

Rethinking the Definition and Value of the Curriculum Concept: The Zimbabwe Experience

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ABSTRACT This paper interrogates the multifarious perceptions of the word curriculum from an educational viewpoint. In considering questions of curriculum one must go beyond the confines of the school to look at society. The study considers the values, traditions and beliefs of the whole culture of society. Curriculum decisions are not just about content and organising teaching/learning of subject matter but careful considerations of philosophical, psychological and sociological issues. Research shows that without a thorough consideration of these fundamental principles, the designed curriculum may fail to address the needs of the society. Using a desktop approach, this study explored and discussed some sociological principles and how these have been considered and represented in the Zimbabwean school curriculum as a case in point. Sociological principles are social forces that govern one's behaviour in a given society. The paper concludes by showing that sociological principles have been considered in the formulation and implementation of most school curriculum studies. The study implores curriculum planners to design curriculum studies that take cognisance of key sociological principles if society is to move forward by using education as a vehicle for development.

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of meanings associated with the word curriculum. Many scholars (Gatawa 1990; Posner 1995; Kelly 2004; Posner 2006) have failed to define the term curriculum satisfactorily. A curriculum as applied to schools is as broad and as large as life itself. No school is an island to itself. A school is an integral part of the society it serves. So, in considering questions of curriculum one must go beyond the confines of the school to look at society. A curriculum does not develop in a vacuum and one must consider the values, traditions and beliefs of the whole culture of society (Gatawa 1990; Nakpodia 2009). Furthermore, curriculum decisions are not just about content and organising teaching/learning of subject matter but careful considerations of

philosophical psychological and sociological issues. As such, a curriculum means a variety of things to people, hence take many a form (Posner 1995). It is in this context that the authors looked into some sociological principles and discussed the extent to which these have been considered, using the Zimbabwean primary school curriculum as a reference point.

The Curriculum and the Social Context

The idea of curriculum is not new and there exist considerable dispute as regards its meaning (Posner 1995; Chipunza 2006). Gatawa (1990:16) views the curriculum as "the instrument through which complex societies transmit and maintain cherished bodies of knowledge values and skills". Kelly (2004) interrogates curriculum from a philosophical and political standpoint and its implication for society, particularly educational practice. Thus, the curriculum reflects and reinforces the social realities in the wider society; a society being a "social system with subsystems, which interact with other social systems" (Gatawa 1990: 16). This definition of the curriculum relates to the wider society in which people interact. As such, sociological principles are social forces that govern one's behaviour in a given

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en society. Examples of such forces include socialisation and social stratification to name two. Socialisation is the process by which the individual develops into a more or less adequate member of a social group (Haralambos and Holborn 1990). In this process, individuals acquire the already existing culture of the social group they come into contact with. Socialisation is learning to perform social roles in order to become a social and moral being (Ashley et al. 1969; Burgos 2003; Safstrom and Mansson 2004). While this definition is clearly from the functionalist paradigm, it does not necessarily reflect a generally accepted description of the concept of socialisation. In other words, socialisation or enculturation (Nakpodia 2009) can be described as the process that makes individuals internalise certain values, customs and skills prevailing in a society, thereby developing the individuals' personalities in a certain direction. In this vein, the researchers feel that Posner (1995) was correct, when he posited that the curriculum concept is not philosophically or politically neutral. Zimbabwe's education philosophy and curriculum after independence was socialistic in principle hence the dictums "Education for all", "Growth with equity" (Kanyongo 2005) and "Education with production" (Matunhu et al. 2011) all aimed at producing a 'total person'.

Socialisation is discussed in the context of culture. Hagedorn (1983) views socialisation as a complex learning process through which individuals develop selfhood and acquire knowledge, skills and motivations required for participation in social life. Burgos (2003) supports Haralambos and Holborn (1990:4) who echo this by explaining that socialisation is "the process by which the individuals learn the culture of their society." Thus, socialisation is seen as the process through which the culture of the society is transmitted to new generations. The individual has to, in that process, be accepted by other members of that society.

Although the learning that occurs in childhood lays the foundation for future development, socialisation is a lifelong institutional process that influences school curricula (Safstrom and Mansson 2004; Nakpodia 2009). The family is perceived as the major agent of early socialisation (Burgos 2003; Nakpodia 2009) but peers, the school, the mass media and other institutions have their influence as well (Stromquist 2007). Gatawa (1990) pointed out that the curriculum is

the vehicle through which complex societies hand on to the next generation, their common heritage. It is a conduit for the development and reflection of community or 'grassroot' values (Chikoko 2008). Schools for instance, are established to induct children into the ways of life of a given society through curriculum socialisation. The school, as shall be discussed later, is a major agent of socialisation. By "school" we include crèches, play centers, primary and secondary schools and universities.

The Zimbabwean school curriculum is, in the main, highly exam-oriented (Chikoko 2008), centralised and designed in a way that provides a structured learning programme that individual children should cope with. It gives a child clear rules of behaviour and routines in a formalised atmosphere. The school serves as a bridge between family and the society (Burgos 2003; Stromquist 2007; Nakpodia 2009). The child competes with its siblings and peers in mastering the school curriculum. Standards of measure used (at school, in our opinion) are generally at variance with the universalistic social norms of the home. A child is consequently socialised for the world of work and learns to be autonomous (weaned from constant/direct family control).

The Zimbabwean Experience

During its school days, the child is in close contact with adults (different from family members). Teachers constitute the main group of the cohort that interacts with the child. Hagedorn (1983) views teachers and school administrators as powerful socialisation agents since they are the human point of contact between pupils and the formal school system. The Zimbabwean primary school curriculum particularly, accepts the notion that teachers are the major vehicles for transmitting curriculum content and associated values. These teachers are viewed by society as role models. Through teachers, schools are responsible for implanting moral standards, values and respect for the individual. Unfortunately, some of these teachers have let society down by engaging in practices that are an anathema to society. These include child sexual abuse and molestation (see Shumba 2003, 2004). This is where the morally inclined school subject comes in handy. Through subjects such as Religious Education, or Life Orientation, children are taught moral values that are in tandem with societal

norms. The participation by pupils in activities like drama, traditional dance and sport is viewed as a continuing socialisation process. Children mix with their peers during such activities. Burgos (2003), Donnell and Garrod (1990), Nakpodia (2009), and Stromquist (2007) believe that the peer group is a major agent in the socialisation process. The school peer group accelerates the socialisation process. The child learns to accept or achieve various statuses and roles thus promoting identity formation and a sense of belonging. However, some may have a positive influence while others provide negative influences. For instance, strikes, demonstrations and 'stay aways' within the Zimbabwean school system and society are a partial manifestation of peer group and media influence (Chari 2008, 2010). Consequently, researchers begin to question the validity of functionalist philosophy, as an acceptable philosophy through its portrayal of the school as an important socialising agency.

The mass media is also a major socialisation agent (Stromquist 2007; Gwirayi 2010). The mass media encompasses radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, journals and the Internet. In Zimbabwe, the radio, television and print media (public and private) play a vital role in the socialisation process. Educational programmes such as 'radio lessons' and some television programmes may shape the character and career paths of pupils. The media thus plays a pivotal role in consciously or subconsciously transmitting social norms and values. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's motto of "Information, Education and Entertainment" is a clarion acknowledgement of the role of the media in the process of education and socialisation. But the same cannot be said about Information Communication Technologies (ICT) where most schools lack these. Moreover, internet usage and access is low among those entrusted with curriculum implementation (Mhlanga 2006; Chitiyo and Harmon 2009). The reasons are rooted in financial constraints and poor infrastructure (Kanyongo 2005). Other studies show that staff in colleges and universities has limited computer competencies and proficiencies- a manifestation of institutional underfunding and blurred IT policies and limited staff development opportunities (Chitiyo and Harmon 2009).

Some educationists (Gatawa 1990; Marira 1994; Abraham 2002) have advocated for a balanced school curriculum for Zimbabwe due to its multi-

cultural nature. The 'multifaith' approach in Religious Education has been criticised for being biased towards Christian teaching (Gillard 1991). There is a danger that a balanced curriculum (one that encompasses all cultures) may not be realised due to biased programming of the curriculum implementers. As a balancing act, the Zimbabwean government has belatedly, recognised and elevated minority cultures (Venda, Tonga, Kalanga, Shangaani, and Sotho) through radio language programmes (See Chikasha 2012) and realigned language education policies (Magwa 2010) particularly at primary school level; curriculum and other planners have accepted language as a tool for transmitting cultural norms and values, but importantly, a socialisation tool despite inherent problems (Hungwe 2007). AIDS education, in the era of the AIDS pandemic is taught in order to: prepare students for critical reflection on values, emotion and behaviour; deconstruct faulty perceptions and beliefs about AIDS and promote compassion with others (Wood 2011).

The preceding information attempted to show how socialisation is enhanced through social institutions such as schools. These social institutions according to Barnes in Ezewu (1990:30) are "the social structure and machinery through which human society organises, directs and executes the multifarious activities required to satisfy human needs". These social structures are known to cultivate distinctive patterns of behaviour that are more or less adapted to functions they are expected to execute for society. The society operates through specific social structures. The social structures, performing specific functions allotted to them by society are called social institutions. Examples include the family, education and religion to name a few.

The family as an institution plays a pivotal role in educating the child (Ezewu 1990; Burgos 2003; Stromquist 2007). Ezewu (1990: 39) points out that the family "is derived from marriage which is a product of culture". Because cultures are different, family patterns differ from society to society thus leading to several kinds of families. Examples include monogamy, polygamy, polyandry etc. Some of these family units may be rich or poor. The family as a social institution is charged with the responsibilities of reproduction and training for future generations thus ensuring continuity (Stromquist 2007; Nakpodia 2009). Thus, child rearing and socialisation are

the cardinal functions of the family. Bishop (1985) went further and argued that child rearing practices have an effect on intellectual development. Basically, the child needs food, clothing, love and attention. These are social factors in human development. The family size and nature of relations within it may also influence children's mental health and personality traits which may, in turn affect their academic achievement. After Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, pre-primary education was introduced to cater for children from less privileged groups and those from poor backgrounds. Rural schools got more per capita grants than their urban counterparts (see Kanyongo 2005). Special education centres were established to care for all kinds of disabled children, who otherwise would have been the sole responsibility of their parents. Some colleges and universities trained specialist teachers for such centres. These measures supplemented the family unit's responsibility towards the children under its jurisdiction.

From an educational perspective, pupils from these diverse backgrounds are offered almost the same curriculum content. The curriculum planners and the government are advocating the vocationalisation of subjects (Nziramasanga report 1999) while some communities and parents cannot provide for the required resources. The introduction of computers in some schools coincided with the hiking of fees or levies beyond the reach of ordinary Zimbabweans particularly in the secondary school sector (Kanyongo 2005). Primary schools expect the child to do Home Economics yet the majority cannot afford to purchase basic cloths and accessories. It is in this context that Ezewu (1990) saw parental socio-economic status as a determinant in children's ascribed roles and status in society. The Zimbabwean school curriculum could thus be perceived as paying more attention to the school and lip service to the family as a social institution.

The School as an Educational/Social Institution

As a social institution, the school plays a vital role in the socialisation process. Hagedorn (1983:327) views the school as 'a complex system comprised of human behaviour, organised in such a way as to perform certain functions within the structure of the society'. The school, as viewed by sociologists, consists of the be-

haviours or actions performed by human actors that are organised so as to produce certain specialised outputs for society and its members. It acts as a bridge between the family and society. It prepares a child's mind in such a way that it becomes consistent and harmonious with itself so as to produce the required personality. The individual is equipped with knowledge, skills and values cherished by a society. A society's future is generally uncertain hence planning (on the basis of the past and present) becomes imperative. Useful changes in society, through, for instance, the vocationalisation of the curriculum or computer studies, could be a reality. The ultimate goal is to create a self-reliant personality who is able to create wealth. The concept of 'Education with production' of the '80s in Zimbabwe is a case in point. It is Ezewu's (1990) contention that no society can progress, as long as the individual is stagnant.

Other educationists perceive the school as an avenue for the inculcation of moral values as well as access and discipline (Kanyongo 2005; Chikoko 2008; Machingambi 2011; Wood 2011). Most schools are seen as traditional in nature since they strive to develop a child with a sound moral disposition and character. Religion, as intimated elsewhere in this paper, is part of the curriculum since it disciplines, guides, and counsels members of society. This aspect can be viewed in the context of the nature and ownership of a school. We have Church-run schools, modelled along Christian lines as well as the non-denominational Government schools and privately run institutions whose basic core business is purely economic or racial integration.

Although schools strive to educate individuals, the stratification that characterises society tends to impact upon efforts that the schools are exerting. Kelly (2004) intimates out that societies consist of levels that relate to each other in terms of superordination and subordination, be it in power, privilege or prestige. Haralambos and Holborn (1990: 24) echo these sentiments by defining stratification as 'the presence of social groups that are ranked one above the other, usually in terms of power, prestige and wealth their members possess'. Societies, simple or complex, technologically advanced or backward, thus have some form of social inequality on the basis of this ranking. Ranking can be on the basis of age, colour, creed, or class. These ranks or layers are referred to as strata and the 'way in which mem-

bers of each stratum relate to one another is called social stratification' (Ezewu 1990:21). Hence, Takawira (1996) acknowledges the existence of social categories on the basis of a specific criterion. Members of any given stratum will have some awareness of its objective conditions in terms of interests and identity. The (social) class criterion is particularly (the) most evident among a host of other criteria. One's class position for instance, determines the type and amount of education one's children are likely to receive. This stems from the fact that members of a particular class develop its own sub-culture (norms, values, attitudes etc.) which are distinctive to it as a social group due to experiences as it develops. For instance, the culture of poverty is synonymous with the poor which tends to perpetuate it. Stratification systems, according to Takawira (1996), can provide little or no opportunity for social mobility i.e. moving from one stratum to another. A member of any stratum can move from one stratum to the next through social mobility or can remain stagnant. The former scenario is synonymous with 'open' systems and the later with 'closed' ones.

It is an open secret that theoretical views on stratification address social issues on the basis of whether social inequalities are functional or useful for society or not. The functionalist view, for instance, concentrates more on positions than on individuals. All people have a role to perform in their respective positions. They thus receive different rewards and prestige from society. Other statuses according to this view can be achieved through social processes. Education is perceived as an element of social mobility. Top positions are expected to be occupied by the highly educated and knowledgeable. A Zimbabwean university lecturer occupies a highly paid position that also demands high professional qualification and intellect. This is why their position is held in higher esteem than that of teachers. Donnell and Garrod (1990) revealed that, with the exception of Karl Marx, nearly all sociologists rank a person's class on the basis of occupation. In the Zimbabwean educational system, people hold hierarchy (from mere teacher to Regional Director and beyond), in high esteem. This is part of stratification. Positions occupied by individuals are viewed primarily as a function of their talents and the efforts they have invested in developing them. The unequal rewards that society attaches to social positions are regarded

as necessary to ensure that capable, competent and motivated individuals will fill those positions. The meritocratic view suggests that the concept of social mobility does not concern itself with the question of power and social class. It contends that there is upward mobility as well as downward mobility in society depending on circumstances. In an open society, one can move up or down the social ladder for as long as the school is relevant to the functional occupational structure. Turner in Worsely (1987) accepts that the Zimbabwean school curriculum is trying to cater for all these through vocationalisation of specific subjects and computer literacy.

In Zimbabwe, some schools are stratified on the basis of the nature of the curriculum taught (Nziramasanga Report 1999; Kanyongo 2005). We have the highly academic curriculum that encompasses subjects such as Science, Maths and the languages and the more practical ones such as Physical education, Music, Agriculture and Art. Regrettably, candidates are expected to pass at least five 'O' level subjects including English and Mathematics for the purposes of academic mobility. Good teachers are in certain cases assigned to good students on the basis of ability. The labelling of classes as A, B, C or D e.t.c., is generally an indication of ability groups rather than mere names. Is this not stratification? Research corroborates (Kanyongo 2005) this assertion when teachers indicated that they would prefer (and be motivated) to teach upper/high performing streams. Students therein have a higher chance of occupational and academic mobility.

The second view is referred to as the conflict view. It rejects the notion that inequality is a permanent feature of social systems. It views stratification in terms of individuals and subgroups within society. It recognises the existence of social classes (rich and poor) that are in constant struggle. This struggle leads to conflict and change becomes certain. Conflict is fundamentally caused by the inequitable ownership and distribution of resources (which resources, in essence, are acquired through force, chicanery, exploitation, fraud, birth, dominance and coercion). The talented never get the chance to express their individuality.

Haralambos and Holborn (1990) maintain that conflict theorists argue that functionalists are incorrect when they claim that the greatest rewards accrue to people in high status occupations. Athletics and Music for instance are high-

ly rewarding though peripherally necessary. Others are highly rewarding like criminality but socially harmful. Some are highly regarded, as in religion, Pastor or Professor or teacher but have negligible material rewards. The conflict theorists therefore, argue that stratification is dysfunctional for society (Takawira 1996). It denies society and the individual certain opportunities. It is a divisive but necessary tool for understanding social conflicts. And yet contemporary society is characterised by conflict.

Social conflicts are an impetus for social change. Social change is an essential ingredient in most societies. Zimbabwe for instance is undergoing rapid social change. Changes are viewed in societal values, technology, labour, sex and age roles (Hagedorn 1983). Education is a catalyst for social change. Ezewu (1990) argues that education is expected by society to bring about changes in society at large. The emphasis here will be on how school education has brought about social, economic, political and cultural changes in a given society.

One reason why education after Zimbabwe's independence was massively expanded can be traced to the desire to effect positive social change. The school curriculum was designed such that most colonial imbalances and relics were removed because education was to transmit a new culture. The Western values were expected 'to go'. The colonial capitalist ideology was also put on hold hence the cry for a socialist education and ideology propounded in the early days of our Independence. Technological changes were also noted. The computerisation of the education system is a case in point. A technical-vocational thrust was advocated for (Nziramasanga Report 1999). The education with production concept can be viewed in this context. A number of technical colleges and related institutions were established. All was done to effect social change through curriculum innovations. Recently, we have witnessed a great deal of stress on science and technology. Actually, a ministry of science and technology was created. It is the writers' contention that the school curriculum has been responsive to these changes, albeit, slowly. Current economic hardships appear to be a threat to some of these efforts. The schools' financial bases have been weakened rendering them weaker to implement some of the noble ideals.

In order to bring about desirable or positive change, some control is necessary. Social control is a force that makes people conform to the

norms of society. The more control one exerts on society, the less is the incidence of deviance. All social institutions and the curriculum play a role in enforcing desirable tendencies in people (to nip deviance in the bud). Hagedorn (1983) views deviance as a variation from acceptable norms. Lawton (1973) argues that the curriculum acts as a powerful instrument of social control. The Zimbabwe school curriculum planners have taken cognisance of a curriculum that address societal expectations. For example, the introduction of AIDS education in schools could be viewed in this context. The purpose is to reduce new infections so that an AIDS free generation can be a reality. The school curriculum imparts AIDS education from grade three up to seven. Education for living done in secondary schools is meant to transmit certain norms and behaviours that are socially desirable. A recent circular has indicated that Zimbabwean History is to be emphasised in the curriculum. As long as the intention is not to indoctrinate the populace one could view these as noble ideas. Such programmes have been pursued in some nations with success. We wait to see whether the Zimbabwean scenario will be anything better.

CONCLUSION

From the above, it can be said that to a large extent, most of the sociological principles have been considered in the formulation and implementation of the Zimbabwe school curriculum. Research has actually shown that without a thorough consideration of these fundamental principles curriculum design and implementation may fail to address the needs of the society, hence produce negative results. The Nziramasanga commission report of 1999 recommended a curriculum shift towards economic-related aspects. The ITC area demands that the state deploys financial and human resources to keep the nation abreast of global trends. Kanyongo (2005) believes that the state is not moving fast. Hence the state needs to implement the Nziramasanga recommendations fully. We can also conclude that the school curriculum is a powerful instrument of socialisation, social change and social control. Challenges do exist and these are being addressed. Curriculum planners are urged to continue designing curricula after considering sociological principles, and other socio-economic imperatives. By using education as a vehicle for

development, Zimbabwe's education and other systems may continue to be highly regarded.

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