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THE GLOOMY OUTLOOK OF PRACTICAL SUBJECTS IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE OF HISTORY PERPETUATED?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the attitudes of the Zimbabwean society towards practical subjects in schools. The argument is that negative attitudes towards practical subjects can contribute to the demise of the subjects in schools. The history of practical subjects in Zimbabwe lays the foundation of the argument and answer if the colonial mindset is still imbedded within certain sections of our society. A critical analysis of derogatory language used, treatment of practical subjects in schools and colleges and the current recruitment practices by employers was undertaken. The article concludes by making recommendations on how the mindset of society can be changed in a positive way and how practical subjects can be sustained in the Zimbabwean curriculum.

Keywords: Practical subjects, Attitudes, Society, Zimbabwe curriculum, F2 schools, The history of Zimbabwe education

INTRODUCTION

Wanyama (n.d) defines practical subjects as subjects where a student uses both the hands and the brain to acquire life long skills. In Zimbabwe, formal practical subjects date back to the colonial period when they were introduced in the former F2 secondary school system. Pupils were taught Carpentry, Metalwork, Building, Domestic Science and Agriculture, to prepare them for employment as domestic servants for the colonisers and as low skilled workers in industries (Kanyongo, 2005). Although the F2 school system has since been replaced by the 1979 Education

Act which saw the secondary school curriculum dominated by academic subjects, practical subjects are still taught in schools. Building, Metalwork and Agriculture have retained their titles. Carpentry is now referred to as Woodwork while Needlework and Cookery are Fashion and Fabrics and Food and Nutrition respectively. However observations are that, practical subjects have been stigmatised by society and thus perpetuating the colonisers' negative attitude towards the subjects. The thrust of this paper is to explore ways in which practical subjects are denigrated by some sections of society. These denigrations come through utterances from society, the job market demands and administrative processes in schools and colleges. The position of this paper is that, the attitudes of society are detrimental to the survival of the practical subjects since they are based on wrong assumptions about the objectives of the subjects.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Zimbabwe's education system consists of 7 years of primary and 6 years of secondary schooling before students can enter university. The seven years of primary schooling culminate in a national Grade 7 examination in Mathematics, English, Content and an indigenous language (ChiShona /IsiNdebele/Tonga/Nambya). The Content paper is a combination of pure and social sciences. Practical subjects, such as Home Economics and Agriculture are examined in the content paper. Thus practical subjects in Zimbabwe, begin at grass roots level in primary schools.

Secondary school education consists of three levels: Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) which includes Forms I and II; 'O' level (Forms III and IV) and 'A' level (Forms V and VI). The ZJC core curriculum consists of 8 subjects: English, ChiShona/IsiNdebele, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Bible Knowledge, and a Practical Subject (Food and Nutrition, Fashion and Fabrics, Woodwork, Agriculture, Metalwork, Building and Technical Graphics). Fashion and Fabrics is taught as Textile Science and Clothing while Food and Nutrition is Food Science at 'A' level. Agriculture and Technical Graphics are other practical subjects offered at 'A' level.

The Ministry of Education, Sport, Art and Culture prescribed a set secondary curriculum referred to as the 'Two pathway education culture' (Circular, 2006). According to this instruction, the two pathways are referred to as the general/academic and the business/commercial/technology/technical vocational (Bergmann, 2003).

Bergmann (2003) observed that, ever since the formal western type of education was introduced in developing countries, there have been complaints that the education system was too academic and did not prepare children for the life they were going to lead after school. On the contrary, Zimbabwe has an emphasis on practical subjects in its curriculum in both primary and secondary schools. However, experience has shown that practical subjects are rejected within various sectors of society. The problem of preference by students and parents for a traditional academic education

over the more practical and vocational curriculum, was also observed by [Maravanyika \(2011\)](#). It is against this backdrop that, if practical subjects feature so strongly in the Zimbabwe curriculum, why then the ingrained negative attitudes from some sections of society in Zimbabwe.

A brief account of the history of practical subjects in Zimbabwe will help in understanding where practical subjects came from and the attitudes then. The question then is, 'Is the gloominess of practical subjects a case of history perpetuated today?'

THE HISTORY OF PRACTICAL SUBJECTS IN ZIMBABWE

Before the arrival of the white settlers, technical education was offered in all communities and it was not the responsibility of specialists called teachers, but rather of every adult. According to [Nyerere \(1967\)](#) and [Peresu and Nhundu \(1999\)](#) the technical education system which was offered during the pre-colonial era was free from stiff timetabling, which is common in modern education. Technical education was passed freely through play and work. The young received their educational training from elders who taught relevant skills which enabled them to exploit the resources of nature. Skills were learnt through observing and imitating the processes until the exact duplicates could be produced. Training was done along gender lines, with fathers passing on their skills to boys and mothers to girls. Practical training was in the form of hunting, carving, house construction, blacksmithing and live-stock rearing for boys while domestic work, weaving and pottery were for girls. Such was the traditional technical education in the whole of pre-colonial Africa, an education which was impressive in terms of social cohesiveness, transmission of indigenous knowledge and skills, hence creating a lasting history and identity.

In the colonial period, secondary school education in Zimbabwe was reorganised into F1 and F2 school systems. F1 was meant for a few academically gifted children and F2 was purely a practical biased system for the majority who were declared unsuitable for the F1 system. [Bergmann \(2003\)](#) says that all colonial administrations and mission schools included practical subjects very early mostly through gardening and farming activities. He further states that, in many colonies in Africa, the curriculum contained Agriculture/Gardening for boys and girls, Art and Craft for boys, and Domestic Science for girls. According to [Zvogbo \(1994\)](#) the racists' philosophy behind technical education stigmatised practical subjects attracting public resentment. [Mungazi \(1990\)](#) notes that, whereas practical subjects were offered to blacks, whites did not learn practical subjects in the same manner as blacks. He further laments that practical subjects for blacks were rudimentary while that for whites had a strong scientific foundation. This rudimentary industrial education aroused suspicion, fear and resentment among Africans leading to the rejection of the mode of education that had been designed for them by the white settlers. After attaining political independence most Francophone colonies abandoned this form of education, whereas the former Anglophone colonies tried to reform it.

ATTITUDINAL FACTORS ON PRACTICAL SUBJECTS

Language and Utterances

The use of certain specific terms has an impact on the acceptance of practical subjects by society. Cavell first established this distinct philosophical identity with a collection of essays, entitled *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Munday, 2009). His work addresses topics such as language use, metaphor, skepticism, tragedy, and literary interpretation, from the point of view of ordinary language philosophy. Language usage and meaning may be relative to context, positive or negative depending on the hearer. Allen and Perrault (1980) suggest that, utterances are executed in order to have an effect on the hearer.

Language used about practical subjects, from experience, carries some elements of negative connotation. There is sarcasm in the language used, for instance, when parents go for consultation on their children's performance in schools, practical subjects are not given the same recognition as academic subjects by the parents. Their attention will be mainly focused on academic subjects. When most parents realise that their children performed well in practical subjects compared to academic subjects, they say that their children are 'wasting time' on 'useless subjects' instead of concentrating on academic subjects which are 'more important'. On the other hand, if the children fail the practical subjects, parents question why the children failed just to 'cook' and 'sew'. You hear utterances such as '*kutadza kubika nekusona chete!*' (ChiShona) 'Failing just to cook and sew!' (English). This is in reference to the Home Economics subjects, Food and Nutrition and Fashion and Fabrics respectively. The assumptions from the parents are that when children do Home Economics they just go there to cook and sew just like they do at home with no scientific theoretical aspects to it. This could be the reason why society considers practical subjects inferior in status. From this view one can argue that although parents try to provide quality education to their children they prefer academic subjects. It is only logical that, what pupils learn during the years spent in school has a direct bearing on their lives in that they have an opportunity to acquire skills beyond school life. It is arguably the same practical subjects school leavers will fall back on when they fail to get employment after school life. For example, those with a Woodwork background join the informal sector as carpenters and those with a Fashion and Fabrics background will fall back on tailoring to earn a living. Other utterances include- '*mabhiridha*' (builders, to students doing Building Studies), '*madhomeni*' (demonstrators for students doing Agriculture), '*chigogogo*' (derogatory for sheet metal workers, taken from the knocking sound of a hammer).

A study on parental aspirations among Form four students in Selangor (Malaysia), revealed that, parents are important predictors of children's academic and social developments especially in decision making for the children's education (Mahamood *et al.*, 2012). However, many parents do not discuss career pathways with their children and how to prepare for it. Arguably their day-to-day

utterances are the most perpetrators of the negative attitudes towards practical subjects. Rather than inspiring their children towards practical subjects the tendency is to denigrate them.

Administrative Processes

Mano (2001) explains that, to receive a passing 'O' level certificate in Zimbabwe, a student needs to pass at least five subjects including English Language with a grade C or better. A pass in English Language and Mathematics at 'O' level serves as a gateway for many students, as they cannot proceed to higher learning or training institutions despite a C or better examination score in other subjects. At 'A' level, students usually have an option of science, commercial and art subjects. Practical subjects are usually grouped with commercial subjects or sciences. Generally, only a few candidates take up practical subjects up to 'A' level. One of the reasons is that, at Form One, practical subjects are offered to those students who performed poorly at Grade Seven. This is evident enough to show that authorities in schools have an attitude that practical subjects should be taken up by students who are not academically talented. From this point of view, it is obvious that low performers do not go up to 'A' level and hence very few candidates will write practical subjects at that level. It was interesting to note in the local paper, *The Herald*, dated 26 January 2013, that, with the 2012 'A' level results, Food Science was one of the top three subjects with a pass rate of 96,95%. This supports the fact that some practical subjects can be successfully pursued up to 'A' - level and even further to university level.

Parents find it difficult to perceive practical subjects as a route to success in the same way as the academic subject route. The assumption is that practical subjects can be passed even by low performers. Students in turn develop a negative attitude towards practical subjects as they are afraid of being branded failures. Kehoe (2007) concurs that the practical subject route is encouraged to those who show that they are unlikely to succeed in the academic route. This is not the case though, as students can still fail practical examinations if they do not take them seriously. The practice of giving practical subjects to low performers has also impacted on the pass rate for practical subjects. Experience has shown that practical subjects are on record for posting a poor pass rate at 'O' level in Zimbabwe.

Some schools offer practical subjects up to Form Two. When students advance to Form Three, they are made to drop the subjects and pursue academic subjects, regardless of their interests in the subjects. In other words academic subjects are forced upon the students at the expense of practical subjects. Students, therefore, do not see any reason for taking up a subject which they will later drop when advancing to Form Three. In a local newspaper, *The Herald* of 22 December 2012, Dhliwayo expressed that in the desire to pursue education to the highest level possible, students face the challenge of choice of area of specialization. The reporter further says students easily accept what they are told to do by parents and schools, even if they are not for the idea. The prescribed educational choice virtually determines their career path in life. Some students are

failures in life today because of the prescribed career path. Some have even found themselves wasting time by changing the career path from the prescribed, later in life.

The limited range of practical subjects in schools has also affected student teachers during their teaching practice session. In most cases, student teachers who specialise in practical subjects find themselves teaching other subjects because the curriculum in schools they are deployed to, do not offer the practical subjects trained for. This practice has forced colleges to train students in a practical subject and an academic subject to circumvent the problem. However, training students in both a practical subject and an academic subject has affected the quality of practical subject teachers. For example, in Home Economics a complete package is composed of Fashion and Fabrics, Food and Nutrition and Home Management. If a student teacher has to combine a practical with an academic subject, the student has to choose one component of Home Economics. This results in a Home Economics teacher who cannot teach some parts of the subject, thus impacting heavily on teacher quality. When such a combination (a practical and an academic) is made, the student teacher, in most cases, will practice on the academic subject which is readily available in schools. More so, since practical subjects are stigmatized as discussed before, where both subjects are on offer, the student will obviously opt to teach the academic subject.

Cost and financing of practical subjects also perpetrate negative practices in schools. Practical subjects are not adequately budgeted for as is the norm with other subjects such as Sciences. Schools buy chemicals for experimental use during lessons and examinations. The same cannot be said for practical subjects. [Kanyongo \(2005\)](#) observed that lack of resources to adequately fund the education system in Zimbabwe is the main challenge and will remain so for a long time. This is the reason why [Kehoe \(2007\)](#) laments that, what were once thriving Woodwork and Metalwork departments in schools have declined due to inadequate funding. Parents have to incur extra costs to buy materials for practical subjects for practice before examinations. In most cases when parents are asked to buy materials, the quality of the materials do not meet the specifications required for a particular item to be made as the parents opt for the cheaper material or they simply do not understand the material specifications. This trend impacts negatively on students' performance as not all parents can afford to meet the extra costs for practical subjects and hence students miss out on proper practice. [Bvekerwa et al. \(2011\)](#) rightly concluded that without consumables students will fail to do the practice as per requirements of the syllabus. Their study established that in Makonde, a district in Zimbabwe, nearly half the schools lacked the required consumables to learn practical subjects. Students had to do with the little resources available and thus compromising on the quality of skills acquisition. This in turn frustrated the students who had to scramble for the little resources at their disposal.

Failure to fund practical subjects in schools also aggravates parents' negative attitudes, for they are asked to meet the extra expenses over and above school fees. The worst practice is when students

are sent home for non payment of practical subject fees. Some students miss out on learning while others dropout of school completely as parents cannot afford the practical subject fee.

Zimbabwe is an agrarian country where Agriculture at school level is the basis for the industry. However, far too often, the school garden is used as a form of punishment for those who break school rules. Misbehaving students are sent to the school garden to weed, dig or do any work that might be necessary at the gardens. This practice about agriculture is misrepresenting and counter productive. Mungazi (1990) states that, colonial enthusiasts emphasised manual labour as a more appropriate form of education for the Africans. When such a form of punishment is practiced in schools, a few individuals in society may permanently develop a negative mentality towards practical subjects. Education has to lay the foundation for a positive attitude towards work.

The negative practices on practical subjects are further perpetrated by the donor fraternity. In 2012 all Zimbabwean secondary schools received books from a non governmental organisation and the observation was that, no practical subject books were donated. Such a selective gesture demotivates both teachers and students who have an interest in practical subjects. In addition this lowers the pass rate in practical subjects further denting the image of the subjects.

Current Job Recruitment Practices

The job market demands are some of the creators and perpetrators of the negative attitudes towards practical subjects. The tendency is that some potential employers tend to single out certain practical subjects as 'irrelevant' when advertising for training and employment. In one of the local weekly papers (The Sunday Mail, 6 January, 2013), a certain health institution when advertising for a General Nursing Training Programme specified that passes in practical subjects such as Woodwork, Fashion and Fabrics and Metalwork were not a requirement. Such an advertisement is bound to discourage students from taking up practical subjects at school as they will consider them useless. This practice by potential employers also discourages parents, school administrators and society at large from supporting students who have a flare for practical subjects.

Government Policy Issues

Soon after Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, the thrust of education was on Education with Production (EWP) in both primary and secondary schools. The emphasis was on application of basic skills in productive work through theory and practice for productive adult roles outside the classroom (Zvogbo, 1994). Nherera (1994) in his thesis laments that, EWP failed as a pilot scheme due to the continuous domination of academic school system with its examination oriented academic education system. In addition Zvogbo notes that EWP units were used to punish delinquent children. This implies that, education sector authorities failed to come up with appropriate regulations resulting in the failure of the programme. The impression created was that practical subjects were not of great value.

In 1999 the government of Zimbabwe set up the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education to evaluate the educational requirements of the country following a string of poor academic performances at secondary school level (Nziramasanga, 1999). The commission observed that the national core-curriculum was inclined towards academic subjects and recommended that the Zimbabwean education system needed to move towards making it more vocationally oriented. However more than ten years down the line, the recommendations have not been implemented by the government despite having a policy that requires students to have at least a practical subject at 'O' level. This indicates lack of monitoring mechanisms by the government.

CONCLUSION

This paper has exposed attitudes among society that continue to denigrate practical subjects in schools. What is needed is to find ways of helping school children identify their skills and job orientation. Society should get the philosophical ideology behind productive education which link education to employment. It should also be emphasized that practical subjects are not merely manual work but have a theoretical foundation linked to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Society should be sensitized about the importance of practical subjects in schools and life after school. This could be achieved through consistent and regular career guidance in schools where parents are involved so that informed decisions are made where choice of subjects is of concern.
- The Ministry of Education, Sports, Art and Culture should consider offering all practical subjects at 'A' level as some parents and students do not see the rationale of taking up a subject which terminates at 'O' level.

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