Pragmatism: A considerable facet for curriculum relevance in Zimbabwe’s Primary and Secondary schools

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In the previous article, titled ‘Curriculum relevance in Zimbabwean primary and secondary schools: Circuitous Search for Lasting Solutions,’ I opened up the discussion of curriculum relevance by focusing on curriculum relevance in Zimbabwean primary and secondary schools. In this article my focus is on the extent to which pragmatism can be employed to enhance the relevance of Zimbabwe’s primary and secondary curricula, especially, at a time when Zimbabweans are re-thinking or revisiting their education agenda. The curricula of the two sectors of education are undergoing review. The discussion revolves around three questions: What is pragmatism? Is it reasonable to consider pragmatism as a philosophy that can be used to inform our philosophical considerations in education? To what extent can pragmatism be employed to enhance the usefulness of Zimbabwe’s education at primary and secondary level?

Pragmatism is a philosophy that can be used to correct the colonial mindset of Zimbabweans who were made to despise education rooted in practice. Prior to and after independence, Zimbabweans were socialised to perceive academic education as superior to education that has a bias to practical work. Thus, curricula with a slant towards practical work were viewed as qualitatively inferior to those with an academic bias. Pragmatism values practical work as an integral part of the learning process and many progressive nations has embraced this philosophy (Lawton, Gordon, Ing, Gibby, Pring and Moore, 2012). To the Cubans pragmatism is praxis, whereas, the Americans call it pragmatism using John Dewey’s terminology and the Tanzanians refer to it as education for self reliance. In Zimbabwe, pragmatism has evolved from Education with Production in the 1980s to the current Vocational Technical Education. Prior to independence, pragmatism used to be offered as F2 in secondary schools on discriminatory basis. African learners were attending poorly resourced secondary schools in comparison their European counterparts.

Pragmatism if clearly understood and appropriately applied has several advantages. Here, I consider five.

First, pragmatism enables learners to marry theory with practice. It helps them to put into practice what they learn. Learners use theoretical knowledge to deal with real life situations. Second, pragmatism helps learners to manipulate their environment rather than getting enslaved by it. Third, pragmatism gives the learners the opportunities to appreciate the need to work hard using both their brains and hands upon leaving school. Fourth, pragmatism is a pathway to active engagement in learning by pupils.
Finally, it is a vehicle for education for self reliance because it removes the dependency syndrome mentality from the learners. Mao, a Chinese leader in the 1970s, once said that any education that is devoid of practice is obsolete. Malownski, a Russian educationist and scholar also underscored Mao’s line of thought by likening education without practice to flogging a dead horse.

The preceding five reasons underlining why pragmatism is a considerable facet for curriculum relevance in the Zimbabwean schools are confirmed by Asmal (2003:2) commenting on the South African curriculum review when he says, “We must abandon the apartheid-distorted, dull, uninteresting, rote learning, imposed on most learners, and turn to the human rights-inspired, lively, activity-based, learner-centred and entrepreneurial activity that it should be for all learners.” This observation is pertinent because pragmatism ensures that curricula offered in schools are relevant since pragmatism departs from the traditional educational practices. The likes of Comenius described such educational practices as ones in which knowledge was poured into the learners in an intricate and confusing manner rather than doing so in a gentle and perspicacious manner. Under such circumstances, the teacher, instead of the learner did most of the learning, while the learner was just a meek listener and passive recipient of information who could not translate the theoretical knowledge into practice.

Being a pragmatist, I will demonstrate how pragmatism is applicable to Zimbabwean primary and secondary school curricula. With reference to the primary education curriculum, it is my conviction that pragmatism spans across all the twelve subjects at this level. In the languages, ChiShona, IsiNdebele and English (the current languages that are the formally learnt in Mashonaland/Manicaland/Masvingo/Midlands and Matabeleland/Midlands areas of Zimbabwe), primary school pupils can learn functional communicative language to help them show others directions using oral language and map work, read instructions about medical prescriptions, and write friendly and business letters. In mathematics, home economics, social studies, agriculture and environmental science, the pupils can learn to budget, prepare beds, food, medical dosages and application of fertilisers and pesticides using the correct measurements. In religious and moral studies, social studies, physical education, art and craft, HIV and AIDS (health and life skills), pupils can learn socialisation, leadership, communalisation, harmony and tolerance skills. All these benefits can only be realised when the primary school syllabi are emphasising progressive (pragmatist) methodology which call for the need to put the learner in the centre-stage of all learning situations and episodes. Such methodologies subsume project, experimental, case study, critical incident analysis, future’s wheel and project methods, just to mention a few.

In the secondary school curriculum, pragmatism is situation specific because the secondary schools offer different subjects which vary according to available resources. Just like in the primary education sector, the languages polishes communication skills using the computer to write business letters, curriculum vitae, write notes, essays and tests and examinations. They can use the verbal facility in languages as a result of their exposure to solve real life problems.

In the mathematics and natural sciences, pupils can learn how to perfect the art of problem-solving through experimentation and projects using the materials from their local environment and beyond. Pragmatism can be used to improve the academic performance of students in mathematics since pupils will apply mathematical approaches in real-life situations such as banking transactions, although, banking is now paperless with the introduction of plastic money on the
Automated Teller Machine (ATM). They can use perimeter to measure fields and beds. They can also interpret water, telephone, refuse and electricity bills if they belong to urban environments. In that regard, its application in real-life situations assists in improving pass rates in mathematics since learners will be putting into practice what they learn and live experientially every day.

In the commercial subjects, pupils can refine the budgeting skills they were exposed to in the primary school mathematics and social studies. They can advance their knowledge by visiting industries (mines, banks, shops, farms, factories, transport, to cite a few examples) located in their areas to help them marry theory to practice. In the banks, for example, they can learn how to deposit and withdraw money using deposit and withdrawal slips. They can also learn how to use telegraphic transfers after reading about them in the textbooks. They can also interpret bank statements, telephone bills, and hire purchase account bills and transactions among other examples.

In geography, learners can best understand their environment if they start learning about their environment. They can learn about their climate, vegetation, soils, rivers, villages and cities, provinces, country, neighbouring countries before they learn about the international community. They can then compare and contrast their practices to conserve their environment with those of other countries so that they can employ the best practices to do so. In the learning of geography learners can benefit from embracing the diversity that is evident in the physical and social environments. It is plausible to note that the strong move associated with the teaching of geography and its related sister subject, environmental science is hinged on the need to conscientise not only learners, but citizens to environmental issues.

In history, pupils can build on the knowledge about living together in the world around us that they will have been exposed to in the primary school social studies. They study about the past, present and forecast the future of their people in relation to the international community. In religious studies, pupils learn about the need to live together. They do so by reflecting on and advancing moral education learnt in the primary school subject; religious and moral education. If properly taught, the learners do not only learn about morality, but practice to confirm that the syllabus is drawn from pragmatism.

In the practical subjects such Fashion and Fabrics, Wood Technology, Metal Technology and Agriculture, to name a few, learners need to be exposed to knowledge which will make them realise that what they will have learnt is not meant for archiving in the workshop, but should help them become entrepreneurs. This kind of thinking makes the curriculum to seek to produce employment-creators rather than employment-seekers.

In conclusion, pragmatism is a precondition to curriculum relevance in progressive countries’ education systems. It defines how education products (primary and secondary school leavers) should be made to benefit the country. Curriculum review not informed by the tenets of pragmatism runs the risk of:

1. Producing employment-seekers rather than entrepreneurs (employment-creators).
3. Rueing the lack of exposure to practical education once they leave school.
4. Producing book nourished shrimps who are unable to put their knowledge into practice (Childs, 1956; Dewey, 1922; Dewey, 1922-1953).

To close this discussion, I borrow a few words from my paper entitled 'The role of education in community development: The Zimbabwean experience,' published in
2012: ‘theory prepares a man for life, practice makes a man ready for life, and conference makes a complete man for life.’

In this regard, I am content that practice perfects the art of life of a person’. Thus, all the foregoing primary and secondary school subjects contain theory, practice and conference, the basis upon which pragmatism can inform curriculum relevance during the curriculum review processes. All the aforementioned subjects are living subjects, hence, the need not to divorce pupils’ learning from practice.

Bibliography


