Peeling the Onion: Public Policy Challenges, Hotspots and Gaps in Contentious Educational Policy Areas

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

This study examined challenges, hotspots and gaps in educational policy in Zimbabwe for a presentation for the Eidos Institute for Public Policy Conference 2013 in Cape Town; South Africa. This Zimbabwean case study was informed by a convenience sample of 107 heads of schools and 36 senior education officials from three educational regions attending Child Friendly Schools seminar. Data was collected from group discussions and group reports on the state of education in the country and the way forward. The researchers asked for and were granted permission to conduct this research. Key findings were that education is failing to teach ethics and responsibility, the proportion of national income spent on education is dwindling, popular participation is weak, there appear to be some social exclusion and the gap between policy formulation and policy implementation is widening. There are also gaps in proactive pedagogy for 21st-century learning. The research argues that education is about equipping students with a way of thinking and behaving that enables them to see opportunities and bring them to fruition, in the process bringing about change. It recommended a fundamental rethink about the purpose of education and a major shift in the process of learning, whereby the students become active rather than passive learners, the "teachers" become facilitators of the learning process and assessment tests for ability rather than knowledge.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational Policy is critical to the economic and social well being of individuals and society. Higher levels of education are associated with greater earnings, lower rates of employment, lower rates of poverty, better health and a host of other benefits. What is worrying are differences in attainment based on racial, ethnic, gender and other demographic groupings. Closing gaps in attainment across groupings requires public policy makers to take decisive action here and now especially in contentious policy areas. There are two sets of rules that educationists must navigate as they launch and grow their educational ventures. The first is the formal set of rules that are shaped by policy and guided by the law [1]. The second is the informal set of rules that are shaped by values and guided by ethical decision making and social responsibility. Of these, policy is central to the success of any education system. This paper, informed by a Zimbabwean case study, attempts to shed light on public policy challenges, hotspots and gaps in education.

1.2 Definition of Educational Policy

According to [2], Educational Policy focuses on the practical consequences of educational policy decisions and alternatives. It examines the relationship between educational policy and educational practice and sheds new light on important debates and controversies within the field. In effect, it blends the best of educational research with the world of practice, making it a valuable resource for educators, policy makers, administrators, researchers, teachers and graduate students.

Education policy refers to the collection of laws and rules that govern the operation of education systems [3]. Education occurs in many forms for many purposes through many institutions. Examples include early childhood education, kindergarten through to 12th grade, two and four year colleges or universities, graduate and professional education, adult education and job training. It means to say when we talk of policy challenges in education we must bear in mind that education policy can directly affect the education people engage in at all ages.

Examples of areas policy challenges that are subject to debate in education policy, specifically

from the field of schools, include school size, class size, school choice, school privatisation, teacher education and certification, salary, teaching methods, curricular content, graduation requirements, school infrastructure investment, and the values that schools are expected to uphold and model. From this discussion, it is now clear that education policy analysis is the scholarly study of education policy. It seeks to answer questions about the purpose of education, the objectives (societal and personal) that it is designed to attain, the methods for attaining them and the tools for measuring their success or failure.

According to [4], policy defines the area in which decisions are to be made, but it does not make the decisions. It usually provides a general guide that facilitates decision-making. Educational policies provide the direction for educational activities. The formulation of an educational policy sets the stage for implementation which is perhaps the most important aspect of planning (Ukeje, cited in 4). Planning is usually an action which succeeds policy formulation but precedes implementation.

1.3 Why Educational Policy is Important?

According to [5] the fact that education increases the skill levels of individuals and contributes to the rise and spread of technological progress is beyond dispute. However, there are policy challenges that puzzle politicians. Some of these are how large the effects of education are on individuals who go through the system. One may also ask who pays the costs and who obtains the benefits. It is a type of investment where public financing is substantial, even in countries where the level of state participation in economic activity is otherwise low.

The importance of public policy has been stressed by [1], who pointed out that one issue that will require further consideration and development as we look to bring public policy into spotlight is the need to know the most effective way to structure the coverage of public policy in curricula. There are two basic approaches. The first is to fully immerse students in a course dedicated to the topic of public policy. The two advantages this offers are that immersion brings the issues to the full attention of the students and that the class can be taught by an instructor who has specific expertise public

policy [1]. The alternative is to integrate public policy throughout the curriculum. As has been learned from struggling with this issue in the teaching of business ethics, the ideal may actually be to do both.

According to [5], education generates higher incomes for private individuals; it is generally believed that the whole is more than the sum of its parts and that the social returns to education exceed private returns. What this means is that society benefits more than individuals from its educated citizens. Better-educated workers are likely to be more productive at their own jobs; they may, at the same time, raise the productivity of their colleagues, by demonstration, discussion or dissemination. If the education system is to develop more entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours in its students, then in most institutions of education there needs to be a "very significant transformation in not only what is taught but how it is taught" [6] (p. 50).

1.4 Zimbabwe Educational Policy: An Overview

Zimbabwe as a country has an increasingly influential presence and role in the global education landscape, which underlines the importance of its progress and vision in the field of education. According to [7], Zimbabwe at 92% literate rate, is the most literate country in Africa. At present, and apart from certain key initiatives based on economic meltdown, the scholarly literature does not sufficiently reflect the significance and scope of developments in Zimbabwean educational policy and some of its challenges, hotspots and gaps. This research attempted to do this. Only those challenges that may be common in other African countries are highlighted so that they can receive attention from relevant authorities.

During the first decade of independence, the Zimbabwe government concentrated on increasing access to education. This period saw a rapid expansion of education system. Enrolments rose in leaps and bounds [8]. For instance, as noted in the Education Secretary Report [3], in 1979, there were 2401 primary schools enrolling 81 958 pupils learning in segregated schools, but ten years later primary schools had increased to 4 504, enrolling in excess of 2 274 178 pupils. At secondary school level, there were 177 schools in 1979 with a student population of 66 215, ten years later the secondary schools had increased to 1 502 with

an enrolment of 695 882 students. The new policies resulted in phenomenal expansion of educational provision and access. This expansion put pressure on human, financial and infrastructural resources as well as teaching and learning resources. This expansion of educational provision was a remarkable achievement but had adverse effects on quality of education. The growth outstripped capacity to provide quality education resources and this brought with it some policy challenges as presented in this paper.

1.5 Some Policy Challenges that Puzzle Politicians

Public education in Zimbabwe was made free in 1980 and inequities from the existing colonial system lessened. Education was declared a basic human right by President Robert Mugabe's incoming government and racial integration pursued. However, there are still some policy challenges that puzzle politicians which include:

- The growing student diversity.
- Little attention paid to classroom pedagogy.
- Effects of education on individuals.
- Assessment practices.
- Who pays the costs?
- Who gets the benefits?

As politicians grapple with these educational puzzles, public policy makers must rise above petty issues and accept the fact, though debatable that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This means to say that the social returns to education exceed private returns. Against this background, this research went on to look at challenges, hotspots and gaps in educational policy in Zimbabwe a country that is the most literate in Africa as of 2010.

1.6 Research Question

What are the challenges, hotspots and gaps in educational policy in Zimbabwe?

1.7 Purpose of Study

This study examined challenges, hotspots and gaps in educational policy in Zimbabwe for a presentation for the IDOs Conference 2013 in Cape Town; South Africa.

2. METHODOLOGY

This Zimbabwean case study was informed by a convenience sample of 107 heads of schools and 36 senior education officials from three educational regions attending Child Friendly Schools seminar. Data was collected from group discussions and group reports on the state of education in the country and the way forward. The researchers asked for and were granted permission to conduct this research.

This research took cognisance of the weaknesses inherent in qualitative methodologies. For this reason, a diary was kept to record occurrences on every step and action that was undertaken during the process of study [9]. Researchers also made efforts to ensured the anonymity of informants in this study. The researcher gave instructions about how the interviewees were to answer the interviews. All efforts were made to ensure the researchers' biases could not in any way affect the responses of the interviewees.

Data was analysed using Five- Phased Cycle [9]. This cycle consists of compiling, disassembling, reassembling (and arraying), interpreting, and concluding.

2.1 A Glimpse of Results on Challenges, Hotspots and Gaps in Educational Policy

2.1.1 Failing to teach ethics and responsibility

Zimbabwean education system was hailed for being one of the best in Africa. However, respondents still found gaps with the system. One area that received more attention was that of ethics and responsibility. Respondents in this study saw ethical standards as going on a downward trend and blamed short comings in educational policy. Some had this to say:

I think ethics and responsibility are in a downward trend. These are some shortcomings in educational policy.

Teaching ethics and social responsibility is firmly entrenched in the modern educational settings but according to the respondents in this study, ethics and responsibility are not being followed in real life practices. While the outcomes of business ethics education has come under fire, the education of business students about the ethical and social context of their decisions and actions continues to evolve [10]. There must be a willingness to peel back the onion and examine the values that are at the core of any social enterprise's culture. As today's students demonstrate digital literacy, they must also do the same with civic responsibility. What this means for public policy in education is that if it is to make visible impact, it must play a role in the promotion of ethics and civic responsibility in society. Theory suggests that public policies will need to have not just "clear and fair policies and procedures, and to communicate them positively and enthusiastically" as [11], (p. 152) contends, but to address the barriers that are preventing civic responsibility within various organisations and to create an environment that is supportive of, and conducive to, its development. To respondents in this study,

Once this is done, then corruption will be a thing of the past.

2.1.2 The proportion of national income spent on education is dwindling

For any education to take effect, funding is needed. Zimbabwe is one of very few countries in the world where the educational budget is far lower than that of defence. However, despite this noble development, respondents in this study noted a decline in the proportion of national income spend on education. To them:

Funding appears to be a major challenge. The proportion of national income spent on education has been declining over the years since independence.

From this finding, funding is and will remain under intense scrutiny particularly during as it affects vulnerable groups in society. Through funding, education will gain new powers and tools so that the nature and functioning of the system will cover the less fortunate members of the society. It will be the best way to raise performance and secure standards.

2.1.3 Popular participation is weak

From the respondents in this study, popular participation was still questionable in educational policy making and this posed challenges. On this issue, one respondent has this to say:

What we known is that in a democracy, the principle of public participation holds that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be

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involved in the decision-making process. Public participation in educational policy making processes appears weak and implies that the public's contribution is not in any way influencing decision making processes.

Public participation is a political principle or practice, and may also be recognised as a right (right to public participation). The terms public participation may be used interchangeably with the concept or practice of stakeholder engagement and/or popular participation. It appears as though the issue of popular participation is a hot global issue. A study by [12] that compared the World Bank 2020 Education Strategy to research conducted a few years ago analysing the effectiveness of the Bolivian Popular Participation law (1994) through policy study conducted from 2000 to 2004, including fieldwork in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2002 dwelt extensively on this issue. That policy research focused on Popular Participation and successive policy initiatives that modified or impacted public services, particularly public education. Challenges associated with this issue included the governance structures put in place by the Popular Participation law, decentralising authority and resources to the municipal level and creating mechanisms for civil society participation in governance. To this study, all these had potential pitfalls. To [12], the implementation of Popular Participation was problematic at best, and the response to features of Popular Participation that parallel the 2020 Education Strategy – in particular, the operating principles enumerated on pp. 7–8 of the 2020 Education Strategy Concept Note – have important implications for the proposed Bank strategy.

According to [13], public participation may be regarded as a way of empowering and as vital part of democratic governance. To them, public participation is a regarded as one potential solution to the crisis in public trust and governance, particularly in developing countries of Africa and other newer democracies. The idea is that public should be involved more fully in the policy process. What is needed is that authorities need to seek public views and participation, instead of treating the public as simply passive recipients of policy decisions.

According to [14], Mauritius, like many developing countries, has a need for educational reform. In that island country, education is a contentious policy area where it is difficult to build consensus [14]. They further explain that

Mauritius has a well-established procedure, the civic network, for involving the public in policy making and building state legitimacy and capacity. Yet, in recent attempts at educational reform, the civic network has been avoided. Instead, they have relied upon technocratic policy making which, in political terms, has had limited success. In participatory societies, a participatory policy procedure probably is essential to the successful development and implementation of reforms in contentious policy areas like education.

2.1.4 Social exclusion

Some forms of social exclusion such as gender inequality and poverty, have been on the policy landscape for many years. Apart from gender, there are also other social group such as indigenous people, ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, sex workers, prisoners, and many more where there is disparate and patchy evidence of policy success. In this study it was exposed and one respondent argued that:

I still feel the a contentious policy area is social exclusion because as i see it, systematic discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender non-confirmation, age, disability, HIV status, migrant status or where they live, shaped certain communities' social prospects, access to services and ability to mobilise in defence of their rights.

Social exclusion is a source of conflicts and in some parts of Africa can trigger wars. It is also a challenge in developing countries. For instance, [15] examined patterns of social exclusion in the compulsory school system of England and Wales. In that study, although they did not touch much on weakening supervision, they supported that stance by suggests that the weakening of local government control of the school system from the 1980s onwards led to a very real fear that market forces would lead to increased polarisation of school intakes and results in terms of social background [15].

These researchers went on to list key policy changes and early research relevant to the increased use of market forces in compulsory education. They also recommended among other issues a human rights framework for protecting the rights of marginalised people and policies and programmes that seek to address the

challenges of marginalised groups in a long-term and systemic manner [15].

2.1.5 Gap between policy formulation and policy implementation

Respondents in this Zimbabwean study voiced their concern on the gap that exists between policy formulation and policy implementation. One pointed out that:

We have competent policy formulators in this country when it comes to educational policy. Our challenge is on implementation. There is a huge gap between policy formulation and policy implementation.

The gap identified in this study is confirmed elsewhere by [4] who argues that the gap that often exists between policy formulation and implementation provokes inquiry to identify factors that constrain the effective implementation of educational policies. He further opines that the problem of policy implementation is traceable to the planning stage which comes immediately after policy formulation. Ukeje (cited in) [4] has stated clearly that good planning will ensure effective implementation. Good planning that can facilitate effective implementation ought to consider such factors as the planning environment, social environment, political environment, and financial and statistical problems. It is in recognition of this observation that Aghenta (cited in) [4] noted that for education to achieve all ends, it has to be carefully planned. The plan must take into consideration the needs of the society. What this means is that the political, socio-cultural, economic, military, scientific, and technological realities of the environment are very important to the survival of any contentious educational policy.

2.1.6 Proactive pedagogy: 21st-century learning

A major challenge that is haunting many educational establishments is to pay more attention to 21st-century learning. A respondent in this study who appeared well informed on this issue said:

Educational policy is failing to pay attention to 21st Century learning which includes things like cell phone and video games, Facebook, YouTube and digital media among others. These are changing the way young people play and socialize in the 21st century.

The term "21st-century skills" is generally used to refer to certain core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving that educational policy makers believe schools need to teach to help students thrive in today's world. Nevertheless, in a broader sense, however, the idea of what learning in the 21st century should look like is open to interpretation—and controversy. Twenty-first-century learning means that students master content while producing, synthesising, and evaluating information from a wide variety of subjects and sources with an understanding of and respect for diverse cultures. Students demonstrate the three Rs, but also the three Cs: creativity, communication, and collaboration.

2.1.7 Education and sustainable development

One area which was seen by the respondents in this study to be a public policy challenge in education is education for sustainable development. If sustainability is fundamentally a learning process as much as it is an ideal, the efforts of academia are critical to its steady progress [16]. One respondent argued that:

Sustainability is an important concept these days. Sustainability innovation takes place in many educational institutions in many forms such as campus "greening," curriculum evolution and research discoveries. However what appears missing is the ability to learn and to integrate the lessons from these efforts.

According to [16], the pursuit of sustainability requires that educational systems become testing grounds for new experiments, ideas and values to help improve prospects for sustainable development. He went further to point out that academic institutions have particular contributions to make, using their freedom and creativity to engage with the complexities and challenges of sustainability. Strategic understandings of educational change underpin development initiatives and should be put in the forefront in public policy making for further collegial discussion worldwide.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Probably the first lesson that can be learned from the above is that education is about equipping

students with a way of thinking and behaving that enables them to see opportunities and bring them to fruition, in the process bringing about change. To achieve this requires a different approach to teaching, learning and assessment than has been traditional. As discussed in this paper, it requires a fundamental rethink about the purpose of education and a major shift in the process of learning, whereby the students become active rather than passive learners, the "teachers" become facilitators of the learning process and assessment tests for ability rather than knowledge.

Universities and colleges will need not only to transform their programmes but to change the way they teach and assess and the way they preserve intellectual integrity, critical inquiry and commitment to learning and understanding. They need to move away from passive to active learning and enabling students not just to learn "what" but "how to" [4], (p.109). This will not be easy, especially given the class sizes in some African countries and it is likely to be resisted as elsewhere. Most academics will not be familiar with the techniques needed and inevitably some will be sceptical about its relevance, seeing it as an attack on "traditional educational values" [17] (p. xiv). Hence, changes will be needed to the structure and resourcing of education and staff will need to be trained in the requisite techniques.

If students are to play an active role in developing their country's economy and making it more competitive, they will need to develop the attributes of the entrepreneur irrespective of whichever discipline they are studying and whether or not they create their own venture [4]. All employers, in both the private and the public sectors, will need employees who can see opportunity and can, in the words of [18] (p. 1), "Initiate, do, achieve and build" rather than see "chaos, contradiction and confusion" or simply "watch, analyse and describe".

Public policy in education must be oriented so that it addresses the risks of experimental change other that simply maintaining traditional forms and practices. Public policy in education should initiate a longitudinal programme of rigorous research and experimentation that records the changes taking place, and monitors and documents the impact on the students, the economy and the society at large.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history.php?iid=746&id=22&aid=6994