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# **An Anatomy of Curriculum Innovation Failure: The Case of Political Economy in Zimbabwean Secondary School Sector**

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## **Abstract**

*The magnitude of educational reforms and change in the first decade of independence in Zimbabwe is legendary and more or less unparalleled in the history of educational provision in post-colonial Africa. By the late 1980s, it was increasingly realised that for the then guiding educational philosophy of education with production to take root, it was necessary to undergird it with the subject of political economy (PE). It was envisaged that the subject would provide an epistemological understanding of socialism among secondary pupils who would consequently champion a socialist transformation as future citizens and leaders. The attempt to introduce political economy ranks as one of the most outstanding curriculum innovation failures in Zimbabwe. This study, through documentary analysis, informant interviews of some protagonists of the innovation and erstwhile school pupils who encountered the curriculum in schools, proffers that the introduction of political economy failed mostly because it was a top down process of change which was not predicated on a supportive constituency of the various educational stakeholders. The study recommends that planned curriculum change and innovation should always be informed by the values, goals and expectations of the various stakeholders it seeks to serve.*

## **Introduction**

The prime purpose of this paper is to analyse the unsuccessful attempt to introduce political economy (PE) in the Zimbabwean curriculum in the late

1980s. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the following: the reasons for the innovation, the change strategy adopted and the possible reasons for failure. The study utilises documentary analysis and informant interviews to build a nuanced account of the advent, short life span and ignoble demise of the PE interlude in the Zimbabwe education system. The paper posits that PE failed partly because it did not have adequate constituency building and also because it was the occasion that brought to the fore the inherent contradictions within the Zimbabwean curriculum and society. The paper highlights the significance of this abortive innovatory moment in the Zimbabwean curriculum history as the defeat of emergent national curricular forms and the continued dominance of erstwhile colonial forms. The research draws the conclusion that in harnessing the support and contribution of stakeholders the curriculum change agent insures the innovation against the risk of superficial implementation or outright rejection.

### **Contextualising the study: Elements of successful curriculum change and innovation**

For the purposes of this paper, planned curriculum change and innovation is taken as a deliberate and collaborative process that brings together a change agent or initiator of change and the client system who are stake-holding audiences like parents, teachers, pupils and education providers among many others (Bennis in Harris et al., 1978). Bennis (ibid) argues that by coming together the change agent and client system should be able to solve the perceived 'problem', to plan, to attain a higher functioning and to apply valid knowledge. Adam and Cohen (cited in Bishop, 1986) enumerate elements which they claim should be considered from the conceptualisation to the institutionalisation of successful planned curriculum change. These elements, which operate in combination and are intertwined, include the personnel, the

task, the method, equipment, plant, the cost, social contexts, time, scheduling, the rationale and the effects of the innovation. These elements can be subsumed and recast as the need for constituency building and the provision of both human and material resources. Of particular relevance to this study is the concept of constituency building. The process of constituency building entails enlisting client support and advocacy for the envisaged curriculum change and innovation. In this regard, it is necessary for the proponents of curriculum change, be they school-based teachers or outside agents like some government body, "...to seek the support of individual groups without who the proposed change will not occur" (Sarason 1993, p. 293). Sarason (ibid) goes further to argue that, "... the power to propose or legislate change does not obviate the need to develop constituencies [...] as they are capable of understanding and contributing to the substance and process of change".

### **Background and rationale for political economy**

The need to have education play a major role in the construction of a desired future is common to many societies irrespective of their ideological persuasion. For states pursuing a socialist path, as Zimbabwe was in the 1980s, education was seen as a critical, if not the principal, force in reconstructing society. Among the many statements highlighting the envisaged central role of education in socialist transformation were the following:

.. to change Zimbabwe we must first change the education system  
(Mugabe, 1981, p. 9)

The curriculum in our education system should be seen as a vehicle towards the establishment of a socialist society (Mutumbuka cited in Maravanyika (1986, p. 30).

In this context, the espoused curricular goals enabling education to fulfil its transformative role were to:

- 1) develop a socialist consciousness among students;
- 2) eliminate the distinction between manual and mental labour;
- 3) adopt subject matter content to the Zimbabwe cultural context;
- 4) foster cooperative learning and productive development strategies as part of the school curriculum; and
- 5) increase opportunities for productive employment (Jansen, 1991, p. 79)

In the period from 1980 to 1985, several educational changes were implemented in an effort to translate these policy goals into practice. These changes included efforts by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) at adopting subject matter content to Zimbabwean cultural and socialist contexts, increase in access and participation, and construction of pilot socialist education with production through the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (EWP-ZIMFEP) schools.

It is the contention here that by 1985 these changes had largely made little impact in developing socialist consciousness among students and society at large. The changes had failed to place education in a position to spearhead a socialist transformation. The CDU-inspired changes to the syllabus content were mere modifications to remove obvious distortions of the colonial past. In most cases it amounted to inserting socialist goals to content where white heroes had been replaced by black heroes (Lillis cited in Jansen, 1989). The psychological and epistemological assumptions which had governed the colonial curriculum remained. In particular, the examination system was still foreign controlled and elitist in purpose. This naturally circumscribed the socialist outlook of the curriculum. As noted earlier on, the attempt to introduce

a socialist variant of education was through EWP. In theory this was meant to articulate all educational goals of the new state. However, by 1985 EWP was showing little promise. This was because of the more "... entrenched capitalist [educational] infrastructure bequeathed by the colonial administration ... (leading to a situation where) ... The majority of blacks appear to be more interested in the kind of education they had been denied than on something new and unfamiliar," (Maravanyika, 1986, p. 30).

In decrying the apparent half-hearted attempts to change the content and organisation of the curriculum by 1985, it should be remembered that the government was paying attention to efforts of expanding access and participation. This was a more urgent political need than having education usher in socialism. By 1985 the government was talking about the need to introduce PE. The commitment to PE should be seen as a logical outgrowth of the pursuance of the ideology of scientific socialism. The timing was out of a growing realisation that attempts at changing content while the examinations system was intact and the increased access and participation did little to advance the role curriculum was to play in bringing about socialist transformation. Given that PE was seen as key in unlocking the transformative potential of education, it is needful to unpack what this envisaged curriculum taskmaster entailed.

No one definition can capture the breadth and meaning of PE. However, in the context of Zimbabwe the following convey how it was conceptualised:

Political Economy explains how people make their living, it deals with the relations between human beings in the process of production and exchange (CDU paper: *What is political economy?* 1986, p.1)

In the process of studying political economy the pupils will acquire a

better understanding of the development of human society and of the world. They will be better equipped to tackle the political, economic and social problems facing Zimbabwe using dialectical and materialist tools of analysis (Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) Political Economy Syllabus 1988, p. 1).

Thus, PE was the school subject meant to articulate the concerns of scientific socialism (Marxism-Leninism). It was seen as a way of developing socialist consciousness among students and thereby be the epistemological basis for curriculum change. The need to transform the colonial curriculum and have education bring about socialism had always been subsumed in scientific socialism. PE was seen as the means to effect curriculum reconstruction and in its wake socialist reconstruction. Chisaka (1999, p. 24) stresses this political-civic educational role of PE since it aimed "... to create an environment whereby the masses and peasants would develop the national consciousness, the self-identity and the self-esteem necessary [...] to take independent initiatives from outside forces ...". PE was viewed as the philosophical underpinning necessary for the success of EWP in the curriculum and scientific socialism in society. Thus, the contextual forces leading to PE were that it was from outside the education system but specifically from the political system to the exclusion of other societal curriculum stakeholders.

### **The change strategy of political economy**

Bishop (1986, p. 15) describes a curriculum change strategy as "... all the available procedures and techniques used by individuals and groups at different levels of the educational system to attain desired objectives." Theoretical models have been proffered as frameworks for analysing the strategies of change (Bennis, Benne & Chin, 1969; Schon, 1971; Havelock, 1971; & House, 1979, 1981). The power-coercive strategy proffered by Bennis et al. (1969)



approximates the strategy used in developing and implementing PE. This strategy entails the conceptualisation and development of curriculum change from the top and its subsequent implementation in the system where other lower level stakeholders are expected to support fully such implementation.

### **Syllabus and materials development**

The introduction of PE became a stated government policy in 1985 (Chung, 1987). The government was the initiator of the change. The Ministry of Education, through the CDU, which was under the directorship of Fay Chung became the *de facto* change agent. In the Zimbabwean context the CDU, which currently falls under the Curriculum Development and Technical Services (CDTS), represents a lower level of policy elaboration but in reality is the driving force behind any innovation. The role of government officials, including that of Fay Chung in the PE innovation, can best be highlighted thus:

... bureaucrats monopolize output, and the extent to which a general policy is carried out is dependent upon the interpretation bureaucrats give to it. Thus the political executive may only be viewed as initiators of policy which is enforced by bureaucracies as energizers and catalysts (Almond & Powell in Hungwe, 1994, pp. 93 -94).

From 1985 to 1987 a PE national panel comprising of educationists, teachers, and lecturers from university and teachers' college, through a series of regional and national panel meetings, developed PE syllabuses and materials. ZIMFEP schools were used for research. By incorporating various educationists and by consulting and researching, the CDU thrived to produce a research-based user friendly curriculum. Be that as it may, the power-coercive basis of the innovation remained. As Jansen (1991, p. 86) puts it, the participants in the syllabus and materials development process saw their task as "... interpreting

and implementing state policy through the medium of the curriculum."

By early 1987 the final draft of the ZJC PE syllabus was produced as announced by the Annual Report of the Secretary of Education that year. The first examinations were set for 1990. In terms of content there were 12 themes in the syllabus. These were: introduction to political economy, labour and production as the basis of social life, the development of human society, property relations, social formation, classes and class struggle, the state, socialism, and Zimbabwe history in relation to pre-colonial modes of production, imperialism and colonialism, the struggle for national liberation and the post-colonial struggle for socialism (ZJC Political Economy Syllabus 1987, pp. 3-6).

### ***Dissemination and adoption***

In order to place the new syllabus in schools a typical 'top down'; 'here it is, use it' approach epitomising the power-coercive strategy, was used. Through an unnumbered Chief Education

Officer Circular dated 1st September 1987; Fay Chung informed all school heads of the impending (1 January 1988) compulsory introduction of ZJC PE. No other information to explain the rationale of the new subject was included. Further, the in-servicing of teachers, the syllabus and teaching-learning materials development were said to be at an advanced stage of preparation.

This change was to be brought about through the "...compliance of those with less power to the plans, directions and leadership of those with greater power" (Bennis et al. in Blenkin et. al., 1992, p. 38). Apart from the use of power and directives, there was an apparent hurriedness discernible in the coercion and compliance approach. An unnumbered circular, which normally would be sent by the Permanent Secretary of Education, coupled with the implied incomplete preparation of the syllabus, materials and teachers four months before

implementation bespeaks of haste. The reasons for such haste are open to question.

The method which was used to in-service teachers of the subject was through regional workshops attended by a selected teacher from each school. This trickle down or cascade model was bound to have problems given that the chosen teachers, at most, attended only two workshops. Such teachers were bound to gain very little from a second generation of trainers of trainers. It was doubtful if they could meaningfully teach let alone mount school-based workshops to win the support and advocacy of other teachers for the innovation. In the words of a key informant who was a Form 2 pupil at the time,

*“... (w)e were taught PE by a teacher who normally taught English. We were made to cram difficult words like bourgeoisie. We prepared for the exam only to be told PE was no longer offered”.*

In using the power-coercive strategy the change agent ignored or at best simplified the processes within the school which work against change. In defence of the power-coercive approach adopted in the PE innovation, it may be argued that any process of change is complex and bound to have weaknesses. However, the real test of any innovation is in its implementation.

### **The negative backlash at implementation**

In the words of Jansen (1991, p. 86), "the community reception of political economy was nothing short of disastrous." Lively debate in the media on the appropriateness of the new subject ensued following its introduction. The proponents of the new subject were mostly Ministry Officials, while the outstanding opponent was the Roman Catholic Church (Jansen, 1991). The church saw PE as essentially anti-God and insisted "on the right of parents to provide their children with a Christian education" (Father Oskar Wermter cited

in Jansen 1991, p. 87). The government viewed socialism as the means to ensure equality, equitable land distribution, equitable access to health, education and wages, and national reconciliation. The proponents of PE accused churches of mystifying reality since socialism was science. Fay Chung accused the church of "reverting to the middle ages ... when it opposed the progressive march of political and scientific knowledge as 'anti-God'" (Chung cited in Jansen 1991, p. 87).

In the education system the adoption and implementation of the innovation was varied. Interview data confirms that in most council schools, rural day schools, government schools and teachers' colleges the subject was timetabled and taught. However, prominent mission schools and elitist schools were unanimous in their rejection of the compulsory subject, (Jansen, 1991). Some leading publishers who had taken the task of developing and producing the material prevaricated thereby creating a further obstacle to implementation. It may have been that publishers were only being economically prudent in the light of the uncertainty and controversy surrounding the subject. In May 1989, the government reportedly withdrew PE so as "to consider how (it) can be taught in schools so that it will be acceptable to mission sponsored **schools** ... " (*The Sunday Mail*, 1989, May 28, p. 8).

The debate surrounding the placement of PE and its eventual withdrawal reveals the potentially divisive nature and weakness of the power-coercive strategy and the *de facto* power of other stakeholders even where centralised curriculum planning dominates. Writing on the divisive nature of the power-coercive strategy, Bishop (1986, p.1) observes that it has "the propensity to stir up a divine discontent". For PE it was 'divine' indeed; with the church taking a leading role. The resistance of the Catholic Church may also have been partly

due to the fact that it had supported the armed struggle culminating in Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. The power-coercive strategy thus brought division between the erstwhile partners in the liberation war over the meaning, content and modalities of implementing socialism. The ensuing debate after implementation underscores a weakness of the power-coercive approach in that it could have been informed by this debate during curriculum planning and development and not at implementation. The reaction of the change agent, notably Fay Chung, to the opposition against PE reveals a weakness of the whole power-coercive approach. Marris (1974, p. 55) highlights this weakness thus:

When those who have power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance and prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own.

The final withdrawal can be said to have been spearheaded by the Catholic Church and other churches with, ostensibly, parental support. However, the varied implementation in which council, semi-government and government institutions had taken up the subject tells another story. While it may be true that these schools together with the ordinary people did not resist perhaps out fear and ignorance it is also true that they had little to lose either way. An honesty scrutiny of the ZJC PE syllabus reveals no new topic that was not covered by the existing history syllabus. The opposition to PE can be seen as the ability of the wealthier members of society to extract concessions from the state while the poor remain relatively quiet on educational issues (Hungwe, 1994). Put differently, there exists, even in a centralised curriculum planning set up, *de-facto* determinants of the curriculum that control the direction of curriculum change in their favour. The observation by Blenkin et al. (1992, p. 38) bears this out thus:

Those who wish to bring about change, amass political ... power behind their change goals. And those who oppose the goals ... utilise power in the same way to prevent change.

In a way, the coercive-power strategy can only be effective if the change agent enjoys absolute power and control over schools. In Zimbabwe direct government control covered only 7% of all schools (Ministry of Education, 1997).

### **The reasons for failure of political economy**

in seeking to explain the collapse of PE one invariably seeks to explicate the reasons for curriculum continuity. Curriculum continuity is taken to mean the relative stability in colonial curriculum content during the post-colonial period (Jansen, 1991). It can be argued that the failure to institute fundamental curriculum change through PE is the reverse side of the same historical coin explaining the durability of colonial forms, content and organisation of the curriculum.

The collapse of PE can be looked at from two perspectives namely; the technical and the political. The technical perspective highlights factors such as effectiveness, packaging, presentation and delivery of the innovation strategy. With regards to PE it can be argued that the syllabus was the product of an inadequate curriculum process (Jansen, 1991). The reasons for this argument are: the apparently hurried nature, the lack of consultation, insufficient development of concepts and a too theoretical level of abstraction inappropriate for ZJC students. While these weaknesses were evident and perhaps inevitable, given the top-down nature of the innovation, the leading antagonists of the change did not highlight them.

The same can be said about the argument that the conflict was blown out of proportion. The government, with the major daily newspapers under its control could also have been in a position to defend its position. Fay Chung (1990) blamed the collapse on Stalinist panellists who pushed in an old unrevised syllabus because of their doctrinaire interests. This explanation is contradictory in that Chung as the final approving authority could not have let through such a faulty document. Thus, while the technical perspective has some truth in explaining the failure of PE it needs to be buttressed by the political perspective.

The political perspective posits that curriculum reconstruction is not concerned with the curriculum *per se* but with the contextual forces determining its form (Samoff, 1991; Jansen, 1991). Put differently, the curriculum is the site of conflict and contestation (Kogan, 1978). It can be argued then, that the PE innovation brought into conflict the social forces favouring the maintenance of the *status quo* and those seeking radical change. PE embodied contestation over values, norms, objectives, interests and priorities of the state and other powerful groups in society, notably the church. By backing down the state acknowledged, perhaps without saying so explicitly, the role of other stakeholders in determining curriculum patterns.

To explain the retreat of the state from pushing on with the innovation a number of reasons can be advanced in addition to the above. By the end of 1980s the eminent collapse of the Soviet bloc, the growing hostility to "socialist" regimes, the drying out of donor funds, the emergent international clamour for political pluralism and economic liberalism, can all be seen as contributing to the retreat. There is also a sense in which the ruling party, ZANU PF, became more pre-occupied with legitimising its control by failing to act. Corruption scandals, such as that of the 'Willowgate' fame, seemed to have forced the government to

paying lip-service to scientific socialism. However, in addition to this, the Government could have genuinely given in to concerns of the stakeholders.

### **Implications of the collapse of the PE innovation**

Many authors have argued that successful curriculum reconstruction is contingent on broad societal transformation (Jansen, 1991; Gwarinda, 1985; Thompson, 1977; Madondo & Phiri 2014; Namasasu, 2013). The proponents of scientific socialism argued that PE would help in transforming the curriculum and hence society. The collapse of this radical curriculum innovation left many vestiges of the colonial curriculum intact. However, it is a matter of conjecture whether curriculum change would be successful if society is restructured first. In its collapse PE can be said to have democratised and politicised the curriculum process by underscoring the need for groups to assert claims and have them reconciled with claims of others. It can be argued that the collapse of PE put paid the hope of creating a socialist state through the aid of curriculum reconstruction. In the 1990s the debate shifted from the call for socialist education to one of increasing efficiency, improving quality and raising standards as defined by advocates of neo-liberalism.

### **Conclusion**

To fold this study, a number of issues need highlighting. The introduction of PE was politically inspired. By aiming at fundamentally reconstructing the colonial knowledge base of the curriculum, it is hard to see how else PE could have been introduced without recourse to the power-coercive strategy. The weaknesses of this strategy were evident and have been highlighted. However, it has been contended that the weaknesses of the power-coercive strategy, by themselves, cannot explain the failure of PE. PE was the occasion for crystallizing the inherent tensions and contradictions within the Zimbabwean curriculum and society. That it failed may be seen as a decisive moment in Zimbabwe



curriculum history for unimpeded curriculum continuity with its neo-colonial and pro-Western educational legacies. It is instructive to note on-going efforts, initiated in late 2014, aimed at reviewing the curriculum and perhaps implementing some of the recommendations of the 1999 Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (CIET) may meet with success as they are building on wide stakeholder consultations (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education - MoPSE, 2014; Mavhunga, 2014).

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