Zimbabwe's 'Four-Pathway' Schools Proposal for Technical and Vocational Skills Development: Implementation Challenges, Benefits and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The first Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training for Zimbabwe was instituted on 2 January 1998. The Commission reviewed completely Zimbabwe's education system against the background of the demands of the Third Millennium and made several recommendations. One of those recommendations was the establishment of a 'four-pathway' senior school system designed to develop technical and vocational skills among Zimbabwean students that are usable in their future formal employment or informal self-employment. Regrettably, the new educational structure has not yet been fully implemented up to now. This paper makes a modest contribution to the on-going debate about challenges associated with renewed attempts to vocationalize secondary education in Zimbabwe. Through a critical analysis of related documents and interviews with key stakeholders, evidence is marshalled in support of the view that the innovative 'four-pathway' skills empowerment project, unlike Education With Production (EWP) of the 1980s, which failed to take off, is a product of a wide consultative process. Because of its commendably public approach, the innovation seems to enjoy a secure ground-base with the generality of Zimbabweans. However, chief among other factors is an apparent situation that exists in which some recalcitrant technocrats in the relevant ministries are prepared to scuttle what is arguably the best school system ever designed in the post-Independence Zimbabwe right at the shoals of its implementation. For, the proposed curricular change project has far-reaching implications for staffing in the affected ministries. At best, some of the key personnel may be redeployed, at worst retrenched. Hence, the sluggish structural reform of the current Zimbabwe education system. The project has massive potential to increase supply of skilled manpower and participation of Zimbabwean future citizenry in the economic development of the country. Such a noble experiment at curricular diversification, therefore, needs the full support of all Zimbabweans.

Keywords: education system, technical and vocational skills, economic development, vocationalization of education

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwean Government, in its new five- year economic blueprint, "Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation-" contracted to ZIM ASSET, which covers the period from October 2013 to December 2018 called for the full implementation of a 1999 project proposal for developing technical and vocational skills among its high school students. Those educational skills objectives were deemed to be economically beneficial to the nation's young people and, indeed, all Zimbabweans. The proposal was made by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (hereafter referred to as CEIT) that was chaired by Dr Caiphas, T. Nziramasanga, a senior research fellow at the University of Zimbabwe.

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Given the perceived criticality of the aforementioned skills empowerment project, a question of especial importance that begs an answer is: Why has the project not taken off to date? In an attempt to address that question, the checkered history of vocational education in Zimbabwe is examined with a view to assessing the extent to which it has negatively affected the successful implementation of the proposed innovation. Initially, the paper provides a conceptual framework of vocational education and the models related to it, which seem to contest the show. Against that background, a critical analysis of the challenges associated with operationalizing CEIT's scheme for teaching technical and vocational skills in Zimbabwean secondary schools is made. Suggestions for improving chances of realizing the goals of that plan are proffered. In conclusion, the paper explicates the potential benefits of the innovation and the prospects for sustained economic development of the country.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Lauglo and Lillis (1988) define vocationalization of education as curricular change in a practical or vocational direction, which is taken to mean the

> *... inclu[sion] in the curriculum[, of] those "practical" subjects[,] which are likely to generate among students some basic knowledge, skills and dispositions that might prepare them to think of becoming skilled workers or to enter some manual occupations (Bacchus, 1988:189).*

Adding force to the argument, Carr in Blackmore (1990:177) characterizes contemporary vocational education as a decidedly school initiative with …"its attendant jargon of skills, 'practical relevance', 'training' and preparation for 'working life." From the above quotations, one is bound to get the distinct impression that vocationalization of education is, in its entirety, a school-based social intervention programme designed to prepare school leavers for employment either in the formal or informal sectors of the economy. On the contrary, industry, traditionally the main source of employment for youths, is often called upon to help schools in their design of such programmes and in creating opportunities for industrial attachment in the curriculum. Hence, Bacchus' (1988:178) broadened purview of vocationalism:

> *[D]iversification of education, sometimes with the cooperation of industry, by the inclusion of practical subjects into what has hitherto been an essentially academic curriculum, with the specific aim of either orienting learners towards manual work or giving them skills usable in future employment or self-employment.*

Technical education is taken to mean "formal education designed to provide knowledge and skills underlying production processes with a wider connotation than vocational education", which takes place in colleges of further education or universities (Lunga, 2000:1). It is, however, not uncommon to find pupils receiving both technical and vocational education at the secondary level. Education such as this has a dual purpose, "that of preparing the learner for the world of work and that of progressing to tertiary level" Motsi, Edziwa and Chiweshe, 2014). In this paper, technical education is subsumed under vocationalization of secondary education.

Curricular Models of Vocational Education

There appears to be basically two divergent paradigms that have strongly influenced the development of vocational education, especially at the secondary level of instruction in the post-colonial states namely, "Diversification of the Whole, Formal Educational System [and] Parallel Vocationalized Systems" (Lillis, 1984:172-173). In regard to the former, three strands of diversification are identifiable. Firstly, there is a predominantly literary academic

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curriculum with a sprinkling of practical or technical subjects. Educationists who subscribe to that form of vocationalization of secondary education are committed to the loosening of the apparent death-grip of academicism on schools by creating space for non-academic subjects in their curricula. In quest for relevance, educationists of those the post-colonial states have found it imperative to 'decolonize' the academic model of education bequeathed to them by their erstwhile colonial masters.

Secondly, an integrationist approach to diversification of secondary education seeks to blend practical subjects with elements of general academic education. The justification for such a strategy is advanced by those policymakers who argue in the full conviction that the traditional dichotomy of theory and practice is epistemologically vacuous. Knowledge and skills are two sides of the same coin and should, therefore, be treated as mutually inclusive. A third approach to diversifying the whole, formal educational system is the establishment of a multi-track system, "which combine[s] academic with pre-vocational subject tracks under one roof" Psacharopoulos, (1988:259). Last but not least, diversification of the secondary curriculum can be achieved by means of a separate educational system of technical and vocational subjects that parallels the traditional academic programme of study (Sifuna, 1991).

Vocational Education in Pre-Independence Zimbabwe

Driven by the philanthropic impulse, missionaries took the private initiative between 1899 and 1929 to provide primary education to the Africans in the then Southern Rhodesia, now politically independent Zimbabwe. This fact is acknowledged by Mills (undated:160): "In most areas the primary school was almost certainly started by a church or mission, and Rhodesia owes much to churches that saw the need for schooling years before Government began to take part." It was after 1929 that secular power to establish, manage and control African schools was fully exercised. Secondary education was only extended to the Africans at the time of the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Nevertheless, both the Church and State authorities were determined on offering Africans an entirely rudimentary form of education. The former laid heavy emphasis on religious education in order to win souls for Christ (Atkinson, 1972). The latter attached particular importance to the development of elementary industrial skills among the Africans. Literary academic education was out of the question because it was unthinkable, then, to expect Africans with such qualifications to compete with Europeans for the administrative and managerial positions in the settler capitalist economy. It is little wonder, then, why those who were commissioned to lead investigations into education in Rhodesia persistently recommended the teaching of simple manual occupational skills in the African schools as opposed to technical skills and theoretical knowledge, which were regarded as vital elements of the curriculum in the European schools. The reports of Frank Tate (1929), B. Fox (1935), Alexander Kerr (1952), A, V. Judges (1962) and Lewis Taylor (1974) in Atkinson (1972) testify to the above.

The constraints of space do not permit a full examination of the provisions of the above-mentioned reports. However, the prodigious impact of the findings of the Judges Commission Report of 1962 on the development of African education in Rhodesia should suffice to prove the point. According to Madondo, Museka and Phiri (2014:66):

> *The 1966 Education Plan, which represented the Rhodesian Front's (RF) interpretation of and envisaged implementation of the recommendations of the 1962 Judges Commission, was a significant landmark in the history of colonial educational provision. The 1966 Plan ushered in the F [(I)-senior secondary schools and F (2)-junior secondary schools] ... in the then African Education sector. This served to exacerbate the differences in the provision and structure of education between the African majority and the minority European, Asians and Coloured communities. For the European sector*

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recognition was made on the need to provide [state-of-the-art] academic and tec-voc education.

The F(1) and F(2) schools offered academic and technical education respectively. The curriculum of the latter was, however, a watered-down version of that, which was offered in the European schools. The diagram below illustrates graphically, the education system that was born out of the Judges Commission's Report of 1962.

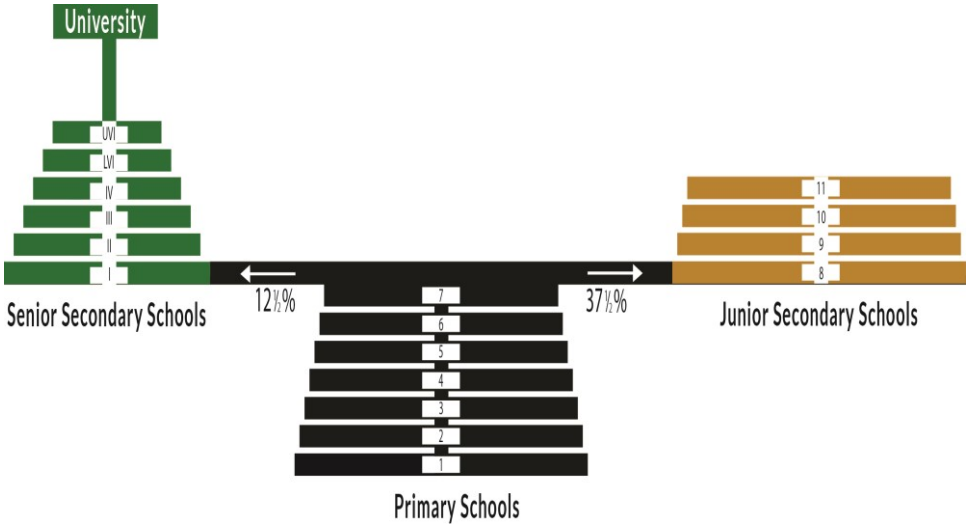

Figure 1. Structure of the African School System in Rhodesia
Source: Mills (undated) The Environment of Rhodesian People, p. 161

As can be clearly seen from the diagram, the Rhodesian African education system provided for seven years (Grade 1 to 7) of primary education and junior and senior secondary education of a total duration of four years (Grade 8 to 11) and six years (Form I to VI) respectively. In "Grade 7, pupils [were] streamed by a system of educational testing, which inclu[ded] subject examination plus tests of intelligence and aptitudes for further study" (Ibid). A paltry 12.5% of the successful Grade 7 pupils were allowed to enrol for a full-blooded academic course of study in the senior secondary school. A further 37.5% were earmarked for eventually joining the junior secondary school. Those pupils who qualified for junior secondary schooling were allowed to do six academic subjects. In addition, each pupil was required to do two practical subjects from the following list: (For boys) Woodwork, Metalwork, Building and Agriculture and (for the girls) Agriculture, Needlework and Housecraft. The latter included laundry, hygiene, vegetable gardening and the raising of small stock. The F (2) pupils were thought to be of marginal intelligence. Hence, the limited academic offerings, which were augmented by practical subjects.

As regards the remaining 50% of Grade 7 graduates who did not qualify for either the F (1) or F (2) system,

> *...those will be the unskilled workers of the future, just like they would in Birmingham, Chicago, Nairobi, Gwelo [-what used to be the corrupt name for the city of Gweru in Zimbabwe]. Seven years of primary school will have done all that Rhodesia can do for these folk. They take their proper place in society; be it rural or urban, industrialized or ranching county. There is no racialism or colour in this, just plain economics and the age of relationship of capital and labour (Rose in Madondo, Museka and Phiri 2014:67).*

On the whole, "the F2 system prepared the school leaver for a life of frustration, immobility and unemployment", which seems to be the main reason why it was very unpopular with the Blacks in pre-Independence Zimbabwe (Madondo, Museka and Phiri, 2014:67).

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Vocational Education in the Post-Independence Zimbabwe

When Zimbabweans attained political Independence from Britain on 18th April 1980, they had a quiver of anticipation. The long-awaited changes to the inherited educational system promised to improve qualitatively, the future lives of the new nation's young people. Accordingly, the Zimbabwe Government directed its reform efforts at the mass improvement of educational access and equity, together with bringing the content, methods and assessment of education in line with the existing local conditions, the postulate of political Independence and the imperatives of balanced economic development.

However, to most Zimbabweans relevant education for their children seemed to be academic education, which they had been denied by the colonial settlers. The floodgates to that education were opened with the result that the number of students who accessed primary, secondary and tertiary education raised to unprecedented levels. Against the background of shrinking economic performance and 'massification' of formal schooling, Zimbabwe soon witnessed staggering levels of youth unemployment (Maravanyika (1989). Policymakers were quick to point out that "the problem [was]… a result of inappropriate, predominantly academic, conventional schooling, which is geared towards producing employees for the limited number of jobs in the formal sector and ill-prepares them for the challenges of joblessness" (Mandebvu, 1990:4). Vocationalization of education was thus found to be a panacea for the problem of youth unemployment. For this reason, Education with Production (EWP) was introduced in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, no sooner had EWP settled in the secondary curriculum than it met stiff resistance. Apparently, EWP was not accepted by parents, teachers, pupils and the Zimbabweans in general because it ignored the collaborative, decentralized curriculum development strategy, which allows room for new educational programmes to be sold to the user system. Rather, the innovation was hurriedly imposed by Government on the people who understandably construed it as the resuscitation of F2 schools under another disguise. The cost of running the programme also proved prohibitive. In the last analysis, the desired results of EWP were never fully realized and the programme soon petered out. Could the same reasons, which led to the collapse of EWP be responsible, as alleged by Madondo, Museka and Phiri (2014), for the lack of progress regarding the full implementation of CEIT's 'Four-Pathway' plan for vocational and technical skills development in Zimbabwe?

After judicious consideration of the current system of education and in line with the 21st century educational vision of Zimbabweans, CEIT recommended a radical restructuring of Zimbabwe's education system with provision for learning tracks along which students would receive academic, business/commercial, technical and vocational instruction. The growing awareness of the irrelevance of a purely academic education justified the new project proposal. It was hoped that a skill-driven education would enable young Zimbabweans not only to be relevant on the job market but to create their own employment in the future. The proposed education structure is shown in Figure 2.

The specific provisions for vocational and technical skills development at secondary level in the proposed Zimbabwe education system may be summarized thus:

I. Initial development of all- round basic skills encompassing manipulative, computer, maths, civic, science, social, and language skills among Grade 1 to 9 pupils. Assessment at this basic education level will involve guidance and counselling, mini projects and tests (Nziramasanga, 2014);

II. Establishment of General (academic), business/commercial, technical, and vocational tracks for Senior School 1 students. "At the end of the Senior School I

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(year 11) pupils sit the first public examination , the General Certificate of Education, which may be categorised as GCE (General, Technical/ Vocational or Commercial" CEIT, 1999:25); and

III. In the Senior School 2, the General track students will take three 'A' Level academic subjects in preparation for tertiary education while those in the skill-tracks study for National Diploma Certificates (NDC) in their areas of specialization, "which will be considered the equivalents of A- level for University entry" (CEIT:1999:258).

Those "students who may not want to proceed beyond Senior School II may opt not only for employment but also for self-employment" CEIT, 1999:250).

Figure 2. Proposed New Educational Structure for Zimbabwe
Source: CEIT (1999) *Final Report,* p. 248

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The full report of CEIT, which had well over 239 recommendations, was officially presented to His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe in August, 1999. After it had been fine-tuned in order to accommodate the tastes of the major stakeholders, the report was finally adopted by both Cabinet and Parliament and was set for implementation in the year 2000. However, the fact that the proposed new education structure is not yet in place almost

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one and a half decades after the Zimbabwean Government nodded in approval of its implementation, speaks volumes for resistance to change on the part of those tasked with the responsibility of running the education ministries.

In a separate interview with one of the commissioners, there emerged the problems associated with implementing fully the recommendations of CEIT. Chief among them is institutional lethargy. The responsible ministries, most particularly the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education formerly, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Art and Culture (MoESAC) appears to be giving only lukewarm support to the cause of reforming the Zimbabwe education system. The ministry abounds with documentary evidence in support of the above. For example, the ministry attempted to disseminate the proposed new education structure to schools and selected stakeholders through mere circulars and workshops. The former included Secretary's Circular Minute No. 2 of January 2001, Secretary's Circular No. 14 of 2004, Secretary Circular (unnumbered) of January 2006 and Secretary Circular No. 77 of May 2006. The latter were three workshops held in Kadoma, Bulawayo and Masvingo in 2005. The MoESAC, in conjunction with the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education initially rejected a suggestion, in the CEIT report that an Independent Implementation Council be set up in order to effect the recommended changes. Instead, the two ministries established what appeared to be an interested Implementation Task Force (ITF) "consist[ing only] of officials from the two ministries, and two specialist representatives from the University of Zimbabwe, namely, an ECD expert and a Language expert", which held the aforesaid workshops (Nziramasanga, 2014:5). Unfortunately, the workshops failed to come up with a National Implementation Policy Document (Ibid).

It would appear that some technocrats in the two ministries of education were prepared to scuttle Zimbabwe's education reform project right from the beginning. According to Nziramasanga (2014:2) "[t]he [then] Ministers [of Higher and Tertiary Education and Education, Sports Art and Culture did not accept] the merging of the two Ministries into one…-obvious." It can, therefore, be argued that personal interests of some of the policymakers in the concerned ministries seem to account for the half-hearted attempts at implementing CEIT's recommendations. Hence, the slow pace of educational change in Zimbabwe. It is against this background that a call has been made recently by Government to fire inept Cabinet ministers.

The main contention by Madondo, Museka and Phiri (2014) that the proposed "Four-Pathway" project is reminiscential of the colonial F (1)-F (2) and the postcolonial EWP schemes seems unfounded. The same is true of their argument that employers are unwilling to accommodate students on industrial attachment. On the contrary, the vocational and technical skills empowerment curriculum project is an embodiment of the expressive views of the major stakeholders in Zimbabwe, which CEIT captured in their research interviews. The stakeholders included captains of industry and commerce, teachers, parents, community leaders and high school students themselves. The innovation, therefore, appears to enjoy the support of many Zimbabweans.

The cost of implementing the vocational and technical skills project does not also appear to be an issue because no reference to such a matter has, so far been made by Government since the time it instructed the implementation of the proposed project in the year 2000. In fact, the Zimbabwean Herald of 6 September 2014 carried a story in which Government indicated that it laid plans to construct 2000 additional schools in the next five years. This suggests that financial resources are available for the implementation of the new education system. Against the welter of evidence, it would seem, therefore, that Zimbabwe's attempt to radically change her education system in the direction of vocational and technical skills development is being

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hampered by politics of education rather than the alleged negative attitudes towards the programme by Zimbabweans.

Fafunwa's advice in Olu (1996:17) that people "must be willing to experiment and not be afraid of failure if [their] country is to become self-reliant, self-assertive and self-confident" is a befitting concluding remark to this paper. The prospects for a successful, technologically-driven Zimbabwe are bright. The country urgently needs a national implementation policy to guide the operationalization and institutionalization of its innovative vocational and technical skill-based curriculum project. The country appears to be very good at developing new ideas but weak in implementing them. It has, in fact, become a seed-bed of brilliant ideas, which are transplanted elsewhere. For, it has recently emerged that some Southern African regional countries have successfully implemented aspects of the recommendations of CEIT.

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