

Zimbabwe's Education 1980-2000: Why Success Turned into Crisis

Anne Welle-Strand¹

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Introduction

The past two decades have shown great social changes in Zimbabwe. After a long-lasting liberation struggle to overthrow a powerful colonial regime, the year 1980 marked a new era with independence. Lack of access to education had been one of the main complaints that motivated the liberation struggle. Thus, the political visions and promises related to education led people to regard it as a means of future development and real independence.

Why did independent Zimbabwe's successful attempts of a progressivist education policy turn into crisis? The purpose of this article is to highlight and discuss possible reasons about this policy which was first interpreted as a successful education but has later turned into a crisis. Empirical studies in 1993 and 1995 investigated

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Introduction

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how Zimbabwe's key education action¹ interpreted the rationale of the country's educational policies in a context of ideological change – and these interpretations were contrasted with actual attempts at implementation (Welle-Strand, 1996).

In late 1999 an empirical follow-up study was made on the situation of education in Zimbabwe (Welle-Strand, 2000). The intention was to investigate how the main policy rationales on compulsory education were interpreted in Zimbabwe at the end of Millennium, and to which degree it had changed during the last five years².

In this article, the educational ambitions of Zimbabwe, in terms of aims and policies, stated at independence are first set as references. Then measures of educational success are presented. After identifying recent indications of crisis, possible reasons for them are discussed.

Aims of Educational Reform at Independence

The structure and curriculum of the old Rhodesian education system were consistent with the political aims and objectives of the white settler minority throughout the whole colonial period. The white regimes tried to control both the administrative structure and curriculum for the whole population through a dual educational system, with different aims and purposes. In the history of education in Zimbabwe, one finds a distinct consistency between the general social policies of the Rhodesian government and the educational policy and structure. In Rhodesia, schooling furthered the colonial ideology, the European work ethic, and the concept of individual, measurable merit and capitalist social relations.

¹ 88 top politicians, central bureaucrats and education researchers were interviewed.

² 18 interviews were conducted on October 1999 with key educational actors. The majority of the interviewees had also been interviewed in the previous study (Welle-Strand, 1996)

The new Government of independent Zimbabwe in 1980 made big promises. The overall aim of Zimbabwe's education policy was stated by the Government in 1982 in the following way:

Government recognizes that education is a basic human right. It also recognizes that education is an investment in human capital, which sustains and accelerates the rate of economic growth and social-economic development. The Challenge for educational development in Zimbabwe is not only one of redressing the education qualitative and quantitative imbalance in the inherited system, but also that of meeting the exceedingly large new demands with limited resources (Republic of Zimbabwe, 1983).

Six main principles were stated, as a guide to the development of the new educational system (Ministry of Education, 1984; Mungazi, 1992 p. 93-97; ZANU-PF, 1980 p. 12; Zvogbo, 1986 p. 30):

- Abolition of racial education and the utilization of the education system to develop a non-racial attitude in the younger generation;
- Establishment of free and compulsory primary and secondary education for all children regardless of race;
- Abolition of gender discrimination in the education system;
- Orientation of the education system to national goals;
- Provision of literacy and adult education to every adult who previously had had no or little opportunity;
- The assignment of a special role to education as being a major instrument for social transformation;

From independence and through the 1980s, there was a policy commitment and a real allocation of resources for expansion and democratization of education. Education with Production (EWP) was to be the guiding principle for the education reform, with the main pedagogical aim to make all aspects of the school curriculum relevant to the world of work (Gatawa, 1998; Mutumbuka, 1987).

The Success Story

An examination of post-independent Zimbabwe's educational accomplishments from a quantitative perspective suggests that Zimbabwe has been successful. Although other countries in Africa have also experienced rapid expansion of education following their independence, none of them has attained access to primary and secondary education in the same degree or as rapidly as Zimbabwe did. The education and training system at all levels had achieved a phenomenal expansion during the first decade after independence. Primary school enrolments nearly tripled, while secondary school enrolment increased tenfold (Dorsey et. al., 1991). For ten years free primary education for all children was provided, new schools were built, facilities for technical and vocational education were improved, a massive teacher training was undertaken, and the university expanded. In the first years after independence, Zimbabwe experienced economic growth, which facilitated the investments in education. However, a rapidly growing public sector absorbed most of the gains, causing some serious economic problems. Two questions often asked were: "Can Zimbabwe afford the expansion of the school system?" and "how long can the country sustain it? In spite of the assertion that education is essential to economic growth, budgets did not keep up with the massive expansion of education. Since 1980, Zimbabwe has been spending annually an average of 13 percent of its GNP on education, while the economy has been growing only some 3.8 percent per year (Sibanda, 1989). More recent statistics (UNESCO, 1993; 1995; 1997) confirm that Zimbabwe is still one of the countries with the highest expenses on education in relation to its GNP, a fact which supports the claim of success.

Indications of Crisis

A general negative economic trend continued in the mid-1980s when mineral exports fell and drought occurred. Most of the growth in the public sector was led by the expansion in education, whose expenditures increased, by 11 percent per year (Colclough et. al. 1990). At the same time, youth unemployment reached alarming

proportions. After ten years of independence, these critical issues started confronting educational policy makers. The resources had been stretched to the limit. In the *Zimbabwean National Development Plan for 1991-1995*; it was stated that the demand for education had exceeded the government's ability to finance it, and several constraints were pointed out. This plan showed that the government was gravely concerned about the cost of education. One of the national development plan's main strategies was to obtain information about educational cost efficiency, being stated in the plan as "Research on and evaluation of educational programmes will be stepped up" (Republic of Zimbabwe, 1991 p.77). Based on reported declining and alarmingly low levels of learning achievements, the quality of education has been questioned. Figures from 1993 showed that the pass rate for O-level exam was only 12 percent (Dorsey, 1993). Such a high percentage of failure is not only costly for the society, but also a personal crisis for those who fail to pass their exams after spending 11 years in school. Reports have also pointed out a considerable variation in achievements in different schools, particularly between urban and rural schools, and between genders. Faulty economic planning and lack of inter-ministerial co-operation have also been pointed out (Colclough et. al., 1990; Dorsey et. al., 1991). In 1992, tuition fees were reintroduced in primary schools. This probably caused many families to no longer be able to afford sending their children to school.

In 1992, the Ministry of Education reported that the primary schools emphasized a broad general education, with a scientific bias. The Ministry was content with "striking a good balance between academic curriculum and a vocational/technical curriculum" in lower secondary schools ((Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Higher Education, 1994 p. 19).

In an earlier study (Welle-Stand, 1996) a mismatch among the understanding of aims, goals, content, methods and examination procedures of the educational system and the students' social and cultural preconditions was found. In spite of the stated aims of

curriculum diversification, a closer look at the time schedule of the students revealed that the composition of subjects appeared to have traditional academic biases. Time was spent mostly with English, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Bible knowledge and modern languages. In general, key actors had perceived academic subjects as the most important in the Zimbabwean education system from 1993-95. Administrators and researchers regarded academic subjects as the key elements of the Zimbabwean curriculum, while former politicians, and a small number of administrators saw vocational training as the key subjects.

Education with Production (EWP) had been the guiding principle for the education reform in Zimbabwe since independence. However, there was considerable confusion regarding the understanding of the principle of EWP. Its importance was only seen as marginal as the programme had only been introduced in a few schools. In general, the informants were positive to the principle of EWP, but it had been poorly implemented. Few practical results could be found (Welle-Strand, 1996).

Concerning the examination procedures, the Ministry of Education after independence stressed the importance of preparing local examinations, i.e., transferring them first from the South African system, later from Cambridge to Zimbabwe. The Cambridge System of Examination was still being used in 1995. Concern was shown on the costs of exams, both for the country, which had to pay for the service of the University of Cambridge, and for each individual, who had to pay for every exam he or she wished to take.

Just before the turn of the century, an empirical follow-up study of education in Zimbabwe was conducted (Welle-Strand, 2000). Still, no comprehensive policy document (e.g. White Paper) on education in Zimbabwe was to be found. Political announcements and circulars provided directions (e.g. Zimbabwe-Education Act-Revised Edition 1996). According to various Education Sector Review studies which have been commissioned (Chicombah, et al. 1999; Gaynor, 1998;

ICE, 1996; Levine, 1996; Levine, et. al., 1998; Levine, 1999; Ministry of Education, 1996; Mudzi, 1998; ZIMSEC, 1998), there appeared to be widespread recognition of the need for reform in education at many levels. The financial problem was evident, and there is an inability to keep pace with expansion and demands of the education system. Even if there was still high expenditure on education (about 26 per cent of public expenditure), expenditure per pupil has declined by about 66 per cent since 1990 (Gaynor, 1998). It has been argued that the reintroduction of school fees for primary schools led to a reduction in numbers of pupils enrolled in government (public) schools (Engberg-Pedersen et. al., 1996). The quality and internal efficiency has been a cause for concern. About 20 per cent of the students who wrote 'O' level exams, passed five subjects, including English. Around 20 per cent of secondary schools did not pass a single successful candidate. And, around 50 per cent of secondary schools passed only five per cent of the students entered (Gaynor, 1998).

In late 1998, an Interim Report of a Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training gave a situational report based on meetings with government ministers, governors, responsible authorities, chiefs, parents, teachers, other civil servants, student teachers, primary and secondary school students. It also did the same based on the information from public hearings. The commission held that the curriculum stood out as the most pressing problem. It was criticized for being largely academic and examination-driven, and that the curriculum was irrelevant for 80 per cent of the students as well as to the economic developmental needs of Zimbabwe. Following this, the Commission focused on other important areas: inequity in the provision of education, lack of better qualified teachers, less importance put on national languages i.e Shona and Ndbele, lack of textbooks, lack of electricity in schools, corrupt education administration, increased unemployment, failure and drop-out rates, and lack of monitoring of education.

Recent findings (Welle-Strand 2000) indicate that Zimbabwean primary and secondary education in 2000 was based on the same rationales as it was five years back. There was hardly any changes in the curriculum, nor in the content of primary and secondary education. The principle of Education with Production as a teaching method was 'turned down' even more than five years ago. It was turned into more of an 'apprenticeship' model. The exams at lower secondary level (Zimbabwe Junior Certificate-ZJC) were localized, while secondary education (O-and A-levels) still was evaluated by the Cambridge System.

Why had an education success story turned into a crisis? Could other reasons than the economic ones contribute to explaining the negative development? A feeling of contradictions in the understanding and implementation of education policies created a need to go more in depth and behind the surface story. Firstly, it was seen as useful to use the country's elite to present their understanding. The three elite groups, the politicians, the administrators and the researchers were asked to assess the rationale and policies of education in Zimbabwe.

The empirical studies of 'success and crisis' (Welle-Strand, 1996; 2000) were inspired by the elite's theory (Etzioni-Halevi, 1985; Marcus, 1983; Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987; Verba et. al. 1987), and the respondents were samples of three groups of the educational elite: top-politicians, central administrators and university researchers. This selection was based on the assumption that the three groups reflect three different (but complementary and sometimes overlapping) rationalities in the societal division of labour, i.e., the normative by the politicians, the practical by the administrators, and, the analytical by the independent researchers³.

³ The categories are intended 'ideal types' in the Weberian tradition.

The Elite's Assessment of Rationale and Policies

The group of politicians supported the formal overall aims of the country's educational policies. Going deeper into the question of the rationale and meaning of education, the former politicians ascribed more importance to it as a means of further liberation and democratization. The group as a whole showed limited awareness of the necessary consistency among goals, content, methods and evaluation/examination procedures – i.e. the rationale of the education system of their country. The former politicians showed a strong dedication to the cause of education, while the present politicians appeared to have a more limited dedication.

The administrative key actors' group was loyal to the socialist-inspired overall aims, as stated in legal documents and expressed by the leading politicians publicly. At the same time, the image gave contradictory impressions as an educational rationale. The administrators were in favour of education for all and viewed academic subjects as the core of school content. They were also in favour of more student-centered teaching and regarded Education with Production as not implementable in practice. In addition, they were in favour of the Cambridge examination system as a means of preserving quality, even though more than 80 per cent of the student cohort failed in these examinations and are stigmatized as losers. This represented a lack of consistency in the relation between goals, content, methods and evaluation/examination procedures, with the rationale selected for the education system of the country.

Generally, the researchers as a group normatively have accepted the aim of education for all as the overall criteria. Examining education from this perspective, according to this group's view, the Government of Zimbabwe was not taking the aim towards equity seriously any more. The researchers agreed mainly in an analysis of what had happened and what had not happened. They did not attempt any kind of empathetic analysis, i.e., seeing the situation from the point of view of the government in a situation of dramatically changed

ideological and economic frame factors internationally. Neither were assessments made concerning how the system could have kept its equality promises and at the same time attained the type of quality of education which could give the country the necessary conditions to compete internationally (Well-Strand, 1996, 2000).

Based on this background information (from all the three groups), it was understandable that the politicians had difficulties in expressing clear educational rationales. The politicians had to handle double messages – to support an education that follows the market economy and, at the same time, defend the rhetoric of equality, education for all and EWP. Under such conditions, to require administrators to carry out evaluation of plans for equity and equality did not actually seem rational. Nor did it seem rational to go of defining competence criteria in educational leadership, when it was no longer very clear about what was meant by effective schooling, seen either from a political-ideological or a national economic point of view.

The critical researchers pointed to the equality aims of education for all, and to democracy as an aim, not necessarily understanding that the government was forced to respond to a new ideological and social agenda, if Zimbabwe should be able to respond competitively to globalization forces. For the Government, it might seem like educational success in the future had to be defined differently from what was done in the past, and in accordance with the new ideological and economic realities.

Educational success seemed to be relative to new policy aims and educational needs experienced by the different groups in society. The success story of Zimbabwean education was a quantitative success in terms of opening primary and secondary education to almost the whole population of younger cohorts. When it came to what was seen as quality of education, and what was required by those groups setting the standard, socialist and democracy-inspired Education with Production did not seem to be chosen. Apart from their publicly held opinions about educational rationales and policies,

the new Zimbabwean elite in their own practice seemed to prefer academically oriented liberal education for their offspring, not infrequently meaning attending private schools of excellence with high fees.

Historical Roots of High Educational Ambitions

Zimbabwe's specific history of education may contribute to explaining both the high educational policy ambitions set at independence and the present crisis. During the colonial history in the 19th Century the two main peoples of Zimbabwe-Shona and Ndebele – made several attempts of revolting (the chimurengas) against the white invaders. Only after a bloody civil war in the 1970s, did the black national movement succeed in overthrowing a powerful colonial regime, and led Zimbabwe to its independence in 1980. Two main political issues of crucial importance that sustained the liberation struggle were the demands for land ownership and equal education opportunities. The rights to land opportunities and access to education were to stand as proofs of the Zimbabwean's conquest of social justice and equality, in which the majority had been deprived of for almost a century. The issue of education became even more crucial when the negotiations with Britain, resulting in the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, stated that land questions could not be legally settled by the newly installed government during the first decade after independence.

In fact, education for all became a main political ambition for an independent Zimbabwe. This was quite understandable, as prior to independence there were two educational systems in the country, one for the white and coloured people, and the other for black Africans. Each system aimed at preparing children for their predetermined status in life-master or employer for the white child, and servant for the black African child. While the white child was offered 11 years of free education, the African child received a more restricted amount of education, which was not free at any level. After independence came as a result of a bitter racial war the First Five Year national Development Plan 1985-90 (Republic of Zimbabwe, 1985), proposed

to use education as a strategy to change this legacy of inequality. The whites fought to maintain a social, economic and political status quo, as well as to keep their privileges. On the other hand the blacks fought for social justice, desegregation, access to schools, health care, and the right to own land. In their political manifesto before the election in 1980, (ZANU-PF, 1980) the inspiration for the aims and contents of the educational reform came from some of the countries that had accepted Zimbabwean refugee students. These countries were donors both in terms of financial aid, and curriculum philosophy trainers for the Zimbabweans. Through the education and training of the refugees, and through their aids (education projects and advisers – hvor kommer dette inn?), in two decades after independence, the donors mainly supported educational curriculum alternatives to British liberal oriented education. As a common denominator, the educational philosophy of independent Zimbabwe was based on a collectivist-encyclopaedic and progressivist tradition with a distinct touch of polytechnicalism. This progressivist philosophy was politically correct among the new black elite and the majority of donors.

Colonial Education Legacy Challenged by Progressivism and Reinforced by Globalization

When the post-independence government gave access to education for all in Zimbabwe, the existing system was still strongly influenced by traditional British liberal education. Access was given to a curriculum and examination system that the black masses, including students and teachers, had not been prepared for in their previous socialization processes. The progressivist attempts were not able to create didactically consistent rationales of an education alternative. In didactical terms, one can say that there was a mismatch among the existing aims, goals, contents, methods, examination forms, and the participants' social and cultural preconditions. One effect of this mismatch was the failure of more than 80 per cent of the students at O-level exams.

The Governments' socialist-inspired visions about Education with Production seemed to have been interpreted contradictorily. The progressivist type of education was not actually accepted by the new black elite, which preferred private liberal schools of the British type for their children. The rapid ideological and economic changes in Zimbabwe have blurred the tension between equality and quality of education, expressed in the collisions between different curriculum philosophies and traditions of educational thought.

The most influential social groups regarded liberal (British style) education as a higher valued kind of education. However, this type of education seemed to be unattainable by many because the social and cultural preconditions for this education were not 'equally distributed' in the population. Under such conditions, it appears to be difficult to reconcile two inherently opposite concepts of education, i.e., collectivist-progressive mass education and liberal-elite education. So far, it has been difficult to find societies where liberal education is not regarded as the most prestigious, and vocational education/training as second best, among the ruling elite.

The cultural roots of the past in Zimbabwe (the Shona and Ndebele peoples' history, different missionary denominations, and British liberal education for the whites) seem to have created a solid resistance towards socialist attempts at creating education of a different kind. In the socialist view, all members of a society are regarded as being equal; therefore such societies defend an education that supports the synthesis of practical work and cognitive thinking, understood as means to attain education that promotes equity and democratic values. However, these ambitions have been seriously challenged by old beliefs rooted in the powerful European colonial heritage that combined religion with liberal education ideals. In fact, the constitutional 'midwife' of independent Zimbabwe, the Lancaster House Agreement, may be seen as having put down structural and political power restrictions that made it impossible to establish an education system deeply rooted in socialist educational thinking. The 'midwife' put on a structural-constitutional

straightjacket, which had, later, dramatic cultural implications on the 'baby'. Expensive private schools that started operating on Zimbabwean soil after independence were a visible token of the cultural victory of the colonizers. The various cultural roots seemed to have created a solid mental resistance towards socialist attempts at creating education of a different kind.

Since the late 1980s, international ideological changes and globalization have brought socialist policies of Zimbabwe, and of some other countries of the socialist-inspired block (e.g., Tanzania), into jeopardy. Following the wave of neo-liberal ideology and market economy, demands for liberal education in all areas of learning have more than ever been seen as necessary in order to produce elite human capital for the country's survival in international market competition. This ideology has favored educational products marked with something quite different from Education with production. The current international educational standard may be seen as constituted by a combination of high status liberal arts and science subjects with modern business subjects, e.g., management and computer science.

Conclusion: The Triple Education Trap

Why did independent Zimbabwe's successful attempt at a progressivist education policy turn into a crisis? There might be different answers to this question, but here it will be argued that the country seems to be stuck in a triple trap, caught simultaneously in three socio-cultural realities.

The Historic Socialising Legacy

The new elite is socialized into a 'double bind'; by its own first schooling, it is socialized to regard British liberal education as the supreme form of education. In practice, their identity formation was 'crowned' by their own higher education at Western research universities or socialist academies of science, and demonstrated in

practice by their strong efforts to let their offspring have a similar elite training.

The Progressivist Rhetoric Legacy

As part of domestic political legitimacy needs, rhetoric of equality and equity for the masses has to be kept up. If not successful, the present elite would lose power (cf. the general elections of June 2000). Educational symbols, e.g. strengthening the local languages, and other progressivist tokens are stressed. The progressivist rhetoric is also important to keep up successful donor relations with education progressivist countries, e.g. the Scandinavian countries. The balac (liberalist educated) elite politician or administrator is pushed to speak the progressivist education rhetoric in negotiations with the progressivist donors, for strategic reasons.

The globalization reality

While the two educational philosophical legacies are social realities strongly determining thinking and actions by the elite, there is the third reality, which is the most dramatic and decisive one – the economic. The network society of the information age and the global economy is a brutal reality. A country is either able to be successful and competitively participate internationally or is left in the peripheral 'hinterland' of the new millennium (Castells, 1996). The relevant educational philosophy for this society is not yet very clear. However, it seems to require both effective mass education and the production of human capital of excellence.

At independence, the rights to land opportunities and access to education were to stand as proofs of the Zimbabwean's for social justice and equality, which the majority had been deprived of for almost a century. The 'golden promises' of the last *Chimurenga* (Civil War) 20 years ago are still far away. The first political challenge is to understand and acknowledge the present contradictions of educational principles. Then, follows the attempt to develop an

education model response to globalization, built on the most relevant elements of both education legacies, to produce both elite and mass education competences. Perhaps equity and justice aims have to be catered for every Zimbabwean's equal opportunity of access to a highly differentiated education hierarchy.

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