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Impediments to Curriculum Implementation in Learning Institutions

by

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Abstract

This article emanated from a study on challenges institutions of learning faced in the implementation of a curriculum. Data was collected through document analysis and interviews with selected teachers in secondary schools of Zambia. The information collected was analysed thematically using emerging themes. Findings revealed that there were several challenges in the implementation of curriculum. Some of these challenges included inadequate teaching and learning materials, lack of funding, inadequate school facilities, inadequate quality and quantity of teaching staff, distance to school and unfriendly conditions of service. The study recommended that the government of Zambia and school authorities should ensure that basic factors that can be addressed within their means are attended to as soon as possible.

1.0 Background

Curriculum is one of the terms widely used in society yet, confounding to resolutely comprehend even among academics. The term curriculum is associated with several meanings and interpretations. One way of looking at it is to say that it is planned and unplanned experiences that learners encounter in a school milieu. Skilbeck (1984) defined curriculum as the learning experiences of students, expressed through anticipated goals and objectives, plans and designs for learning and the implementation of these plans and designs in school environments. Furthermore, curriculum refers to a plan for providing sets of learning opportunities for persons to be educated, (Saylor and Alexander, 1981). The definition of curriculum is further echoed by Glatthorn (1987) who reported that, the term curriculum has to do with the plans made for guiding learning in schools usually represented in retrievable documents of several levels of generality and the actualization of those plans in the classroom as experienced by the learners and as recorded by an observer; those experiences take place in a learning environment which also influence what is learned. The definitions provided above were summarised by Mulenga (2008:5) who reported that “Curriculum is all the selected, organized, integrative, innovative and evaluative educational experiences provided to learners

consciously or unconsciously under the school authority in order to achieve the designated learning outcomes”. Curriculum implementation, according to Okello and Kagoire (1996:124) “is a network of varying activities involved in translating curriculum designs into classroom activities and changing people’s attitudes to accept and participate in these activities”. However, curriculum implementers (teachers, headteachers, standard officers and others) are faced with barriers which hinder the successful implementation of the curriculum. Some teacher’s failure to interpret and implement the curriculum result in serious effects such as the backwash effects on national examinations. The next section discusses this concept and its effects on national examination.

1.1 The Backwash Effects on National Examinations.

Backwash effects on national examinations can be described as teaching learners to pass examinations without considering whether the skills needed for their lives, values and moral development are attained or not. The term backwash means the unpleasant result of an event or the negative aspects of something and some dictionaries define it as a filter. The term examination refers to final assessments and tests of students’ knowledge or skill in a particular subject which results in a qualification with successful output (Cambridge advanced learner’s dictionary, 2007). The backwash effects of national examinations is a serious impediment to curriculum implementation due to the nature and the negative effects it has on the education system. When teachers in schools decide to focus much on helping pupils pass examinations by all means necessary without helping them to be better citizens with expected aims and goals of the national curriculum, they are doing so at the detriment of the nation. Such teachers once found should not be tolerated or allowed in the teaching fraternity. They should be dismissed without impunities as they are destroying the education system.

Education should not be centred on examinations, but focus on the promotion of the full and well-rounded development of the physical, intellectual, social, affective, moral and spiritual qualities of all pupils so that each can develop into a complete person, for his or her own personal fulfilment and good of society. Education should shape the lives of learners so that they become more fully human by learning survive skills than being centred on the examinations (Ministry of Education (MOE), 1996:29). The goals to such an aim as set by MOE (1996:5) is that of producing a learner capable of ’being animated by a personally held set of civic, moral and spiritual values; developing of an analytical, creative and constructive

mind. They should be appreciating the relationship between scientific thought, action and technology with sustenance of the quality of life. Another educational aim looks at developing the qualities of character of an individual that society regards as important (Kelly, 1999). The goal for such an aim is that the individual can freely express his or her own ideas and also exercise tolerance for other people. The individual can cherish and safeguard his or her own liberties and also promote the human rights. The other aim looks at giving scope to the individuals in order for their potential to be developed (Kelly, 1999). In having such an aim, the goal of making the individual maintain, observe discipline and hard work as the foundation of personal and national development is achieved. All these aims should be imparted in the learners through the teacher without focusing on examinations which disregard these important aspects thereby serving as a challenge and an impediment to curriculum implementation.

In order to achieve the above stated aims and goals, MOE has come up with a curriculum, which has several definitions. Basing on the stated aims and goals of education above which are found in the ideal or recommended curriculum offered in the mainstream education. The ideal or recommended curriculum is what is proposed by scholars, researchers and evaluators as a solution to meet a need or needs of the society and is consequently perceived as the most appropriate curriculum for learners. It is what a nation aspires to achieve. Due to several factors affecting the implementation of the curriculum, the ideal curriculum cannot be 100 per cent implemented because of factors such as the backwash effects of the national examinations. In the end, most educational systems around the world end up with achieved curriculum or experiential curriculum which goes to a certain percentage in terms of implementation. The achieved curriculum is what learners have actually learnt as a result of their interaction with the implemented curriculum. What learners have experienced as a result of what they have learnt and interaction with the teacher. What the learner has achieved is seen when the teacher gives a test and other forms of assessments (Mulenga, 2008).

In many schools, teachers are usually in competition to have their pupils pass or outperform other classes. In the process, there is a situation where the teacher has the pressure to teach for the sake of the learners to pass the examinations and so hurries through the curriculum whether taught thoroughly or not. The teacher tailors the teaching towards examinations and in so doing runs away from the aims ,goals and objectives of education that have been discussed above. Examinations are not the main intent of the curriculum and are not a true reflection of what education is and if it was possible, nations around the world should abolish examinations.

An ideal implementation of a curriculum should make learners feel educated and informed. Learners after being exposed to learning should show that they have acquired attitudes and values towards social trends and ideologies, and this can contribute to the development of a country. In this way, education becomes important for a learner he or she should not just acquire knowledge but acquire other aspects as stated in the aims of education. However, because of the issue of examinations coming on the way, learners are simply drilled in factual information and leaving out the aspect of attitudes, values and skills that go into producing a holistic individual. Take for instance, a learner who has been in the school system has to show behavioural change with regards to public property. A learner is supposed to have a positive attitude towards its protection. In most cases, what we see are negative attitudes towards public property. This kind of education has reduced the standards to the lowest levels. No wonder we hear such comments as ‘learning has now gone to the dogs.’ A society cannot see any change in attitudes and values in the learners. The learner has not learnt any survival skills that may sustain him or her after dropping out or completing school. What is happening in schools now is simply drilling the learner for the purpose of an examination at the end of a learning experience. This makes the implementation of the curriculum to be ineffective. In Zambia as the education system stands, any learner who lacks the ability to put clear thoughts on paper is seen as a failure.

In order to implement the curriculum effectively, the teacher has to be eclectic in nature in the manner they interpreted and put curriculum into work. The teacher has to employ variations of teaching methods and techniques. However, this is not done to the fullest because of the backwash effect on national examinations. Towards the end of the second term or early third term, teachers diverts from the use of various teaching methods and techniques and eyes are on the examinations. They will simply just state the facts as they are because to them the use of techniques may delay the drilling for the examinations for the learners.

The main focus of education is to provide learning to all learners. There should be no segregation as Zambia is a signatory to education for all, one of the millennium goals. If well followed, the curriculum would be fully implemented with expected results.

As a result of the backwash effect, many learners in Zambia have been thrown out of school once they fail these examinations. When they leave schools, they come out of the system with no life skills that may sustain them in life. No wonder we see a lot of youths roaming the streets

doing nothing for the school system they went through did not really provide lifelong skills to them. Backwash effects does not support knowing of topical issues but memorisation. Once a learner has written an examination the knowledge of factual information immediately goes out because the intended objective has been achieved. This is so because the focus is on learning to pass the examinations. However, education is a lifelong process, even after school the learner should show skills, values and attitudes that were acquired in school. This problem is equally found in high learning institutions. The students are tuned to learning for the examinations. Once the examinations have been written then everything is forgotten. The learner's attainability of learning is marked through the passing of an examination. It is a vicious cycle which is hard to break, for the system has been planted with the idea of learning in order to pass the examination. Later, when this learner goes into the field of work for example, the higher learning institutions, he also tunes the students to learn in order to pass the examinations. This will go on and on until educators realise that though examinations have negative effects on the education system. The nation will realise that learners are not prepared holistically.

1.2 Research Questions

The study sought to address the following research questions:

- (1) How prominent was the backwash effect in Zambia's secondary schools?
- (2) What impediments did teachers and institutions of learning face in the implementation of the secondary school curriculum in selected subject areas?

1.3 Motivation for This Study

The motivation for this study was that there were several studies that were carried out previous on the subject matter above such as Walker (1971), Print (1993), Okello and Kagoire (1996), and Kelly (1999). These studies reported some challenges that institutions of learning experienced in implementing curriculum. This study sought to harmonise these revelations from various studies and make a case with a little interviews from field teachers and educators in Zambia.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Documentarism and constructivism theories were used to guide this study. Documentarism refer to the analysis and interpretation of written materials for specific purposes (AGrell,

1997), and (Bergman, 2009). Documentarism is applicable in social sciences to address two major issues; writing or composing text or analysing literary works (Sauerberg, 1991). The study employed documentarism by selecting existing literature related to curriculum implementation in institutions. Collected documents were analysed by generating related themes of interest associated with challenges or impediments to curriculum implementation. The constructivist theory was also used based on the premise that data collection methods such as interviews, are centred around constructing meaning. Ackermann (2001) noted that constructivism is all about making meaning from people's experiences. The concept of constructivism may take several strands such as social constructivism, radical constructivism and cognitive constructivism (Anderson, Reder, and Simon, 1998). All these forms of constructivism theory impinge on making meaning from available resources. The data from interviews was analysed thematically with the help of constructivism by selecting and grouping information into relevant themes and making meaning from the available information from the respondents.

2.0 Method

Searches for existing literature were conducted by going into the physical library at the University of Zambia, and also searched online on databases such as JSTOR, google scholar and other search engines such as Lycos, Metacrawler, Google and Yahoo. Eight studies on challenges of curriculum implementation were reviewed. The literature collected was analysed thematically with the help of the documentarism theory by (Agrell, 1997). The analysed literature was cross referenced for validation purposes and notes were taken. Interviews with ten (10) secondary school teachers randomly selected from five different schools were conducted. The data collected was analysed thematically and made informative meaning from the data with the help of the constructivism theory. The results collected on this study were reported in subthemes and categories.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion of data in this section was arranged with respected to the research questions of the study. Other emerging themes that from the data collected are also presented in this section which generally highlights on impediments to curriculum implementation.

3.1 Teaching pupils to Pass Examinations

The first research question sought establish the prominence of backwash effect in Zambia's secondary schools? When asked whether or not teachers were teaching pupils for purposes of passing examinations in schools, four of the ten teachers interviewed with pseudo names; Mutale, Lufafa, Cholwe, and Ngoza reported that several teachers in targeted schools taught pupils to help them pass the examination rather than understanding the content of the curriculum. Their specific voices have been reported below.

Mutale: *Last year, three teachers at our school were rewarded and some of them were labelled best teacher of the year because they produced 100 per cent pass rate in their classes. When I interacted with one of them, she said "Achieving a 100 percent pass rate in your class goes beyond mere implementation of the syllabus. In my grade 12 class, I stop mere teaching in term one but focus on examinations and help my students towards that. So, it is not about teaching alone but go through past papers with pupils so that you help them pass the examination".*

Lufafa: *Every teacher knows that you cannot have a 100 per cent pass rate if you focus on books alone. Pupils need to know how examination questions are framed.*

Cholwe: *Heheheee...[laughs] I think it is not correct that teaching should be centred on making pupils pass tests or exams only because education is bigger than that. What some teachers are doing is not right. They should help pupils understand the issues in the syllabus...*

Ngoza: *In my classes I balance approaches. When I teach a topic, my class exercise is a mixture of my personal framed questions and those from past exam papers on that topic. So I do not find it a problem because it is the reality and teachers are doing it. Some of them stop teaching in examination classes and their eyes are on examination coming.*

The four teachers have divergent views about teaching pupils to pass examination. Teachers Mutale and Lufafa seem to suggest that teaching to make pupils pass examination is not a problem because it is one way to attain 100 per cent pass rate in classes. Ngoza seem to have a different approach, she believe that a balanced model was a better solution. Implying that pupils

needed to be taught the curriculum or syllabus and then, exercises on each topic can include what might come or what had come in the past examinations. Prodromou (1995:13) believe that teaching pupils to pass tests and examinations has negative consequences “on teaching in a broad educational context, and suggests that 'negative backwash' makes good language teaching more difficult”.

It is important to note that teaching pupils to pass tests and examinations as reported by Lufafa and Mutale above has serious consequences on the education system and the state as a whole because what the backwash does is schooling of children and not educating them. It produces irresponsible, worthless, careless and violent citizens that may turn a nation into anarchy, thereby frustrating everybody around. Education officials and school authorities must encourage their teachers to focus more on implementing the national curriculum in order to meet the aims, and goals of the education system.

3.2 Impediments to Curriculum Implementation that Teachers and Learning Institutions Faced.

The second research question sought to establish impediments that teachers and learning institutions were facing that hindered them from implementing the curriculum effectively. The literature reviewed and the interviews with teachers indicated that there were several factors that hindered the effective implementation of the curriculum. These factors are discussed below.

3.2.1 Inadequate financial resources and funding

Financial resources and inadequate funding can have devastating effects on curriculum implementation. It is very difficult to implement a curriculum successfully if the education system has limited financial resources. Money does not always make things work but it makes things move smoothly and better with a little motivation from drivers. When asked about factors that may impede curriculum implementation in schools, Zgambo (pseudo name), had this say;

Zgambo: Ooooh, that one is a big issue at our school. Last few years we have had a problem of water. So we involved PTA, community, and other fundraising issues to have money for a borehole. We raised some funds but not enough. So, we resorted to piece works with pupils. The worst part was where we cancelled some classes on some days in a

week and went with pupils to do some piece work for money at some farmers' farms.

Instead of teaching and learning, some schools especially those in the rural, take pupils during learning time to go and do some piece work to raise funds to address certain issues in the school as noted by Zgambo. This practice has negative effect on curriculum implementation and government needs to adequately fund schools in order to stay afloat.

Financial resources can expand infrastructure, pay teachers, introduce new initiatives to help implement the curriculum, and schools can make progressive efforts towards the cause. Underfunding raise a lot of other implications on the part of curriculum. Kalla (1983) noted that the economy of a nation will determine the success of curriculum implementation. In developing countries, the numbers of pupils and teachers have kept on rising but government money available for education is less which make it challenging for curriculum implementation. (Sibulwa 1996:35) noted that, since manpower in the education sector has increased, the bulk of money allocated to education is absorbed by salaries leaving very little for other important aspects in curriculum implementation such as in-service training, continuous professional growth (Lieber et al, 2009), monitoring and other things needed for the smooth implementation the of curriculum. Although the government introduce tuition fees in schools to help supplement monetary resources, this move does not have help some schools to sustain themselves as they have routine expenses such as paying caretakers, guards, sweepers, water bills, electricity bills and pay part time teachers. Some of the workers on this list in some schools are not on government payroll and they survive on payments from school authorities. This means that, funding can affect school operations severely.

3.2.2 Lack of Teaching and Learning Materials

The absence of or inadequacy of teaching and learning resources can be a serious impediment to curriculum implementation. There is limited procurement and supply of these resources in schools. Instructional materials and equipment are all in short supply or may not be available at all – no books or writing material, no chalk, no science apparatus, inadequate or out-of-date library (Kelly 1999). Worse still, with population explosion, classrooms are overcrowded and learners are made to share whatever little stocks of material and furniture available. In such situations, teacher effectiveness is hampered and it becomes almost impossible for the teacher to render individual pupil attention because of large numbers of pupils in classes – over

enrolment. This kind of situation in institutions of learning will make it very difficult for curriculum implementers to carry out their roles effectively. In the absence of teaching and learning materials such as books for pupils and teachers, pamphlets, and journal articles, the teaching and learning processes will be hampered.

3.2.3 Inadequate Learning facilities

Unavailability of school facilities and equipments like classrooms, libraries, resource centres, offices, desks, schools halls and others. The fact that the education sector is under-funded by the government means that the availability and quality of facilities in learning institutions is affected negatively. It has been observed that in most government schools in Zambia with an exception of the newly built, infrastructure is in a deplorable condition, Kelly (1999:196) describes the buildings as “dilapidated, unsafe and sometimes unusable.” In certain instances, some schools have inadequate classroom accommodation, which gives rise to double or triple shift in order to give all eligible children an opportunity to learn. Meanwhile, some schools, especially in remote areas, have no buildings at all. Furniture is also inadequate in most schools and in some cases the seats and desks are battered or totally absent (Kelly 1996). However, the face of infrastructure has improved in some schools with the help of donor funding such as ‘sector pool’. The absence of teaching and learning materials in schools imply that effective implementation of the curriculum is hampered (Tambulukani, 2004).

3.2.4 Lack of Quality and Quantity of Staff

Teachers interviewed reported that they had so much work to cover as they were understaffed. The extent of this case was noted at one of the rural schools where one teacher was teaching three subjects (Religious Education, History and English Language) to three different classes in grades 8, 10 and 11. Even though the teacher was qualified to teach the subject areas, there was too much work in planning the lessons which in turn compromised on the quality of the teacher. When asked why such a situation was allowed by school authorities, one of the teachers indicated that the school was understaffed and therefore, the school used available teachers to share the subjects to be offered. Quality and quantity of teaching staff to meet the expectations of pupils and the society is another impediment. Teachers are the most important human resource in curriculum implementation since they are the ones who adopt and implement the ideas and aspirations of the designers. This implies that the success of a

curriculum depends on the teachers (Okello and Kagoire 1996). A sufficient supply of trained teachers is therefore, needed if the implementation of the curriculum is to be effective.

In Zambia, however, learning institutions have been for a long time experiencing a shortage of the teaching staff and the rural areas are the most affected since most teachers shun those areas to urban or towns. Teacher pupil ratio is too high and in some cases, untrained teachers are involved to help teach class without teachers. When a school does not have enough teachers, the few that are there are overstretched/overloaded, hence they are overworked which in turn affects their capacity to teach effectively. In the case of high schools, for example, where there is specialization in terms of teaching subjects, some subjects are not offered in certain schools even though they appear in the curriculum due to lack of trained teachers in those subjects. Such hindrances are also found in selected higher institutions of learning such as colleges of education where one lecturer would offer two to four courses. All these are barriers to the provision of quality education in learning institutions in Zambia.

Okello and Kagoire (1996:125) says, “The quality of education of a country largely depends on the quality of teachers.” In other words, the quality of education is as good as the quality of teacher. If the quality of teachers is poor, the quality of education will be poor. What this means, therefore is that the quality of teachers will determine the effectiveness of curriculum implementation. The education system needs adequately trained and motivated teachers in order to succeed in its programme but the Zambian education system lacks such teachers. For instance, the intended curriculum includes content for learners with special needs but trained personnel to handle such learners is inadequate. Hence, in some cases, they end up being taught by untrained teachers. This problem is also experienced in high schools are not fully qualified since they are diploma holders who are trained to handle junior classes and as such quality is compromised. In other Instances, some teachers fail to perform effectively despite their being fully qualified because they are either not well-educated and trained or they are well-educated and trained but demoralized. While the ill-trained teachers lack subject matter, the well trained teachers fail to implement the curriculum out of frustration because he has not been given the material resources needed for the professional discharge of his duties (Kelly 1999). For example, a teacher of English who has no material for comprehension lessons, will abandon the component all together and concentrate on teaching components such as structure where material is available. Similarly, in the absence of apparatus and chemicals

needed for experiments, a science teacher will teach experiments theoretically, denying the learners the practical aspect of the content.

3.2.5 Poor Conditions of Service May Affect Curriculum Implementation

Poor conditions of services for curriculum implementers is another impediment to curriculum implementation. When curriculum implementers have lower salaries, no housing units, unpromising job security, poor transportation and generally poor conditions of service may be a serious impediment to curriculum implementation as they would resort to going out for in search of resources to sustain their families. Some teachers may even resort to go into private commercial enterprises to supplement meagre salaries. If various education policies and programmes are to be effectively implemented, teachers ought to be adequately trained and motivated. After pre-service training which provides foundation for professional service, teachers need to keep abreast with new developments in the system through in-service training. Other professional staff such as laboratory technicians and librarians also need to be in-serviced in order to give sound support to the teaching staff in the implementation of the curriculum. Employers such as the teaching service commission needs to ensure that teachers are well paid and on time so that curriculum implementation is not hindered by all means necessary.

3.2.6 Lost time for Learning due other activities

Loss of learning time due to poor time management by school administrators and teachers is another impediment to curriculum implementation. Curriculum implementation is also hindered by what goes on in learning institutions. Pupils' learning time is mismanaged by administrators and the class teacher. In most schools, a lot of time is taken up by activities such as assemblies, meetings held by visiting government officials, health talks, variety shows held during lesson time, sports activities, clubs, teacher-service programmes which last the whole day and learners are either sent away or asked to stay away from school, unplanned holidays such as when a teacher dies, teachers' day, women's day, mother's day and many other unforeseen eventualities that take place at the expense of learners. Lost time for learning is a serious impediment to curriculum implementation. Therefore, school authorities and teachers should ensure that time is properly managed in order to implement the curriculum.

When it comes to classroom time management, the class teacher is the main player. A teacher who is not time conscious is not disciplined and a drawback in as far as curriculum

implementation is concerned. For instance, a teacher of English who goes to class five [5] minutes for each lesson in a particular class every day, will have lost 25minutes at the of the week. That is a lot of learners time wasted and will derail the implementation of the curriculum since curriculum developers take time into consideration when developing the curriculum. Teacher absenteeism from work for various reasons also costs the pupils learning time. Learner absenteeism from school also deprives the learner of learning time. In addition, the need to devote inordinate amount of time to the management of problems of large classes effectively reduce students' time on the learning task which results in the failure to complete the intended content for the lesson and will necessitate the allocation of more time to the same task (Kelly:1999). Apart from that mock and final examinations also take up learning time for non-examination classes.

3.2.7 Poor monitoring and evaluation of schools

Findings revealed that most schools in Zambia are rarely visited by school authorities to ensure that standards are maintained. One of the teachers interviewed reported the following: "I came here in 2007 as a new teacher, up to now, I have never seen or heard of any district or provincial educational standards officer coming to inspect, check or something quality wise never. It is only the head teacher who goes around but again who monitors his work as school head"? It is important that educational officials visit schools in order to maintain standards and remind school authorities of their primary mandate in the education section.

4. Conclusion

The study presented several factors associated with challenges or impediments to curriculum implementation. Learning institutions can effectively implement the curriculum if basic resources are available. In other words, the availability of resources in the education system can actively facilitate effective teaching and learning. The well-being of learners in terms of good health and nutrition is also determinant to effective educational outcomes. In view of this, curriculum developers, adopters and implementers should be mindful of destructors such as those presented in this article and address them adequately in order to minimize the impediments to curriculum implementation in learning institutions.

5. Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:

- (i) The government through Ministry of Education should ensure that basic necessities such as school facilities, qualified teachers and teaching and learning materials are provided to all schools for effective learning and implementation of the curriculum.
- (ii) Schools can have institutional initiatives to supplement government efforts in supplying shortage of teaching and learning materials, hiring part time teachers and financial initiatives to sustain themselves.
- (iii) Schools should engage the community through parental teacher associations to help in supplying the shortage of school necessities.

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