Utility of Ordinary Level Examinations to Self-Employed School-Leavers in the Light of Zimbabwean Economic Distress

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Abstract

This study is anchored on the notion that most school-leavers in Zimbabwe find it difficult to meaningfully utilise the skills which they were tested for at Ordinary Level in self-employment. In that light this paper explored into the relevance of Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council Ordinary Level Examinations to the school-leavers who are engaged in self-employment for survival. The study is informed by the Pragmatist School of Thought being championed by John Dewey which believes that for any theory to be regarded as worthwhile to study, it must be proven in practice. The research was undertaken in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe whereby school-leavers with at least five Ordinary Level passes were purposely sampled for the study. The interview and questionnaire were used as research tools in this study and participants were asked questions with regards to the usefulness of Ordinary Level Studies in the acquisition of skills needed for survival in their respective self-jobs. The study revealed that the majority of school-leavers are engaged in various occupations some of which are totally divorced from the nature of knowledge tested in the public examinations. However a small number of the respondents indicated that some of the skills they use in self-jobs have relevance to the skills acquired at Ordinary Level. The research has illustrated that there is need for Ordinary Level studies to be crafted in a manner that promotes the development of essential skills for economic development. The study further stressed that public examinations should acquaint candidates with skills that are vital for self-reliance rather than over-relying on bookish information.

Key words: utility, examination, school-leavers, distress

Introduction

Zimbabweans from all walks of life experienced a period of economic malaise between the years 2000 and 2009. The causes of that economic meltdown could be attributed to a number of determinants among which were the country’s economic reforms and political instability
As a result the local industry suffered greatly due to lack of inputs and the country’s negative image as portrayed by other nations; hence the industry became incapacitated to the point of failing to absorb the Ordinary Level school-leavers as had been the traditional trend. The SADC Secretariat (IFEP,1998) asserted that, “Unemployment of young people leaving school is especially high and is a source of general concern to the Zimbabwean Government, considered by many to be a time bomb” (p34).

The SADC Secretariat (IFEP, 1998) further expounded that,

Indeed for the countries that have most rapidly expanded secondary education like Zimbabwe, the size of a single cohort of secondary school leavers are as numerous as the entire body of workers in the manufacturing sector of the formal economy (p51).

Due to the subsequent rise of unemployment most Ordinary Level school leavers have decided to initiate self-employment projects that may assist them to attain self-reliance. This study is seeking to investigate how these self-jobs or informal employment is related to Ordinary Level studies, which is the highest qualification attained by the sample under study. It is essential to take note of the idea that all the sampled school-leavers have at least five Ordinary Level passes but have failed to proceed to further studies due to different reasons.

This study is anchored on attempting to relate the various self-jobs undertaken by different school-leavers to the knowledge which they acquire at Ordinary Level. The paper will also suggest the possible methods that may be implemented by the government and other stakeholders in the education sector as remedy to the challenges.

Theoretical framework

The study is informed by the Pragmatist School of Thought which propounds that all theories that are learnt should be married to practice (Stumpf, 2008). Pragmatism took shape at the end of the Nineteenth Century being introduced by Pierce, then propounded by James and later on perfected by Dewey. To a large extent pragmatism as a philosophy is informed by empiricism, utilitarianism and science. Pragmatists believe that knowledge is an instrument that can be used to solve educational and socio-economic challenges. In other words it can be stated that pragmatism advocates for hands-on approach to teaching and learning thereby equipping the learners with skills that are vital in life. In that light the research seeks to examine the link between Ordinary Level studies and self-employment projects in which most of the school-leavers are engaged. As such for Ordinary Level Examinations to be regarded as an exercise worth undertaking, they should be in a position to equip the candidates with the adequate arsenal that may be used during and after school life to deal with all kinds of problems.

Statement of the problem

This study seeks to assess the extent to which skills that are tested at Ordinary Level are implemented in self-employment projects.
Research questions

- What is the relevance of Ordinary Level Examinations to self-employed school-leavers in Zimbabwe?
- What are the challenges that are faced by the school-leavers in the implementation of the skills they acquired at Ordinary Level in self-employment?
- To what extent have the skills acquired at Ordinary Level been instrumental in moulding self-sufficient school-leavers?

Delimitation of the study

The study was carried out in the suburbs, Central Business District and the industrial area of Masvingo. Masvingo is a city which is located in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe and it is the Capital of Masvingo Province. The city is located about 292 kilometres south of Harare. This research was confined to school-leavers with at least five Ordinary Level subject passes who are engaged in self-employment projects.

Population and sample

Masvingo city has an estimated population of 58 000 (UNICEF, 2010). Out of approximately 200 Ordinary Level school-leavers with at least five Ordinary Level passes, the researcher purposely chose fifty school-leavers who are engaged in self-employment as follows; ten from the Central Business District, twelve from Rujeko, twelve from Mucheke, six from Rhodene and ten from the industrial area of Masvingo City. The targeted group was constituted by informal traders at flee-markets, air-time dealers, brick-layers, welders and carpenters.

Research methodology

The researcher used the interview and questionnaire as research tools in this study. Neuman (2002) defines an interview as a short term social interaction between two people who are normally strangers with the explicit purpose of obtaining specific information from the other. An interview consists of oral questions that are asked by the interviewer and oral responses by the interviewees. Interviews were preferred by the researcher because they attempt to clarify vague statements and the interviewer may rephrase questions so that the respondent understands what is meant by particular questions. Interviews were administered to the respondents who seemed to be mobile dealers or vendors without permanent working places while questionnaires were provided to all the school-leavers who had fixed work places such as flee-markets, offices and workshops. Borg and Gall (2006) assert that questionnaires are documents that ask the same questions to all individuals in the sample and if properly constructed a questionnaire may serve as the most appropriate and most useful data gathering device in research.
Discussion of findings

The researcher compiled the findings of the study into three sub-headings and answers to the research questions are provided as follows:

- Relevance of Ordinary Level Examinations to self-employed school-leavers in Zimbabwe.
- Challenges encountered by the school-leavers in self-employment in the implementation of skills acquired at Ordinary Level.
- Instrumentality of Ordinary Level skills in moulding school-leavers who are self-reliant.

Relevance of Ordinary Level examinations to self-employed school-leavers in Zimbabwe

The majority of respondents indicated that Ordinary Level studies equipped them with the relevant skills which they use in self-jobs. Eighty percent of air-time dealers revealed that they acquired mathematical concepts which they employ during daily transactions. They also indicated that studies in humanities subjects equipped them with various life skills that are needed for survival. For instance more than fifty-percent of them propounded that History Paper 2 (2167/2) equipped them with interpretation and critical thinking skills that are vital for acceptable personal conduct or proper socialisation that is expected by the community.

Twenty percent of the air-time dealers indicated that circumstances have made them under-utilise the knowledge which they garnered at Ordinary Level. They felt that their work is totally divorced from what they were examined at Ordinary Level. A certain respondent by the name Sipho (pseudonym) with five Ordinary Level passes in Integrated Science, Geography, Religious Studies, History and Agriculture asserted that,

We are doing this work (selling air-time) for convenience in order to earn a living, otherwise we are under-utilising the knowledge that we acquired from different Ordinary Level subjects. As such I rarely apply the knowledge that I obtained from secondary education studies. For instance how can I meaningfully apply various scientific principles in the buying and selling air-time?

The majority of respondents at flee-markets were female dealers, who stated that they rarely utilised the knowledge gathered at Ordinary Level in their daily work. They however, asserted that besides utilising the fundamental mathematical concepts acquired at Ordinary Level, they also have been equipped with communication skills that are necessary when interacting with different types of personalities. One respondent with five Ordinary Level passes including English Language by the name Thandiwe (pseudonym) asserted that,

I can safely communicate with people of different nationalities, since I have been equipped with the basic communication skills through the study of Ordinary Level English Language and I was one of the best students in that subject. However, I feel that the bulk of information that I acquired at Ordinary Level is just lying idle in my brain since I seem not to apply it in my job.
The study revealed that ninety-percent of the school-leavers who have joined the construction industry as brick-layers, feel that Building Studies at Ordinary Level has equipped them with the elementary brick-laying skills and they strongly feel that it is their duty to perfect those skills as they perform their tasks. Ten percent of the brick-layers indicated that they did not get adequate skills at school that are needed in the construction industry, hence they ended up losing out some jobs or working under somebody with a professional board.

Most of the welders and carpenters interviewed revealed that Ordinary Level examinations in practical subjects such as Metalwork and Woodwork have accorded them the potential to work independently. However, twenty percent of the carpenters stipulated that Ordinary Level Examinations have not adequately provided them with the knowledge base that is required in the field.

**Challenges that are faced by the self-employed school-leavers in implementing Ordinary Level knowledge**

Ninety-percent of the air-time dealers and flee-market tenders revealed that their major problem was on how to source the initial capital for their projects. Most of them indicated that they borrowed money to start businesses from close family relatives. They would be expected to repay the amount over a stipulated period of time. Suzan (pseudonym) a flee-market tender with five Ordinary Level passes including Commerce remarked that,

> Having passed Ordinary Level I felt fully equipped with relevant skills to embark into the business of buying and selling, but the major obstacle I encountered was on how to source the initial capital to inject into my business. Otherwise passing Ordinary Level Commerce meant that I am competent in that discipline that I could easily execute my duties with less challenges if any.

All the respondents from the construction industry raised the sentiment that Building Studies at Ordinary Level did not equip them with the relevant practical skills necessary for them to fit well into the industry. They claimed that they had only been taught basic brick-laying techniques, hence they might not be competent enough to undertake other tasks like erecting complicated structures such as double-storey buildings and underground compartments. The other challenge raised by respondents from the construction industry was that it was difficult to get into the industry as an independent contender since most of them did not have adequate tools or capital to procure the equipment needed in the construction industry.

Fifty-percent of the carpenters interviewed expressed that their major challenge was that most of the knowledge they acquired in Ordinary Level Woodwork had been theoretical to the extent that they found it almost impossible to perform some of the tasks expected in their industry. A carpenter based at Pangolin Shopping Centre in Mucheke with six Ordinary Level passes including Woodwork asserted that,

> Most of the issues we dealt with at Ordinary Level were theoretical to the extent that most of the times we cannot practically perform the tasks that we have been taught. For
instance, having passed Ordinary Level Woodwork, I cannot assemble trusses for a simple roof, yet we theoretically studied that as one of the critical topics at that level.

Eighty-percent of the welders indicated that their major challenge was lack of funds to purchase the material needed for their work, otherwise they felt that they acquired adequate welding skills during their Ordinary Level studies in Metalwork. Sixty-percent of them further explained that even if somebody had the funds, some metals needed to assemble certain gadgets might be difficult to find in the local hardware stores, hence one would be compelled to travel as far as South Africa or Botswana to procure aluminium or brass for instance.

Instrumentality of Ordinary Level examinations in moulding a self-reliant school-leaver in Zimbabwe

Most of the air-time dealers and flee-market tenders purported that Ordinary Level studies did not adequately expose them to the survival skills that are necessary for their work. Instead they claimed that most of the survival skills had been acquired through interaction with friends and relatives. Eighty-percent of the respondents from this sector indicated that Ordinary Level Examinations have a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge rather than pragmatic skills. On the question of how they competed with their rivals who have never gone to school, fifty percent of them responded that it was very difficult to distinguish between an air-time dealer who had passed Ordinary Level and somebody who had never gone to school, except that one who had been good in Mathematics at Ordinary Level might be faster and precise in his or her transactions.

Ninety-percent of the respondents from the construction industry indicated that to a certain extent Building Studies at Ordinary has trained them to be responsible and self-reliant in the sense that individual candidates were assigned individual projects to accomplish. They asserted that even the theoretical component encouraged self-sufficiency as candidates would write the examination on individual basis. The same respondents added that however in most of the subjects studied at Ordinary Level the element of self-reliance seem to be insignificant.

The respondents from welding and carpentry generally echoed the sentiments that to some extent Ordinary Level studies provided them with a self-reliant mind through the fulfilment of individual projects as part of their examination. They however, reiterated the idea that the majority of subjects that are offered at Ordinary Level tend to be biased towards the theoretical component of knowledge.

Conclusion

From the findings discussed above, it can be established that there is little and in some cases no relevance between the Ordinary Level Examinations and the self-employment projects which are initiated by the school-leavers. It was revealed by the study that except in the cases of Mathematics, English Language, Commerce, Science and practical subjects most of the
knowledge acquired at Ordinary Level cannot be utilised practically by the school-leavers to earn a living.

It was established by the research that school-leavers face myriads of problems before and after they have secured self-help projects. These problems are mainly anchored on scarcity of initial capital to initiate a self-project. The study has revealed that most Ordinary school-leavers with good passes can start self-projects as long as they then source initial capital to purchase the necessary equipment and material needed in their projects.

It has been noted that the manner in which most Ordinary Level subjects are examined leaves a lot to be desired and in most cases candidates are not adequately prepared for the after school life. It has also emerged from the study that Ordinary Level examinations are strongly inclined towards the theoretical rather than practical aspects of education.

**Recommendations**

- The Ordinary Level syllabi in Zimbabwe should be crafted in the manner that it easily caters for the school-leavers who might decide to initiate self-employment projects.
- The approach in the teaching of Ordinary Level subjects should be largely practical rather than mere regurgitation of facts from textbooks.
- It is high time the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture implements vocational programmes (VOC-TECH) at secondary school level in line with the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission of inquiry into education and training in a bid to produce Ordinary Level graduates who are self-reliant.
- The Government through the Ministry of Medium and Small Enterprises should seek appropriate ways of assisting Ordinary Level school-leavers to start self-help projects.
- The Ministry of Education Sports and Culture should seek ways of teaching ubuntu/hunhu education at Ordinary Level as that might equip candidates with adequate communication and interaction skills expected by the community.

**References**


