Quality of Education in “Independent” Primary Schools in Zimbabwe: A National Survey

Viola Machingura
Director, Teaching and Learning Centre, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe
Email: machingura2001@yahoo.com

Snodia Magudu
Lecturer, Department of Curriculum Studies, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe
Email: srmagudu@yahoo.com.au

Obert Edward Maravanyika
Former Vice Chancellor, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe
Email: profmaravanyika@yahoo.com

Partson Virira Moyo
Lecturer, Department of Curriculum Studies, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe
Email: partsonvirira2004@yahoo.co.uk

Martin Musengi
PHD student, School of Education, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
Email: Martin.Musengi@students.wits.ac.za

Abstract

The survey was undertaken to investigate the extent to which independent primary schools in Zimbabwe provide quality education. This was done through identifying proxies of quality that these independent schools exhibited. The study used the descriptive survey method in which the presence or absence of these proxies were recorded. Fourteen independent primary schools from across Zimbabwe, all their heads and eighty-three teachers from these schools participated in the study. The major finding of the research was that these schools aimed at providing an all round education that would result in the growth and development of the whole child who would be productive in society. The schools have enough human and material resources to achieve this goal. There is, therefore, potential in these schools to provide quality education. However, in spite of the large black population in these schools, their curricula have remained largely influenced by Western values with little emphasis on African values. The heads of these schools claim that this is what the parents want. The study recommends the need for teamwork and more consultation and involvement of all relevant stakeholders. Parents especially, do not seem to have a say on curriculum matters which appear to be largely the responsibility of school heads. Lastly, although the schools are classified as ‘independent
schools’, they do not seem to have a common pedigree other than that they are high fee-paying and English-medium schools.

**Keywords:** independent school, quality education, efficiency.

**Background**

This paper attempts to explore the quality of education in independent schools in Zimbabwe. An independent school is one that is not maintained by a local authority or national government but by individuals, groups of individuals, institutions or organizations. Independent schools enjoy a large measure of autonomy in the running of their affairs outside the day-to-day control of the government [Boyd, 1998]. The idea of an ‘independent school’ in Zimbabwe remains conceptually elusive and somewhat chimerical. In ethos and values older independent schools appear to have borrowed and still borrow heavily from practices of independent preparatory schools overseas especially from Britain whilst the new ones are closer to former Rhodesian Group A schools which were meant for white pupils. We failed to identify the quintessential defining attributes of an ‘independent school’ as opposed to a well resourced public school. If rural local authorities decided to set up well resourced model schools along the lines of the ‘independent schools’ in our survey would that make these schools independent schools? What we probably have is a new evolving phenomenon born out of contingencies of a transitional society with elements from the traditional independent schools, the former white Rhodesian schools, pupils from different racial and cultural groups now predominantly black, and teachers from a variety of educational and training backgrounds – government, missionary and private. For this research, independent schools are high-fee paying private schools which were formed for a variety of reasons chief amongst which was that public education was associated with large numbers of learners sharing inadequate educational resources and with little commitment on the part of those involved thus leading to a perceived lowering of standards. In a nutshell, one major reason for the rise of independent schools was a concern for quality education.

**Quality Education**

The concept of ‘quality education’ is difficult to define, elusive and relative. There appears to be no agreement on what quality education entails (Chisaka and Mavundutse, 2006). There is a general consensus though that quality education exists and that although we may not be able to define it, we can identify it when we come across it (Doherty, 1994).

Several authorities have written on indicators of quality education, for example, Lawton (1975); Hawes (1979); Doney and Fuller (1986); World Bank (1987); Combs (1988); Riddle (1988); Hawes and Stephens (1990); Hallack (1991); Doherty (1994); Singh (2000) and Woodhouse (2000). A careful examination of these indicators shows that quality education can be described in terms of an education system’s internal and external efficiency.
Internal Efficiency

The internal efficiency of an education system refers to how well the internal operations of the school are run. Proxies of the internal efficiency of a school system include, among other things, access, performance, a good school environment, quality classroom interactions and diverse curricula.

Access refers to the extent to which educational institutions offer equal entry opportunities to all children of school-going age who need education irrespective of colour, creed, physical and mental disabilities. Hawes (1979) refers to this as ‘the universality of the provision of education’. Barnett in Doherty (1994) refers to it as ‘massification of education’. Many authors see ‘inclusion’ as opposed to ‘exclusion’ and ‘selection’ as proxies of quality. And so, access as an index of quality refers to the ability of a school to absorb and accommodate large numbers of learners including those from disadvantaged and marginalized social groups such as the handicapped, the minority and sub-cultural groups, women and the poor.

Performance refers to the ability of learners, teachers and the school as a whole to attain high levels of achievement in various areas of the curriculum. And so, good pass rates in various school subjects, good performance in sporting activities and clubs, meaningful and memorable educational tours and field trips, prizes, for example, for being the best school in some geographical area, would constitute quality education (Doney and Fuller, 1986).

A good school environment refers to a school with attributes such as staff who are well-educated and well-qualified, dedicated to their work and whose morale is high; a well-educated, qualified and committed school head; a supportive school community; the provision of adequate teaching/learning resources and making optimum use of them; small manageable classes; inculcating in pupils cherished values such as honesty, hard work, respect for the feelings of others and their property and a sense of responsibility; and access to international languages and examinations.

Quality of classroom interactions refers to good teaching and learning practices characterized by a large variety of interesting activities where each learner is afforded learning opportunities.

Diversified curricula refers to the ability of the school to provide activities inside and outside the classroom to accommodate and cater for individual learning needs, potential, styles and cognition.

External Efficiency

External efficiency refers to the match between what the school does or teaches and the expectations of the outside world. Proxies of external efficiency include the relevance of the education system to the learner and the society. For example;
is the education system sensitive to the needs and social backgrounds of the learners? Education should not alienate the learners from their culture and their own social groups outside the school (Lawton, 1975).

Preparing learners for meaningful existence in life, for economic productivity and for the world of work. The system should empower learners with knowledge, skills and values relevant to the demands of modern society including training learners for positions of leadership and power in various sectors of the society and the economy. And so, quality education would prepare learners to become responsible and productive citizens who can easily interact with and join social groups outside the school system including the elite and the powerful (World Bank, 1987; Singh, 2000; and Woodhouse, 2000).

Equipping the learners to adapt to other physical and economic settings (Hallack, 1991).

Quality education can also be described in terms of the internal and external culture of the school which translates into internal and external efficiency described above. Boyd (1998) says that the internal culture of a school is manifested through a strong and focused leadership with a clear vision on what needs to be done and how; team work where everybody understands, accepts and plays their role in the school with a unity of purpose; autonomy and self-direction; loyalty to the system and professionalism; motivation, energy and resourcefulness while external culture of a school is manifested through, among other things, a customer focused, driven, and oriented education system where the needs and expectations of the customer, who in this case are the parents and the pupils, are sought and catered for.

This study was undertaken to find out the extent to which these proxies of quality education were exhibited in independent primary schools in Zimbabwe.

The Research Problem

The research study sought to investigate the extent to which independent primary schools in Zimbabwe provide quality education. Specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:

To what degree do identified proxies of internal efficiency exist in independent primary schools in Zimbabwe?

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Methodology

Fourteen independent primary schools from across Zimbabwe made up the sample of schools used out of a total of 45 schools. In an effort to come up with a truly representative sample, the schools chosen included company schools, schools owned by churches or religious groups or ethnic or sub-cultural groups. The sample further included both the well established [older] and the newly established schools.

Data gathering techniques included a questionnaire for teachers, an interview schedule for school heads and former students as well as visits to and observations of all schools in the sample. The questionnaire sought the teachers' characteristics and their major activities at the schools. The interview solicited information on the school heads’ characteristics, the activities peculiar to the school in terms of the curriculum on offer and the provision, use of teaching and learning resources in the school and the extent to which the school involved stakeholders in activities of the school. The interview with former students sought to find out the extent to which independent school education contributed to their present position in society. The visits to the school were to get first hand information on the characteristics of these schools, their major activities and the general learning environment. All this was done in order to determine the extent to which the schools exhibited proxies of quality as discussed above. The collected data were presented, analyzed and discussed qualitatively.

Results

Characteristics of Independent Primary Schools

Although the schools used in the study are run and controlled by different agencies, they share a lot of similarities in terms of their characteristics, activities and perceptions of their roles. All these schools are members of the Conference of Heads of Independent Schools in Zimbabwe [CHISZ]. This is a body whose task is to ensure that high standards of education are maintained in the schools. Each school has to adhere to stipulated guidelines provided by CHISZ on the type and quality of education to be provided. However, each school would have the autonomy to provide the specific ethos and thrust peculiar to that school. The independent schools visited have different histories and backgrounds but their goal, according to the heads, is the same and it is basically to create a caring, friendly and dedicated community for the growth and development of the whole child.

Internal Efficiency in Independent Schools

A rigorous screening exercise is carried out to recruit children who the schools judge to be ready for and capable of surviving in the physical and social environment offered by the school. Classes of not more than twenty-five pupils per class characterize the schools. By Zimbabwean standards, these are small classes. Pupils are generally recruited from well-to-do black families or educated minority social groups such as whites. We did not see any evidence of attempts by the schools to recruit pupils from the disadvantaged or marginalized social groups. What we
found out in this survey was that quality is seen as selection and exclusion based on the ability to pay.

The heads reported that their pupils perform very well in national examinations in all academic subjects except in the local languages [ChiShona or IsiNdebele] where they do badly despite the large black pupil population in the schools.

The heads of these schools who are mostly white or Asian are generally well-educated and very experienced teachers who speak knowledgeably about their schools. Most of them had bachelors’ degrees and one of them had a doctorate in Education. The heads generally spoke about their schools aiming to develop an all round complete child without undue emphasis on academic subjects through the provision of a diversified curriculum that would also cater for individual learner differences. They offer a strong and quite focused but rather autocratic leadership that revolves around the school head and does not involve, to a great extent, other relevant stakeholders such as parents and teachers. For example, most school heads openly admitted that they were against parental involvement in schools as this, according to the heads, ‘tended to cause misunderstandings’.

The teachers in the schools who are mostly black, are highly educated and professionally qualified with a significant number of them [37%] having university degrees. Most of these teachers have additional qualifications in such areas as Art and Design, Physical Education, Music, Counseling and Special Needs Education. They are capable of coaching a variety of sporting activities and offering guidance in a number of co-curricular clubs. Most of these teachers are computer literate. The teachers are reported by the school heads to be hardworking, committed to their work and highly motivated mainly because of excellent working conditions that include a good salary. In some of the schools, the teachers earned as much as six to eight times more than teachers in public schools. They seemed to identify with independent school ethos and culture. They, too, aimed to reach and develop to the fullest each pupil in their small classes. We, however, got the impression that these teachers lacked opportunities to become autonomous and self-directed. For example, at some of these schools, the teachers received curricular plans that had been generated by the school head and to which they had not made any contributions. Some of the teachers were not able to explain to us the essence of these curricular plans.

Each school is endowed with a rich variety of facilities and according to one school head, What you ask for [by way of facilities, equipment and materials] is what you get. Facilities such as libraries with plenty of textbooks, computer laboratories, reading laboratories, workshops and sports fields; equipment such as computers, sporting equipment and material resources such as stationery are abundant in the schools. These allow for and ensure a vibrant cultural life, a variety of sporting activities and an enriching academic life for both staff and school children. While class teachers are engaged for each grade, more specialized teaching is done in such areas as Music, Art and Design, Computers and Drama. Observations of classroom interactions revealed that there is a lot of individualized work based on pupils’ interests and abilities. In several of these schools, a lot of outdoor excursions which included projects were evident.
especially in Environmental Education. Teachers were able to attend to most pupils and these pupils participated actively in many of the class activities.

The academic life of the schools is characterized by a diverse curriculum. This means that although the schools follow the curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, write grade 7 examinations set by the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC), their curriculum include more subjects for example, Environmental Education and Computer Education. The curriculum appears to have a much deeper covering of many more concepts at more advanced levels. The children are also prepared for a special entrance examination for CHISZ-affiliated secondary schools.

The cultural life of these schools is catered for in numerous activities such as art, music, dance, pottery, worship/religion, charity work, organized school trips and club activities. Most of these activities are, generally, Western in orientation with little African experiences. Field trips to educationally interesting places around Zimbabwe are organized on a regular basis and sport enjoys a high profile with many disciplines which include athletics, basketball, cricket, swimming, cycling, golf, hockey, rowing, rugby, soccer, squash, lawn tennis, volley ball, etc. Sport is such an important feature of the independent school calendar that each child is expected to participate actively in a number of sporting activities. The heads indicated that their schools contribute to national teams in such sports as cricket, swimming, tennis and rugby. The field trips were said to be important in making the pupils aware of the world around them as well as enhancing their personal enrichment.

External Efficiency in Independent Schools

The school heads referred us to quite a number of their former students who have become leaders in their communities and captains of commerce and industry. However, because of time and logistical constraints we did not get a chance to interview many of these former students. The few former students we managed to access were black and generally appeared to have become alienated from their social groups outside of the school. For example, some of them complained about being derisively referred to by their black counterparts from a public school background as the ‘nose brigade’ because of the way they speak English through the nose.

Discussion

The above observations clearly indicate that these schools are potentially able to provide, to a very large extent, quality education in terms of internal efficiency. For example, their small classes would ensure maximum individual learner participation in class activities and individualized assistance from the teachers; specialist teachers in problem areas such as Music, Physical Education, etc. would ensure that these are well taught; the hiring of well educated and highly qualified and motivated teachers and availability of a rich variety of teaching-learning resources would all ensure good examination results in the academic curriculum. Nyagura (1991) also found that organizational or structural variables such as adequate
textbooks, stationery and low teaching loads were important indicators of the effectiveness of schools. His finding confirms that high-fee paying schools offer quality education as indicated by high achievement in Mathematics and English.

These schools view selection and exclusion [hence the need for small classes of rigorously screened pupils] where a lot of teaching-learning resources are concentrated on a few learners as a sign of quality. However, it can be argued that their focus is largely on internal efficiency as espoused by Doney and Fuller (1986) and Woodhouse (2000). A wider focus on external efficiency would see the importance of facilitating the participation of the majority in education as explained by Lawton (1975), World Bank (1987) and Singh (2000). This would lead to egalitarianism, social justice and equitable distribution of resources and services that would result in an overall improvement of quality of life of the majority of people. Such an education that improves the quality of the majority of people would be regarded as of very high quality by those who believe in equality of opportunity and egalitarianism as social philosophies. Quality as inclusion through increased access is influenced by egalitarian and integrative considerations as a basis for promoting the good life to a majority of citizens. The opposite view regards quality as exclusion characterized by selection and enrolling small numbers of pupils who pay heavily for the ‘quality education’ provided. In terms of external efficiency, a diversified curriculum, with emphasis on the individual learners’ area of strengths is likely to be more marketable after school because of their diverse knowledge and skills. This is viewed as elitist, disintegrative and discriminatory by the former, leading eventually to a divided class society. Such opposing views are not surprising given the polemic nature of quality alluded to by Chisaka and Mavhundutse (2006) and Doherty (1994).

We felt that teamwork between the school heads and teachers and between the school and parents was weak. For example, curricula proposals generated by the school should really be the work of both administrators and the implementers of the curriculum. Unless this is done, the curriculum proposals may be implemented unsatisfactorily or not at all. Clients of any education system are a big ingredient to the success of the operations of the system. This means that independent schools should consult and involve their relevant stakeholders [parents and the wider community] much more than they do now. Chivore (1994) highlights the importance of Omari and Mosha’s (1987) production function approach in which the quality of education is determined by the interactions between intra- and extra-school environments. This is because it serves little purpose to produce a product that few would buy and it is the present customer who is the attraction to future customers (Boyd, 1998). It is pertinent to note though that the current decline in the provision of resources in public schools makes these schools attractive to parents who have the resources to send their children to these schools.

These schools may also need to re-examine their position in terms of African values and culture given the fact that the majority of the pupils in these schools are now black. Needless to say, these schools have been seen in some quarters as residual enclaves of pre-independence white racism. It would be sad to find an education system or part of it producing learners who are alienated from their own social group outside the school. Mavhunga (2008) suggests that the school curriculum in Africa should be Africanised in line with Lawton’s (1975) position that
curriculum should be based on a selection from a people’s culture. Mavhunga cites Gelfand (1973) who acknowledges the rich beauty of African ethical codes which stand in sharp contrast to the material individualism of the West. To their credit, however, independent schools are aware of the changing nature of their client base. This study, for example, is the first part in a series arising out of CHISZ’s request to us to identify their stakeholders’ expectations of quality education in light of changes in racial and cultural balances of pupils and their backgrounds in these schools.

Conclusion

Independent primary schools in Zimbabwe have a lot of ingredients necessary for the provision of quality education defined as both the internal and external efficiency of an education system. However, they should be more inclusive in terms of both enrollment and the teaching of African values. There is also need for greater teamwork at the schools and greater consultation with and involvement of all relevant stakeholders. The schools, however, argue that parents send their children to these schools not necessarily to learn African values but to acquire technical, social and intellectual skills for the broader world of work even outside Zimbabwe hence the emphasis on English as a language of broader communication. This study was a kind of ‘snap shot’ with limited long term findings as most of the information came from the school heads and emphasis tended to be on the more readily observable internal efficiency variables. Future research could be longitudinal in order to more adequately cover external efficiency variables as well as interrogate teachers’ deep seated views and involve key stakeholders such as parents.

References


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