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VOCATIONALISATION OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT: ZIMBABWEAN EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Vocationalisation of the school curriculum, particularly at secondary school level, is viewed as one way of making the curriculum, which is a crucial instrument for human development, relevant to the needs of a nation. Since attaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has been striving to vocationalise the school curriculum, especially after the demise of the pre-independence vocationally oriented F2 curriculum. Recently in 2001, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture re-affirmed its quest to vocationalise the curriculum by circulating a minute to all schools which, among other things, directed that all pupils should do at least one technical/vocational subject at Ordinary level (Secretary's Circular Minute No 2 of 2001). The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report (1999) also recommended a secondary school curriculum with a strong vocational component. Despite efforts made so far, the vocational thrust in the secondary school curriculum seems not to bear much fruit. This article seeks to examine the justification of vocationalisation within the preview of human development, and to analyse the problems which Zimbabwe has encountered in its attempts to vocationalise the secondary school curriculum. Recommendations on the way forward are also made which other African countries may benefit from in their quest to enhance the development of a total human being through offering relevant curricula to secondary school pupils.

Introduction

Among the major problems facing post-independence Zimbabwe is that of high rate of unemployment which currently stands at about 50% of the adult population *(The Sunday Mail*, 6 August 2000). The bulk of those failing to secure jobs are the school leavers. One of the fundamental reasons proffered for the unemployment problem is that the Zimbabwean school curriculum is failing to "...reward with jobs the majority of those who went through it," (*The Sunday Mail*, 15 June 1997). The argument being advanced is that the school curriculum is too academically oriented and, therefore, deficient as an instrument to foster total human development. Against this background, there is a school of thought which believes that what is needed is more skills training to address manpower shortages in technical categories of labour (UNESCO Monograph, 1994, Ndawi, 1997). These sentiments have a direct bearing on the issue of curriculum relevance. The crucial question that springs to the mind is, What fundamental knowledge is of most worth? (Herbert Spencer in Barrow, 1976). One can go further and ask; Does vocational education constitute worthwhile knowledge within the context of human development which schools are supposed to foster? If it does, why have efforts made by Zimbabwe to vocationalise the secondary school curriculum failed to gather the envisaged momentum and what can be done to ameliorate the situation? What lessons can other African countries draw from the Zimbabwean experience in their attempts to fashion out relevant curricula for the development of a total human being through the education system? These questions, among others, shall form the basis of the discussion in this paper, within the context of ever shifting paradigms in education and training.

Vocationalisation Defined

Vocationalisation of the school curriculum may mean different things to different people depending on the context, hence the need to define the term in the context of this paper. Bacchus (1988) (cited in Museva 1989:13) gives a definition of vocationalisation which seems to

adequately capture the essence of vocational education. He says:

> Vocationalisation has been defined as efforts by schools to include in their curriculum those 'practical' subjects which are likely to generate among the students some basic knowledge, skills and dispositions that might prepare them to think of becoming skilled workers or to enter other manual operations.

The impression one gets from the definition given above is that vocational education prepares recipients for the world of work. It is a programme of education which, according to Good (1959), is organised to prepare the learner for entrance into a particular vocation by equipping them with relevant practical skills, knowledge, and attitudes. In the school system, vocational education is the type of education carried through such practical/technical subjects as Metalwork, Woodwork, Agriculture, Garment Construction, Cookery, Computers, Art, to name just a few. Skills acquired through such a curriculum should render school products readily employable in the formal and non-formal sectors of industry and commerce as well as being able to create their own employment. The Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum includes such subjects in an attempt to vocationalise it.

However, it must be noted that some authorities argue that academic subjects also lead to some vocations such as theology, medicine, teaching, law, etc. (Maravanyika, 1989). This discussion adopts the rather narrow view as propounded by Bacchus (in Museva,1989) that vocational education is carried through practical subjects in the curriculum, leading to occupations of a menial nature and not the broad view given by Maravanyika (1989).

Justification of Vocational Education as a Tool for Human Resources Development

Vocationalisation of the secondary school curriculum in Zimbabwe is a post-independence curriculum innovation introduced to replace the

immensely unpopular F2 vocational curriculum for blacks during the colonial era. It was criticised for being a deliberately watered down and inferior curriculum as compared to what was being offered to whites. The intention was to develop cheap manpower which did not have high level skills that would make them eligible for technical jobs that were reserved for whites. Naturally, this kind of curriculum was rejected by blacks as they fought for their liberation (Zvobgo, 1994). Come independence in 1980, the F2 curriculum was dropped and fresh efforts to vocationalise the curriculum started as an innovation, focusing on human resources development at school level.

The success of any educational innovation programme is largely determined by its relevance to the needs of the user-system (Havelock & Huberman, 1977). If a programme lacks adequate justification, it risks being rejected by the user system and implementation is bound to falter, hence the need to make an analysis of whether vocational education is justifiable both from a philosophical and a practical point of view, as an effective tool in fostering the development of a total being.

The debate on whether vocational education provides worthwhile knowledge to the learner or not is on-going. While some academics, reality definers of the day, captains of industry and commerce, and the general public argue that it does, others say it does not. Basing his analysis on an epistemological point of view, Maravanyika (1982) gives two opposing philosophical positions as the bases on which curriculum propositions are made, namely the absolutist and the relativist positions. The discussion briefly focuses on these two positions in relation to vocational education.

The Absolutist Position

The absolutist view can be traced to the classical idealist, Plato, whose idea of a good education was one of an academic nature. Absolutists argue that there are certain 'time-honored truths' which schools should transmit to pupils. 'Good education', they posit, is an end in itself. It should not serve any instrumental purpose. It should be an education for

its own sake and should be academic in nature. Those who do not go through academic education are not 'educated', they argue (Stenhouse, 1975). The kind of curriculum advocated for by absolutists is one of a liberal nature, featuring academic subjects. This view rejects vocational education as a form of worthwhile knowledge, based on the argument that there is no philosophical justification for it and, therefore, should not be part of the school curriculum. In Zimbabwe today, as is the case in many other countries, there are people still holding on to this absolutist and elitist view and this has had a negative impact on the efforts to vocationalise the curriculum as shall be seen later in the discussion.

The Relativist Position

The opposing view, as given by Maravanyika (1982) is the relativist position which espouses that members of the society enter into agreements as to what counts as facts, truth and, therefore, knowledge. Worthwhile knowledge is based on the needs of society.

The relativist position encapsulates the pragramatic view that, what works is what is right (Kneller 1971). Based on this position, the curriculum should be made up of what society perceives as worthwhile knowledge. On this score, it can be argued that the relativist view accommodates both academic and vocational education since both attempt to meet the needs of society as determined by society itself. The Zimbabwean view of worthwhile knowledge seems to fall within this perspective. The Presidential Commission of Enquiry into Education and Training(1999) found out that the majority of Zimbabweans are in favour of an integrated curriculum which offers both academic and vocational subjects because both are relevant for the development of what Rousseau calls 'the hand, the heart and the mind' (Rusk, 1979), ie the development of a total being. This, relativists argue, augers well for the development of a well-balanced individual who is well-prepared to take up his socio-economic position in society. Attempts to vocationalise the secondary school curriculum are, therefore, justifiable from a relativist philosophical point of view.

Practical Considerations

Along similar relativist lines of argument, Bray et al (1986), Maravanyika (1989), Oxtoby (1993), among others, have advanced the following as some of the practical considerations for the vocationalisation of the school curriculum:

- To equip school leavers with knowledge and technical and vocational skills necessary in an age of increasing technological advancement to enable them to contribute to national development. This is in line with the human capital theory.
- To transmit knowledge, attitudes and skills useful in employment situations. This comes in the wake of unemployment among school leavers, especially in developing countries.
- To alleviate unemployment through equipping pupils with practical skills that would aid self-employment.
- To re-orientate students' attitudes towards rural society, thereby halting the tide towards urban migration.
- To link school-work to the world of work.

The reasons given above further justify vocational education from an instrumental and practical point of view, which is encapsulated in the relativist view given earlier. Vocationalising the curriculum is done in response to the needs of a nation, mainly those caused by industrialisation, technological advancement and increasing levels of unemployment. Schools, as part of their human development mandate, should develop skilled manpower for commerce and industry, as well as for self-employment, it is argued (Pollard, Purvis, & Walford, 1988). Findings of the *Presidential Commission of Enquiry into Education and Training Report (1999)* indicate that the Zimbabwean school curriculum is largely academic and recommends a major thrust towards vocationalisation of the secondary school curriculum to cater for the employment and developmental needs of the school product. This

recommendation is a further endorsement of the government's position at independence, which advocated for the vocationalisation of the secondary school curriculum. In this vain, vocational education, offered alongside academic education, is believed to have a positive impact on the overall development of the learner.

Modes of Provision

In spite of the sound justification for vocationalisation given so far, there are a number of questions about the mode through which vocational education should be provided. The following are a few questions posed by Oxtoby (1993) in this regard:

- Is vocational education best located in mainstream secondary schools, specialist centres such as polytechnics or some form of employment based provision?
- If it is to be based in mainstream secondary schools (like is being attempted in Zimbabwe) how best can it be organised in terms of provision and assessment strategies?
- What links with the world of work will these links have in terms of provision of resources and organisational as well as logistical issues?
- Is it most cost effective for the individual to acquire job related skills in school, after completion of school but before taking a job, or after securing a job?

These are pertinent questions which have a bearing on the success of vocationalisation. A rational, well structured mode of presentation is a pre-requisite for successful implementation of any curriculum project. Zimbabwe has adopted a multi-pronged approach in which skills training is taking place at secondary school level, at technical and polytechnic colleges and of late, at vocational training centres. This paper focuses on vocational skills training at secondary school level. Since independence, the Zimbabwean Government policy has been that every secondary school pupil is required to undertake at least two vocational subjects at

the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate level and at least one subject at the Ordinary level. (Zvobgo, 1986) This position was recently reiterated by the Ministry of Education through Circular No. 2 of 2002 cited earlier.

The Presidential Commission of inquiry into Education and Training Report (1999) recommends a more radical mode of provision of the vocational programme with a view to strengthen it. In the proposed structure, the vocational/technical subjects would form one of the three pathways which a pupil could elect to follow at senior (secondary) school level. The other pathways are the business/commercial pathway and the general (academic) pathway. One major advantage in this approach cited in the report is that a pupil can make a choice to follow a purely vocational curriculum out of personal interest based on one's aptitude, unlike the colonial F2 vocational curriculum which was meant for the so-called academically weak black pupils, a mode which, as seen earlier, was very unpopular with both parents and pupils (Zvobgo, 1994). This created some negative attitudes in the user system, leading to its resentment, a situation which continues to haunt efforts to vocationalise the curriculum even to this date as shall be seen later.

Problems of Vocationalisation

In a bid to systematically vocationalise the secondary school curriculum, the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education and Culture set up an evaluation team led by B.C. Mashingaidze to conduct a front end analysis of the situation on the ground in terms of the extent to which schools were ready to offer vocational subjects and to suggest the way forward. A detailed report produced by Mashingaidze (1990) recommended a phased approach to the vocationalisation of the 1532 secondary schools in existence then, starting with 40 schools which were almost ready to vocationalise in terms of infrastructure, then 140 schools in phase two and then the remaining 1352 in the third and final phase. Details of requirements and costing for the programme which was intended to take five years at most to complete were carried in the report. However, for some reason, the vocationalisation programme proceeded in a wholesale approach without following the phased approach as recommended and

this has become a source of one of the major problems. Some schools which were not ready to offer some vocational subjects due to manpower shortages in the form of qualified teachers, lack of physical infrastructure such as specialist rooms and lack of equipment and consumables were 'coerced' into implementing the innovation. Consequently some schools, especially those in disadvantaged rural areas are failing to cope with the demands of offering vocational subjects and, as a result, observations have been made, indicating that, of late, provision of practical (vocational) subjects in secondary schools may be on a downward trend, with subjects such as Food and Nutrition, which require expensive consumables being discontinued.

A tracer study carried out by Mukabeta at al. (1997) indicated that as many as 5% of graduates of Chinhoyi Technical Teachers College who were trained to teach vocational subjects were found teaching academic subjects because they could not find vocational classes to teach in the secondary school system. In another study, Munowenyu (1999) reports that in 1996, there were only 167 937 'O' level candidate entries for vocational subjects, as compared to 682 090 entries for academic subjects, a difference of 514 153. This indicates that despite efforts to vocationalise the curriculum, the education system in Zimbabwe is still negatively skewed against vocational subjects in the curriculum as compared to academic subjects.

A study by Maravanyika (1988) in Zimbabwe and Botswana based on the Education with Production programme which has a vocational thrust revealed some of the fundamental problems besetting the new vocational thrust. These are summarised below:

- Occupations forming the target for vocational training tend to carry the stigma that they are both arduous and unremunerative.
- Power elites are dominated by men (and women) whose background is academic, and yet they are responsible for making decisions to vocationalise. They may lack the inward conviction that vocationalisation is the way forward.

- The public tends to exclude vocational fields from their definition of 'valid knowledge'.
- Vocational options have tended to be associated with 'failures' in the academic selection process. In schools, vocational subjects are well down the status ranking, with vocational subject teachers being generally looked down upon.
- Schools lack suitable teaching/learning resources to effectively teach vocational subjects. Where equipment exists, it is usually old, obsolete and inappropriate to technology in industry. Most of it is usually donated.

In short, problems identified by Maravanyika (1988) given above hinge on negative attitudes towards vocational education by various stakeholders, including reality definers, employers, the school itself, and society in general. They tend to perpetuate the colonial attitude that vocational subjects are inferior to academic subjects because they lead to blue collar as opposed to white collar jobs. To them, these are subjects which should be preserved for the less gifted children. Further, schools are ill-equipped and under-funded to handle vocationalisation in a meaningful manner in terms of funding the construction of the required specialist rooms in some cases, and the procurement of equipment and consumables for the vocational subjects. Also to blame is the examination system which has largely failed to come up with a reliable approach to evaluate vocational subjects. The nature of assessment and examination continues to follow the traditional theoretical approach which is best suited for academic subjects as opposed to continuous assessment of projects and practical activities which is more relevant to vocational subjects because of their practical nature. These problems, among others, threaten to derail the vocational thrust in Zimbabwean secondary schools, notwithstanding its noble cause in terms of producing a total being for the society.

Recommendations and the Way Forward

The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report (1999) which is highly critical of the present curriculum accusing it of encouraging a "white collar mentality" because of its academic thrust, recommends a secondary school curriculum with a strong vocational thrust. This is not a new thrust as stated earlier. What is of interest is the proposed structure for the secondary school, where students could opt to follow either the general (academic), business/commercial or technical/vocational paths. One major advantage in the proposed structure is that students who opt for the vocational path have an opportunity to graduate from school with National Diploma (ND) qualifications which are recognised by industry and commerce. Also, students wishing to proceed to university after attaining an ND qualification have the opportunity to do so in the proposed structure, thereby dispelling the notion that vocational subjects are inferior to academic subjects because they do not lead to a university qualification. This is commendable.

However, a number of issues also need to be tackled apart from the proposed change in the structure in terms of provision. There is need for change in the mind-set of all stakeholders in education and training. Positive attitudes need to be adopted, so that words are matched with action. At the moment, the vocational thrust has largely remained at the rhetoric level, casting doubt on the genuineness and commitment of those advocating for it. The study by Mashingaidze (1990) cited earlier indicated that vocational education is expensive in terms of the equipment, specialist rooms, consumables, among other things required to offer effective learning. It, therefore, calls for a strong sustained commitment from all stakeholders, particularly government, commerce and industry in the provision of funds and other resources if vocationalisation of the secondary school curriculum is to succeed. A phased approach, as recommended by Mashingaidze (1990) seems to be the most feasible, bearing in mind the cost factor.

The "schools on the shop-floor" idea adopted by Zimbabwe in the early

nineties, which attempts to link schools with the work-place should be revived and strengthened. This gives learners an opportunity to relate theory to practice within the real work situation, as they take time off their studies usually during school vacation to go and work in industry on some attachment arrangement. However, the programme needs some refinement, clearly stating the objectives of the attachment period. The modus operandi of the programme also needs to be clearly spelt out to the users, ie schools and industry as well as providing for a funding structure to cater for the needs of the pupils while they are on attachment. Industry too needs to be motivated by rewarding them eg. through tax rebates for their effort in training the pupils during attachment.

Lessons can be drawn from success stories elsewhere, and Sweden is one good example. According to Green (1991) Sweden has, since 1971, had a successful system of integrated upper secondary schools which combine vocational and academic 'lines' of study. Only one third of the pupils in Sweden, according to Green (op cit), opt for more academic courses while the rest, including bright ones, opt for the vocational tracks. This is an indicator to the successes realised by Sweden in its thrust to vocationalise the school curriculum. As part of the study programme, the Swedish pupils spend part of their 35-period week in industry, gaining 'hands-on' experience. This arrangement ensures that the gap between what Gilbert Ryle calls 'knowing that' (theoretical knowledge) and 'knowing how' (practical knowledge) is reduced. Vocational skills acquired at school are immediately tried out and reinforced through practical application in industry. The 'schools on the shop-floor programme' in Zimbabwe attempts to do the same.

The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report (1999) recommends provision of secondary education along the Swedish lines and this is commendable. As the Zimbabwean Government grapples with efforts to implement the new vocational thrust, some formative evaluations need to be carried out along the way so that problems are identified and rectified immediately in order to ensure the successful implementation of the curriculum innovation. That

way, it may become a success story and a model for other African countries in their endeavour to foster the development of an all round human being through education and training.

Conclusion

It has been argued in the paper that Zimbabwe's thrust to vocationalise the secondary school curriculum has philosophical and practical bases for justification. Vocational education is worthwhile, from a relativist and practical point of view. It attempts to address society's needs by equipping recipients with work related skills, knowledge, and attitudes that can render them employable in the formal, infomal, and non-formal employment sectors. That way, the curriculum would be instrumental to the development of a total being, one who is functional in society. The problems encountered by Zimbabwe so far in its quest to vocationalise the curriculum are not insurmountable. *The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report (1999)* recommends a change in the mode of provision which may go a long way towards mitigating some of the problems identified earlier in the paper. Stakeholder commitment and a more aggressive approach towards vocationalisation are required, especially in the area of funding. Other African countries can also learn from Zimbabwe's efforts and experiences.

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