and Ngara, 1985, p.89). It had been observed that the inherited colonial education system placed undue emphasis and value on paid employment and white-collar jobs. It failed to instil good work habits and ethics and did not prepare school leavers for the world of work (Nherera, 2000).

Over the first decade of independence, the reforms in the education system focused on making them suitable for Zimbabwe in line with the principle of 'Education for all' adopted at independence. The government expanded the education system by building schools in marginalised areas and disadvantaged urban centres, accelerating the training of teachers, providing teaching and learning materials to schools. Increase in enrolments gave rise to the need for buildings. This was managed by introducing double shifts per day, but with two different sets of teachers, ensuring a more efficient use of existing classrooms without disturbing the existing teacher-pupil ratio. The need and supply of teachers was met by rapidly increasing the number of untrained teachers at primary level. Although this step provided a well-motivated teaching corps, it led to the supply of low-quality teachers and resultant poor quality of teaching. The supply of teachers was increased by introducing the Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC), a low-cost teacher-training scheme, whereby, only two terms of the four-year course were spent in college and the remainder in teaching in schools.

The government involved local communities to help support schools through providing labour and other resources. The emphasis was not so much on quality and cost effectiveness of the education system, but on accessibility to education.

In 1988, the government formed a separate Ministry of Higher Education³ to be responsible for tertiary education, which included teacher training colleges, universities and vocational colleges. More and more trained teachers were supplied into the education system and this helped reduce

² Prior to Independence, White was used to include Asians, Europeans and Coloreds (people of mixed races).

³ The Ministry of Higher Education is now known as the Ministry of Higher Education and Technology.

the proportion of untrained teachers. All the different government strategies helped boost the number of teachers from 18483 in 1979 to 60886 by end of the decade.

From 1990 to 2001 the reforms focused more on the relevance and quality of education and training through new approaches to content, technologies, teaching methodologies, skills provision and through decentralisation and devolution of technical and teachers colleges into degree awarding institutions. According to Riddel (1998)'s categorisation, this would fall under quality reform. The proportion of trained teachers increased dramatically during this period. In 1990, about 51.48 per cent of primary school teachers were trained and by 1997 the proportion of trained primary school teachers had jumped to 77.2 per cent. In secondary schools, only 48.1 per cent of the teachers were trained in 1990 and this number increased to 89 per cent by 1996. This period also witnessed the localisation of the country's testing programs. An Act of Parliament created the examination board, the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) to administer and manage all of the country's primary and secondary education examinations. Prior to the creation of this examination board, all the examinations were set and marked by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) in the United Kingdom. Thus, the localisation of the examinations helped cut costs by eliminating the need for foreign currency. However, it created other challenges as discussed further in this article.

Education in Zimbabwe today aims at promoting national unity to contribute to national development particularly, economic development through the supply of trained and skilled teachers and staff. The aim is also to revive neglected languages and cultural values and to develop a distinctive way of life with mutual recognition and enrichment of the diverse cultures.

STRUCTURE OF ZIMBABWE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

Primary Education

The education system consists of primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. The primary level is a seven-year cycle and the official entry age is six years. It runs from Grade 1 through Grade 7. Prior to Grade 1 children enrol in the early childhood education and care (preschool). Primary education is mainly free but parents pay levies in the form of building fund and sports fees. The curriculum is centrally planned by the *Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture's Curriculum Development Unit* (CDU). This unit designs syllabi and teaching materials. The subjects taught in primary schools are: Mathematics; English; Shona and Ndebele (Indigenous languages); and General Paper covering Social Studies, Environmental Science, and Religious Education (largely based on Christianity). The teacher student ratio is one to 30 or 40, though sometimes it can be higher than that. Most teachers in primary school hold a diploma in teaching. However, there are untrained teachers especially in remote parts of the country where trained teachers are unwilling serve.

At the end of Grade 7, students are tested in the four subjects. Since primary education is compulsory and is guided by the policy of unimpeded progress, performance on the Grade 7 examination does not necessarily affect the progression of the students to secondary education. However, some secondary schools are selective and they set selection criteria based on the Grade 7 examinations.

Secondary Education

Secondary education starts in Form 1 (Grade 8) and parents have an option to send their children to a private boarding school (usually church-affiliated), a government boarding school or a day school. Parents pay fees for secondary education, and boarding schools are usually very expensive. Those who can afford it prefer to send their children to boarding schools because most

of them provide good quality education. The majority of students go to day secondary schools because they are the cheapest. However, the quality of education in most day schools is poor compared to boarding and private schools. Like primary education, the secondary curriculum is centrally designed by the CDU in the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture.

Ordinary Level (O-Level)

Secondary education comprises a four-year O-Level cycle where the official entry age is 13 years, and a two-year Advanced Level (A-Level) cycle. The O-Level cycle covers a wide curriculum and different schools offer different subjects depending on the availability of resources. However, there are core subjects that students are required to take. These subjects are: Mathematics, English, Science, Shona or Ndebele, Geography, and History. Officially, a student should take a minimum of eight subjects in secondary education. At the end of the four-year cycle, students sit for the Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (ZGCE-O) examinations. A student should pass a minimum of five subjects, which include Mathematics, English and Science. After O-Level, a student may choose to proceed to A-Level or go to any of the following: teacher's training college, technical college, agricultural college, polytechnic, and nursing training college.

Advanced Level (A-Level)

Progressing to A-Level is based on the performance on the ZGCE-O examinations. Progression is on merit and schools set selection criteria. Only those students with good passes proceed to this level of education. At A-Level, students major in a minimum of three subjects. The choice of subjects is usually based on the students' long term career goals. The subjects one picks at A-Level will determine the degree program one will study at the university level. For example, a student who wishes to study Law may consider subjects like English, English Literature, and History while a student who wishes to study Engineering may consider subjects like Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics.

Tertiary Education

Tertiary education in Zimbabwe covers all universities, technical colleges, polytechnic colleges, teacher's training colleges and other vocational skills training centers. Tertiary education falls under The Ministry of Higher Education and Technology, and is not discussed in detail in this article.

Zimbabwe's Examination System

The Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) is responsible for all examinations in primary and secondary education, which are Grade 7 examination, Zimbabwe Junior Certificate of Education (ZJC), Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (ZGCE O-Level) and Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (ZGCE A-Level) examinations. All the examinations except objective tests are marked by teachers who are trained as markers by ZIMSEC. To qualify to be trained as markers teachers should have at least a diploma in teaching, and some experience in the subject they intent to mark.

Grade 7 Examination

The Grade 7 examination takes place at the end of primary education. The average age of students taking this examination is 12.5 years. The age ranges from 12 to 15 years. Students are tested in four subjects: English, Mathematics, Shona or Ndebele, and General Paper. Students do not pay examination fees to write this examination. Candidates receive a separate result for each subject in the form of units on a nine-point grading scale from 1 to 9 with 1 being the highest possible grade

and 9 being the lowest. This means students with the best results will have four units (one point in each subject) and one with the worst results will have 36 units (nine points in each subject).

The main purpose of the Grade 7 examination is certification of the students' level of educational achievement. It is also used for the selection of students to secondary education especially by private and mission schools. Some top government schools where there is stiff competition to enter also set selection criteria based on the Grade 7 results. Many other schools, especially those in rural areas, have a 'mass admission' policy regardless of the students' results on the Grade 7 examination. This is because of the government policy of education for all, so that no student should be denied a place for whatever reason.

ZGCE O-L Examination

The next examination takes place at the end of Form four (Grade 11). Students pay examination fees to take this examination. This examination serves a number of purposes. First, it certifies students' level of educational achievement. Second, it used for selection to go to A-Level. Third, it is also used by employers for hiring purposes as well as for admission to other institutions of higher learning like teachers' and nurses' training colleges. A letter grading system is used as follows: A, B, C, D, E, F, and U; with A being the highest grade achieved and U (Unclassified) being the lowest. The grades are assigned for each subject, and C is the minimum acceptable passing grade. A student should get a minimum of 5 Cs including English to have successfully completed Ordinary level.

ZGCE A-L Examination

The final examination of the secondary school education system is the ZGCE A-L examination, taken at the end of Form 6 (Grade 13). Results for this examination are used for: (a) certification of student's level of educational achievement, (b) selection to the university and other institutions of higher learning, and (c) employment purposes. Grading of this examination is based on a seven-letter grading system as follows: A, B, C, D, E, F (fail), and O. The O indicates that the student produced work that is equivalent to O-Level standard.

SUCCESSSES OF ZIMBABWE'S EDUCATION REFORMS

The government policies achieved successes in increasing enrolment, achieving racial as well as gender equity in education, increasing the supply of educated manpower, and improving the country's literacy rate⁴.

Access to Education

The government made basic education accessible through policies of free education, compulsory education and upholding children's right to education. With a socialist philosophy, primary education was made free and this resulted in admission rates expanding dramatically (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). According to The Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (2001), during the first decade of independence, the number of primary schools jumped from 2401 in 1979 to 4504 in 1989, an 87.6 per cent increase and primary school enrolment showed a 177.5 per cent increase from 819,586 to 2,274,178 during the same period. The number of secondary schools increased from 177 in 1979 to 1502 in 1989, a change of 748.6 per cent and secondary school enrolment increased from 66,215 to 695,882 a 950.9 per cent change. The government took steps, such as a rapid increase in public spending on education from 4.4 per cent of recurrent public expenditures in 1979-80 to 22.6 per cent by 1980 and introducing substantial community

⁴ Literacy rate is defined here as the proportion of those who are 15 years or older who can read and write.

financing. This allowed rapid primary sector expansion, for which government resources quickly became inadequate.

Gender Equity in Education

In 1980, the proportion of female students in primary schools was 47.6 per cent compared to 52.4 per cent males. By 1999, the proportion of females had increased to 49.1 per cent and that of males had gone down to 50.9 per cent. This information shows that although equity has not been completely achieved, there were significant improvements during the first two decades of independence in making education accessible to female students. The general pattern is the same for secondary education as it is for primary education; that is, the proportion gap between male students and female students was narrowed during the first two decades. In 1980, about 43.3 per cent of students were females and 56.7 per cent were males in secondary education. In 1999, the proportion of females had increased to 46.9 per cent and that of males had gone down to 53.1 per cent.

Racial Equity in Education

Prior to independence, schools in Zimbabwe were divided into two main categories, Group A schools and Group B schools. Group A schools were for white students and most of these schools were well equipped with state of the art teaching and learning facilities. Group B schools were for black students and most were poorly funded. The government disbanded this classification system in an effort to achieve racial equity in all schools. White and black students had the opportunity to enrol in the same schools and receive the same education regardless of race.

Educated Manpower

The aggressive education policies by the government resulted in the country producing professionals to work in the private sector and government. The country also became a major source of educated manpower in Southern Africa and today Zimbabwe has thousands of teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals working in neighbouring countries and overseas. The sad part associated with this success story is that some poor economic policies by the government created a hostile environment resulting in 'brain drain' of the country's professionals, discussed further below.

Literacy Rate

Although literacy rate is not a perfect measure of educational results, it helps especially in international comparisons of some achievements in different education systems. According to the United Nations Development Program (2003), the country achieved a male literacy rate of 94.2 per cent; a female literacy rate of 87.2 per cent and a total literacy rate of 90.7 per cent. Zimbabwe ranks first in male literacy rate, second in female literacy rate and first in total literacy rate among Southern African countries. This is important because literacy and educational access are important as a means of improving public awareness of environmental and health issues, and reducing family planning (International Labor Review, 1995).

CHALLENGES TO ZIMBABWE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

The policy formulation process of the first decade after Independence was hurried and highly centralised. The goals and targets were not put within a reasonable time frame. They were largely an act of faith as the strategies and targets were neither well defined nor focused. These goals were not tied to the availability of the requisite resources to achieve them. The provision of education was therefore regarded as a compensatory act for those who had been denied the

opportunity by successive regimes of the colonial era and as a payback to the people who had participated in the liberation struggle to bring about independence.

Impact of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program

By the end of the 1980s, it became evident that the government's socialist ideology adopted in 1980 was no longer suitable to the changing world and was placing a heavy financial burden on the government. Also, the fall of communism in the late 1980s forced the government to move towards a more capitalist society. The government had to pursue new strategies to address the economic challenges facing the country. These strategies were prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP). This program was adopted by the government in 1990. It helped in the liberalisation of the economy with the consequence that many people lost their jobs as local industrial companies closed down because of high competition from outside. The introduction of this program required the government to cut expenditure in social services sectors including education. The government therefore had to make the most of meagre resources to meet the educational and training needs of a growing young population. The Zimbabwe Human Development Report (United Nations Development Program, 2003) notes that the country's economic performance went down since the introduction of ESAP in 1990. Poverty has become more acute and widespread, leading to many parents finding it difficult to afford school fees for their children.

The period 1990-96 witnessed the introduction of cost-recovery policies with regard to education and health. The government scrapped a lot of subsidies in some basic services and commodities. The cumulative effects of these measures on the well-being of ordinary families have been devastating particularly concerning education of children and care of the sick. To cushion the disadvantaged, the government introduced the Social Development Fund (SDF). This fund helps pay school fees and examination fees to orphaned children and those whose parents are physically disabled. It also helps those who are able but poor to afford paying for the education of their children. This fund is too small and in most cases, because of government bureaucracy, it takes a long time for the funds to be disbursed to schools. That means most schools continue to operate on limited budgets.

In 1991, faced with a different socio-economic climate from the one existing in 1980, the government amended the Education Act of 1987 (No.5/1987) to bring it in line with the new socio-economic environment caused by the introduction of ESAP. In particular, the 1991 Act (No.26/1991) introduced fees at the primary school level that had been tuition-free since independence, a reversal of the principle of free and compulsory primary education enacted into law by the 1987 Act. It is important to point out that even after this Act, rural primary education continued to be mainly free. Decentralisation helped reduce the central government's administrative and financial responsibility for the educational expansion. This, however, resulted in less financial support for those schools in poor rural areas, hence further widening the gap in quality education between the rich and the poor.

Although rural primary education generally remained free, parents continue to be responsible for levies to take care of buildings, school facilities and sports. These levies are beyond the reach of a majority of parents. A lot of workers got laid off as companies tried to remain viable under the deteriorating economic environment, inflation began to rise and teachers' income became eroded, schools got caught between reduced funding and increased costs of supplies. One headmaster of an urban primary school points out that at least half of the school's more than 1,000 pupils cannot afford fees, while a government directive says students must not be sent home for failing to pay fees.

The situation became worse by the drying up of donor support and the government was forced to further cut costs. All these resulted in (a) general shortage of books, science equipment and other essential learning facilities due to poor funding of schools, (b) poor students' performance due to lack of books and other teaching/learning resources, (c) low moral among teachers as a result of poor salaries and other working conditions, and (d) lack of attraction and retention of qualified teachers because of poor amenities in rural areas.

These problems facing the education system in Zimbabwe were echoed by the country's leading financial newspaper which noted:

The malady plaguing the local education system is fed by under-funding from the State budget; high inflation which topped 525.8 per cent continues to eat into grants provided by the State to schools. Low morale within the teaching profession has led to staff exodus from the teaching profession. (Financial Gazette, 2003)

Many teachers have left the teaching profession to escape the worsening economic situation. Most found employment in neighbouring countries and others have gone to Britain and the United States to continue with their education. This brain drain seems to be reversing the gains attained over the past two decades of providing trained teachers to the system.

Corruption in the Examination System

One of the major changes that took place in the 1990s was the localisation of the country's testing program. This was done following the setting of the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council. Although this was a cost-cutting measure, the system faced serious challenges. One of the problems has been the issue of the security of examinations. There have been several cases of examination leaks, with some scripts getting lost during transportation as there is reliance on public transportation to transport examination papers. Headmasters and teachers complain of the sloppy conduct of examinations, which sometimes result in a mix-up of results. Some headmasters gave examples of wrong examination scripts delivered to wrong candidates, candidates receiving results for subjects they did not sit for, and candidates failing to receive results for subjects they sat for. School officials pointed out that not only do the mix-ups of examinations betray the inefficiencies within the education system, but they erode the little confidence that the public still has in the system. Corrupt school officials unseal examination packages before the examination date and either sell the scripts to candidates or give them to relatives. There have been cases of examination papers sold on the black market before students sit for the examination, and teachers writing examinations for students as noted in the *Zimbabwe Independent*, a leading independent weekly newspaper:

In January the dubiety of Zimbabwe's examinations system was exposed at Mnene Primary School in Mberengwa. It was revealed that the school headmaster and three teachers wrote and filled in answer sheets for dozens of Grade 7 pupils. The then Education permanent secretary, Thompson Tsodzo declared that results of more than fifty pupils at the school would stand as genuine. (Zimbabwe Independent, 2004)

Relevance of the Curriculum

The expansion of the education system during the 1980s led to many qualified graduates supplied onto the job market. Sadly, this increased supply of educated manpower has not been met by an equal or greater supply of jobs to absorb them. This has been worsened by the shrinking of the private sector as some companies closed down and others relocated to neighbouring countries to escape the poor economic situation. Unemployment quickly rose to unimaginable rate, about 70 per cent according to 2002 estimates. Some people in the country argue that the school curriculum should be revamped to align it with the needs of the country's industries. They complain that most

students who graduate lack the requisite skills for them to be employed. Thus, people argue that the system is failing to produce employable graduates. For example, the *Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training* which was headed by one of the country's leading educationists, Nziramasanga (1999), recommended that the curriculum be changed to focus on employment related skills and other essential skills. However, the government is not moving fast enough to implement some of the commission's recommendations, and as a result the irrelevance of the curriculum is an issue most people still blame for the rising unemployment.

Information Technology

The promotion of technology in the school system is one area which has not been moving fast enough. In fact, this is a problem in most developing parts of the world not just Zimbabwe. The problem is that while most schools and other educational institutions in the industrialised countries have ready access to computers and the internet, the same cannot be said of developing countries. Moore (2000) notes that around 700000 in Africa (about 0.1 per cent of the population) use basic internet service such as email. The lack of financial resources and poor infrastructure are the main reason why it is difficult to introduce computer technology in most rural schools. Although computers have been part of the country's education curriculum for a long time, their use has been limited to a few well-funded private schools and boarding schools that have electricity. The majority of the schools do not have the basic facilities required for the use of computer technology.

CONCLUSIONS

Lessons that can be derived from Zimbabwe's experiences are that quality educational reform in developing countries is difficult to achieve. The reforms that took place in Zimbabwe did not focus on outcomes assessment. Indicators of quality education like reading achievement, writing achievement, and test scores did not achieve sufficient attention during reforms. Much attention was paid towards the quantity of students enrolled and their progression through the system regardless of whether they can read and write or not. There were no standards set for students to meet at each level of their education. It can be argued that the colonial education system produced higher pass rates than the post-Independence education system. However, this argument should be made within the context that the colonial education system was highly selective and only a very small percentage of those attending primary school qualified for secondary school education. This means the standards and quality of a colonial educational system are inappropriate for a post-colonial system where the government believes in empowering people and serving the once disadvantaged group of people.

Lack of financial resources to adequately fund the educational system is the main challenge and will remain so for a long time to come. Zimbabwe, just like any other developing country relies on donor funding for some of its educational projects. According to the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture (2001), about 94 per cent of the government's allocation to the education systems goes towards paying salaries. Only 4 per cent remains to fund development projects. These financial constraints result in the shortage of staff and training materials thus compromising the quality of education. With this poor funding, it is impossible to implement reforms that improve academic achievement, and proficiency and hence provide quality education.

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