

The Paradox of Using Educational Reform as an Instrument for Social Transformation: A Marxist Analysis

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ABSTRACT Attaining economic and social development is a goal that many nations the world over seek to accomplish with intense vigour. Consequently, many countries have developed or adopted models of development that are consistent with their notion of the concept of development and how best it can be brought about. In Zimbabwe, and indeed many other independent countries of Southern Africa, educational reform has been adopted as a major vehicle in the process of social and economic transformation. This explains why many independent countries of Southern Africa have made massive investments in educational reform. Whether or not these educational reforms have succeeded in yielding the much expected results in terms of socio-economic development is an issue that has generated a lot of controversy among critics. This conceptual paper adopts a Marxist theoretical approach to reflect, analyse and stimulate an intellectual discourse on the paradox of using educational reform as an agent for economic development. Its main thesis is that educational reforms, while necessary, are not sufficient to stimulate socio-economic development particularly in post-colonial states of Southern Africa. The article is based on the review of local and international literature on the relationship between education and development.

INTRODUCTION

Formal education is primarily regarded the world over as an important instrument for human, social and economic development (Torres-Harding et al. 2014). This is the most probable reason why governments, countries and planners invest heavily in the area of educational development. In developing countries like Latin America, Caribbean and Africa (Freire 2014; Machingambi 2008), education has for long time been highly esteemed as the panacea for socio-economic and national development problems. This belief is underpinned by the strong conviction that social ills ranging from inequality, poverty, gender inequity, underdevelopment, and class would be permanently addressed through reforms in education (Zvobgo 2007; Atkinson et al. 2003) This view, which is informed in part, by the Liberal Reformist stance and the Structural Functionalist Theory of Modernisation (Freire 2014), lies at the core of major educational policy, planning and reform adopted by many post-colonial states of Sub-Saharan Africa. Inspired by this view, the educational systems of these countries underwent massive reform, expansion and democratisation.

This paper is inspired by the ardent need to critically reflect on the impact of these reform interventions and policy positions in terms of

socio-economic development and social transformation. There is a growing concern among critics that in spite of an impressive record of educational expansion and reform, the outcome in terms of socio-economic development has remained largely marginal. As Shizha and Kariwo (2012) succinctly observe, notwithstanding the heavy expenditure and reform in education, the majority of people in developing societies are far from being egalitarian. This tends to heighten the debate on the potential of educational reforms to stimulate socio-economic development.

While, moderate critics have raised the concern that by itself, educational reform can only achieve very limited social change, Marxists have out-rightly rejected education's role in this regard since to them, education merely reproduces the social relations of production that prevail in society (Bowles 2012; Bourdieu 2008). Feminist critics also doubt the effectiveness of educational reforms in bringing about meaningful socio economic changes among all citizens in a society that is fraught with a sexist and patriarchal value system that relegates girls and women (Chabaya et al. 2009).

This paper seeks to stimulate an intellectual discourse on the potential of educational reform as an exogenous force with which to activate social transformation in society. The central the-

sis that propels this presentation is that the complex issue of social development can never be sufficiently attained by educational reforms alone without corresponding changes in other economic and social sectors such as social class relations, availability of resources, gender and power relations as well as, economic and political stability. The discussion is set to examine this issue using the Marxist perspective as a frame of reference.

The Concept of Education

Education encompasses the acquisition of a set of skills, knowledge, attitude and values essential for informed participation in the cultural, economic, political and social life of communities (Peresuh and Ndawi 1998). This view depicts education as a spine for national development. This conception of education is central to the human capital investment theory which posits that investment in education will have a trickling down effect that will eventually lead to socio-economic development (Thomson 2008).

The human capital investment theory lays an overwhelming emphasis on education as a major vehicle in the process of social and national development. That is to say education has to minister to the socio-economic needs of the citizens by supplying the economy with skilled manpower and also imparting knowledge and expertise that is crucial in national development (Machingambi 2008; Zvobgo 2007). The human capital investment theory rests on the premise that every member of society will benefit from a rise in the levels of education acquired by the average citizen. Its major handicap is that it does not focus on the relevance, type and political nature of curricula that prevail in many educational institutions especially in the African continent (Okeke 2008).

The Concept of Development

The concept of development is complex and broad and has come to mean different things to different people. As Badat (2009) posits, the notion of development is not neutral as it is embedded in different views of the world and society, including views of what constitutes a just and good society. Thus the decisions, policies, actions and practices that are associated with particular conceptions of development are not

neutral as they have differential effects on different social classes and groups in society. In terms of the Functionalist Theory of modernisation, the term development is usually conceived in terms of the macroeconomic forces of growth and positive social change (Atkinson et al. 2003). In terms of this view, education plays a critical role in the development process by preparing students for the labour market and the economy. This view has it that development can only come about if schools and other educational institutions produce skilled and productive workers who contribute positively to economic growth (Yates 2014). Such notion of development contrasts sharply with the Marxist view which among other things regards development as the creation of a humane society that is underpinned by social equality, non-oppression and non-exploitation of one social group by another (Bourdieu 2008). Marxists regard education as ideological, political and un-neutral, qualities that render it an ineffective tool with which to transform society.

This paper will apply the concept *development* in a much broader and multi-faceted way that embraces the improvement of the individual and collective human condition, increasing choices and participation, social equality, equity, improved standards of living and well-being, civil liberties, economic and social rights, health care issues and cultural preservation (Francis and Hezel 2008). In keeping with Thomson's (2008) view, development is depicted in this paper not as a stage to be attained or a goal to aim for. Instead, it is a constant process of improvement in which education, service and other social forces are expected to play a prominent role in creating positive change in the self, the social group and the community.

The Essence of Educational Reform

The term reform is usually conflated with such terms as transformation, development and reconstruction. The thread that unites all the four terms is the idea of progressive change. Educational reform has to do with the alterations or reconstruction of the educational system in order to bring about desired changes or conditions. In this discourse, the terms social transformation, development and reconstruction will be used interchangeably.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Situation in Zimbabwe and Other African Countries

In the developing countries of Africa, the strong belief in the potency of education as an instrument for socio economic development has been clearly attested by the huge sums allocated in educational budgets and investment programmes (Zivengwa 2012; Peresuh and Ndawi 1998). In respect of Zimbabwe and many Southern African countries, reforms in education were mainly characterised by phenomenal expansion of all levels of the education system, the establishment of free primary education and the deracialisation of education (Zvobgo 2007). These and other reforms adopted were aimed at making education accessible to almost all those who needed it. To Functionalist theorists, access to education opens greater opportunities for individual self- advancement with status and financial rewards offered to those who can apply their energy and ability more successfully. Educational expansion was justified on the assumption that increased schooling will act as an avenue to prestigious social positions, which in the past were reserved for the privileged social groups. Thus, access to education was viewed as an important intervening variable in the process of upward social mobility (Machingura 2006).

In Zimbabwe, as in many post-independent African countries, access to primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions was widened through the phenomenal expansion of schools colleges and universities. The massive expansion of the secondary school system at independence in 1980, saw the transition rate from primary to secondary shooting from 12.5% to 70% (Shizha 2012).

Reform in higher education included among other things the expansion of the sector through the construction of more institutions which include teacher training colleges, agricultural colleges, technical colleges, and universities (Zivengwa 2012). In a bid to increase access to higher education by the youth, all technical colleges in Zimbabwe were upgraded to polytechnics in 2002. Access was further boosted through the establishment of more public and private institutions and the devolution of degree programmes to selected polytechnics and teachers colleges. As Zvobgo (2007) notes, by 2004 Zimbabwe

was boasting of 8 public and 4 private universities while the total number of universities had risen to 13 by 2008.

This expansion is remarkable given the fact that at independence in 1980, Zimbabwe had only one university. As a result of these measures the higher education sector recorded a 364% gross enrolment increase from 1980 to 1987 (Public Service Circular 1997). In 1994 the enrolment increased by 37%, reaching a peak increase of 84% between 2002 and 2005 (Zivengwa 2012).

While there has been appreciable improvement in access to HE, the greatest challenge which Zimbabwe faced revolved around the issue of quality and the relevance of the education system. A study carried out by Mandebvu (1996) on the relevance of school education to employment in Zimbabwe revealed that there is a mismatch between what traditional school education develops in learners and the needs of the world of work. The study established that most employers particularly in the city of Harare, criticised the Zimbabwean education system for being too academic and lacking in the inculcation of a proper work ethic. The critical issue was that the prevailing educational system, did not necessarily develop the requisite job-related competencies. This view is illuminated by Thomson (2008) who remarks in respect of education in the developing countries that much of the content and style of education is often divorced from the reality that surround the students.

Francis and Hezel (2008) advance an interesting observation that investment in education does not in itself guarantee development. The two authors further argue that education should not be taken out of the context of the multiple and complex forces at work in a society nor should education be assigned too great an importance in development. This means that other important factors in society need to be in place or aligned if at all the educational system is to make a meaningful contribution in development. Such factors include but are not limited to political stability, peaceful social environment, economic growth and others. It is therefore critical to point out that no amount of educational reform can stimulate socio-economic development if the political and economic systems of a country are in disarray. A case in point is the political and economic meltdown that was experienced in Zimbabwe during the period from 1999 to 2009. This crisis gave rise to all sorts of undesirable

conditions that actually inhibited development. The economic challenges that were exacerbated by the violent seizures of white-owned land by the Robert Mugabe-led government gave rise to hyper-inflation of over five thousand billion percent, that effectively forced the economy to grind to a halt. This situation was compounded by the political instability and the gross human rights violations that were perpetrated by the State Apparatus on civil society and political opponents giving rise to animosity, and a legacy of violence (Zivengwa 2012; Okeke 2008). These conditions, which obviously were not conducive for development, aggravated the problem of the brain drain as disillusioned workers from all sectors of the economy including those in education were forced to emigrate in search of greener pastures in the region and diaspora Zvobgo (2007). Although all sectors of the Zimbabwean economy were vulnerable to the brain drain problem, the education and training sector is largely believed to have been the greatest casualty.

The brain drain problem remains a critical challenge because it denies people the opportunity to use their skills and knowledge for national development. So, in this case the expanded Zimbabwean educational system was of little benefit to the local people since Zimbabwe was mainly training people for the world market. With regards to the education sector, the brain drain problem had the further undesirable effect that the government had to employ unqualified teachers to fill the vacant positions thereby exacerbating the problem of quality in education.

In the South African education system several laws, strategic plans, policy statements and intervention programmes were initiated by the Department of Education so as to propel the transformation agenda (Department of Education 1997). The creation of a single national department of education, which did not rely on race as criteria to access education was a notable reform in this regard. The effecting of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to regulate qualifications and programmes in schools, colleges, technikons and universities is also noteworthy. As Cele (2004) points out the NQF was established as an instrument of the single national high-quality education and training system that was consistent with the ideals of an inclusive education system.

Major reforms also took the form of the creation of new institutional types mainly through incorporations and mergers. A case in point was the incorporation of colleges of education into universities as well as the merging of technikons and universities. Various policy regimes were also put in place in order to redress educational inequalities and inequities in learning opportunities (Department of Education 1997). These included but were not limited to the 1995 White Paper on Education and Training, the National Education Policy Act of 1996, the South African Schools Act of 1998 whose hallmark was to ensure that equity prevails and that all citizens had equal learning opportunities (Cele 2004). The assumption was that these and other measures would address the scourge of poverty, inequality and other social vices that impede on social development.

The critical question that comes to the fore is to what extent has this reform agenda achieved its intended consequences? Reflecting broadly on the situation in developing countries, Tagwira (2006) makes an exciting observation that despite heavy expenditure, reform and considerable expansion in education, results in terms of socio-economic development have been rather disappointing. This is particularly true with countries like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and South Africa where reforms in education did not succeed in eliminating social inequality, elitism, poverty and unemployment (Zivengwa 2012).

Critics argue that the uncontrolled expansion of the educational system itself as a reform strategy has created relatively new problems in developing countries such as the problem of educated unemployment. As Shizha and Kariwo (2012) notes in respect of Zimbabwe, the ever increasing numbers of graduates who continue to pour onto a super saturated labour market, has given rise to massive school-leaver unemployment crises. This, Thomson (2008) observes, often leads to the problem of the “diploma disease”. This problem arises out of the strong belief that educational qualifications are the key to obtaining the best paid jobs in society. Informed by this belief, people will strive to acquire as many higher degrees as possible with the hope that this will help them to secure employment. In this way, the educational process becomes a ritualistic process of accumulating qualifications (Tagwira 2006).

In Zimbabwe, the provision of more education, while noble, did not necessarily provide access to more jobs except perhaps for teachers (Peresuh and Ndawi 1998; Kapfunde 1999) because the economy continued to shrink while on the other hand the education system was expanding. This brings to question the prudence of expanding the educational system without a corresponding expansion of the economy or a policy of population control. The critical issue here is that as long as population growth continues unabated and the economy remains stagnant, there will always be more people than jobs to fill and therefore unemployment will persist even if everyone is educated. Zvobgo (2007) commenting on Sub-Saharan Africa in general observes, that the numbers leaving school year after year are such that, unless the economy is transformed, there appears little hope of employment for most school leavers. This seems to suggest that educational expansion without a corresponding restructuring or activation of the economy is likely to create more socio-economic problems than it may purport to address.

Therefore the researcher concurs with Zvobgo (2007) who argues that educational reforms need to be complemented by many other forces in society if such reforms are to make real impact. Such forces could include agricultural, rural and industrial development, economic restructuring, political stability and a policy on population control. In respect of Zimbabwe, for instance, one can argue that there seems to have been an over investment in educational reform particularly in the eighties at the expense of other fundamental investment areas that could have stimulated economic development. Among the areas that could have been prioritised include the manufacturing, mining, water resources and development as well as industrial and technological development sectors. It is therefore important to note that, while education remains critical on the Sub-Saharan Africa development agenda, careful deployment of resources in education must be made so that other equally important areas of development do not suffer from lack of financial support. From the preceding, it is clear that the view that educational reform is the prime mover in national development cannot be accepted without serious questioning.

While many reforms adopted in many Southern African countries did widen educational opportunities for the majority of the citizens, it re-

mains true that these reforms were not sufficient to stimulate far reaching social transformation. This seems to give credence to the Marxist argument as clearly articulated in the work of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu. These theorists maintain that educational reform can hardly bring about any meaningful socio-economic changes in an economy that is driven by capitalist values and ethos (Bourdieu 2008; Bowles 2012).

The Marxist view of education is premised on the idea that education and educational reform cannot be understood independently of the main economic relations of the society of which it is a part (Bowles 2012). To Marxists, the economic factors in society constitute the base or foundation of that society as these exert a determining role on the operations of all other factors in society such as the education, media, and the religious system. The later aspects are referred to as the superstructure because the nature and extent of their operation is dictated, influenced and constrained by the economic base (Bourdieu 2008) That is to say, a society's education system is shaped, determined and constrained by the economic system and in turn the education system itself responds by reflecting and reproducing existing social relationships that prevail in the broader economy.

This argument implies that for social change or development to occur attention should be directed first and foremost at the economic aspects of society and then at the education system later. For instance, an educational system that operates in a gendered and class society tends to promote gender relations and class values rather than being in direct contradiction with them. This way Marxists argue that educational reform, instead of transforming society, tends to legitimate and perpetuates the status quo.

Marxists also find it paradoxical to entrust the educational system with the responsibility of transforming society given the fact that the education system itself is stratified and characterised by inequalities. The stratified and unequal nature of the educational system serves the purpose of socialising students in terms of personality traits that are compatible with the relationship of dominance and subordination that exist in the capitalist world of work (Freire 2014; Okeke 2008). This renders the current educational system a social problem and an ineffective tool with which to transform society. There-

fore from a Marxist position, to bring notable socio-economic change in society, the way forward is to address conditions in the economic infrastructure first and then bring reforms in education later. As Chung and Ngara (1985) cogently observe, education is there to service the existing political and socio-economic order rather than being in direct contradiction to it.

The view that education acts as an avenue for social advancement has become widely accepted and is rarely questioned in Zimbabwe and other African countries in the sub-continent. From a Marxist stand point, this view has severe limitations since access to education does not necessarily guarantee equal educational opportunities for pupils of different social classes. Essentially this means that pupils entering school may not benefit equally from education or reforms for that matter since they are differentially advantaged as a result of different social class backgrounds. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the democratisation and deracialisation of education as reforms adopted at independence in 1980 seem to have largely benefited children from middle and upper-class backgrounds than those from lower class backgrounds. This is so because deracialised schools (previously referred to as Group A schools in Zimbabwe and as former model C schools in South Africa) remained in the high fee paying category with the ultimate undesirable effect that children from lower income families could not afford to enrol with them (Zvobgo 2007). These schools were created so as to cater specifically for the educational needs of white children only. Though no longer so today, such schools are still more privileged than other schools from the point of view of equipment and other physical provisions they acquired prior to independence (Tagwira 2006). Typical examples of such provisions and facilities include sporting equipment of such games like tennis, cricket, rugby and swimming. In fact, these schools are still differentiated by social class and privilege. It is therefore no overstatement to say that children from former group A schools or former Model C schools continue to receive better education than those from high density suburbs and impoverished rural areas.

Cele (2004) argues that the inherent language barrier that exists in schools and universities ultimately reduces the possibility of success for the majority of students. This view is buttressed by Scot et al. (2007) who remark in respect of

previously advantaged universities in South Africa that while admission policies no longer explicitly discriminate against students on the basis of their race, black students in South Africa continue to be differentially excluded because of poverty in the family and the language they speak. In this way, poverty is mediated through language resulting in serious scholarly hindrances in the learning of students from poor families. Therefore, the need to develop African languages as academic languages for use in universities should be explored with fervent vigour if at all students are to benefit fully from the expanded system of higher education.

The foregoing discussion seems to strongly suggest that reforms in education seem to remain largely superficial, as they are incapable of purging society of vices such as social inequalities and relationships of domination and subordination. To Marxists, the solution lies in the radical restructuring of socio-economic relations and not in educational reform. Feminists argue that the current system of education does not sufficiently equip girls and women for total liberation and participation in all social, political and cultural spheres. The point implied here is that in a patriarchal society such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, social institutions of which education is one are all biased in favour of boys and men. Given this scenario, any educational reform enacted in such an unbalanced social environment has very limited chances of improving the socio-economic status of girls and women in any significant way. For example, owing to poverty and cultural stereotypes that depict girls as inferior to boys, girls have not fully benefited from the widening of educational opportunities in the same way as their male counterparts in Zimbabwe. As amply demonstrated by the Nziramasanga Commission of inquiry into Education and training in Zimbabwe (1999), in times of financial crises many poor parents sacrifice the education of their daughters while attaching more importance to the education of their sons whom they regard as heirs who will perpetuate the family name. These findings are consistent with Sigauke's (2002) observations, which he made in a study of factors that influence participation in adult literacy programmes in the Mashonaland central province in Zimbabwe.

The study revealed that female participation in adult literacy programmes was strongly constrained by traditional roles often assigned to

women in the family. These findings are instructive as they help us realise that reforms in education can only enhance the material and social status of girls/women if social vices such as sexism, patriarchy, cultural stereotypes and traditional values that marginalise girls/women are addressed first. The socialist Feminist Theory has it that the solution to the problem of women socio-economic development does not lie in educational reform or in affirmative policies but in the destruction of all patriarchal relations that exist in society.

In Zimbabwean schools, colleges and universities, the marginalisation of girls/women is facilitated in part through subject-stereotyping, teachers' attitudes, the sexual division of labour and the use of gender insensitive language for instructional purposes (Mutekwe 2012; Gordon 2004). In the final analysis, education ceases to be neutral as it tends to confine and channel girls/women into inferior subjects that prepare them for low socio-economic positions in society as compared to their male counterparts. The above study also showed that despite the University of Zimbabwe's affirmative policy to promote girls education, most female students are still concentrated in the Faculty of Arts, Commerce and Education with very few in the Science and Engineering faculties. Of issue here is that girls tend to be concentrated in areas that channel and destine them for low status jobs as compared to boys. This study is invaluable as it serves to remind us that as long as girls are systematically discriminated against by men in education and occupational structures, educational reform may not achieve much in emancipating them from their subordinate and subservient status. This buttresses the view that while education is a necessary condition for transformation and development, it is not sufficient. As Badat (2009) asserts, there must be simultaneous transformation and development initiatives in other arenas of society if education is to make an effective contribution and if those who receive education are to derive maximum benefit from it.

CONCLUSION

Education and educational reform in particular has for long been perceived as the vanguard of the social development process. This has seen massive investment being made in educational development and transformation particularly in

post-independent African countries. With many of these reforms failing to achieve the desired results in most of Southern Africa, there is a growing concern that educational reform should not be treated as an exogenous force with which to stimulate social and economic development. The author has argued that while education may be a pre-requisite for development, it is by no means the only one and perhaps not even the most important one. In order that educational reform exert influential role in social transformation, it is critical that structures and processes of educational change be linked to changes in other social conditions and institutions of the broader society. Major reform programmes embarked upon by a number of independent African countries like Zimbabwe did not only fail to generate social, economic and political change but have somehow generated more problems than solutions to development. To Marxists, the way to social development does not lie in educational reform but in a wider restructuring of the economic, social and political base. In other words educational reforms should be well located and complemented with factors in the economic, social, cultural and political systems of society if at all real transformation is to be realised. Therefore the use of educational reform as a stimulant for social development is always a paradox; the outcome of which will depend on other multiple and complex material conditions that exist and prevail in any particular society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the study was to stimulate a critical conversation on the paradox of using educational reform as an instrument for social and economic development particularly in the African context. The study has highlighted that educational reform, on its own, cannot achieve much in terms of socio-economic development. In view of the conclusions, the following recommendations are made to inform policy makers, governments and planners:

Reforms in education should always be initiated in the context of a broader process of economic, social and political restructuring. In other words educational reforms need to be backed up by corresponding restructuring of the economic, cultural, social and political systems of society.

Governments should guard against the temptation of allocating more financial resources to the education system at the expense of other equally important sectors of the economy. This is important as the educational reform process can only achieve real impact if all the other sectors of the society are functioning properly.

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