Utilitarianism: An avenue for curriculum relevance in Zimbabwean schools

1Tichaona Mapolisa 2Bornface Chenjerai Chisaka 3Chrispen Chiome 4Ignatius Issac Dambudzo, Zimbabwe Open University

I am certain that you are now aware that my previous two articles on curriculum relevance and pragmatism advocate an outcomes-based education rather than outputs-based education. Outcomes-based education focuses on long term benefits that school leavers use for life in their societies (Bentham, 1996). These benefits include social cohesion, loyalty, discipline, integrity and straightforwardness just to name a few. Outputs-based is content-based education that emphasises the importance of examination results ahead of character building of the learners (Bentham, 1983; Smart, 1956). The attainment of either the former or the latter form of education is indicative of the degree to which curricula obtaining in a given country are relevant. The argument presented in this paper is based on another facet of curriculum relevance called utilitarianism. The argument begins with the definition of utilitarianism, rationale for utilitarianism and application of utilitarianism in the interests of the current curriculum review in Zimbabwe. The application of utilitarianism will be based on selected primary and secondary school subjects in order to demonstrate how well utilitarianism is one of the gateways to curriculum relevance during curriculum review. The paper ends with a conclusion spelling out my convictions about the issue under discussion.

In this paper, utilitarianism is regarded as a philosophy in which the joy of the majority of people is considered the greatest outcome of education brought about by relevant curricula. It refers to how useful products (school leavers irrespective of the quality of their attainments) of primary and secondary school education systems in society are, once they leave their respective school systems. It is about the utility value of the school leavers to their families (both nuclear and extended), the society, industry and the nation at large.

Utilitarianism is critical in curriculum review directed at searching for curriculum relevance for a number of reasons. Foremost, it deals with issues of ethics, implying fairness/justice/morality and egalitarianism (Heydt, 2006). Regarding ethics, utilitarianism ensures that learners are not exposed to curricula that harm them, hence, the proposition to have human rights-based education. Also, it is fair, just and morally-right to offer learners curricula that will render them useful to their countries once they leave school. Guardians and parents expect their children to be self-supporting and to support family members once they exit from schools. Egalitarianism is about treating all learners of the same level of education the same, with respect to offering the same curriculum, same examinations, same time tables, same textbooks and other learning/teaching resources, and teachers with the same qualifications. This can be done provided that these resources will culminate in the production of the intended useful school leavers to the society and the nation at large.

One other dimension of curriculum relevance in this context is equity. It occurs when learners are provided with curricula that do not put them at a disadvantage in the society when they leave school. All these points about utilitarianism in curriculum review searching for curriculum relevance are put in their apt perspective by Asmal (2002:2) who contends that, “With the new outcomes-based curriculum we are combining, rather than
separating the acquisition by all learners of the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that reflect more closely life outside and after the school.” In this regard, education is not supposed to end in the school, but should be life-long. It has no abrupt end as it is continuously responding to the dynamic needs of the nations.

Utilitarianism unveils itself quite well in integrated primary school subjects. In the three official languages of Zimbabwe, its effectiveness can be gauged by the manner in which school leavers exhibit eloquence in public speaking, writing, poetry, story-telling, dramatisation and singing. In the social sciences (HIV and AIDS/Health and life skills education, religious and moral education and social studies), pupils exhibit aspects of utilitarianism when they practise virtues of integrity, trustworthiness, diligence, accountability, honesty, morality and dependability, just to name some of them in their societies and beyond. With regards to the expressive arts such as music, art and craft, physical education and home economics, learners reveal acquisition of utilitarianism when they effect leadership, teamwork and entrepreneurial skills in their societies and schools as well. They can form clubs within and without schools to demonstrate how their curriculum is relevant as a result of considering the facet of utilitarianism in the curriculum review process. In regard to sciences namely, mathematics, agriculture and environmental science, utilitarianism shows itself in the school leavers through their abilities to take charge of the control of their environment. The learners exposed to environmental science are equipped with skills to help them appreciate the need to live a habitable ecological environment. In terms of agriculture and mathematics, the foregoing view is echoed by UNESCO (1996) which found out that the first six years of primary education enable the pupil to be very useful in one’s society as he/she will be able to read instructions regarding how to apply fertilisers, pesticides and insecticides.

In the secondary schools, the subjects are also integrated in an attempt to show utilitarianism and it manifests itself in curriculum relevance sought through the curriculum review process. By offering the languages, secondary schools consolidate the gains made in the primary school when secondary school leavers engage in educational plays full of moral values, participate in national debates at societal level, and write stories and articles informing the nation about how best to develop their areas to name a few examples.

In the natural sciences and mathematics, utilitarianism is realised when learners actively engage themselves into problem-solving real life situations. They really become useful when they willingly engage in community projects such as pit filling to prevent the spread of malaria and bilharzia during the rainy season, and land reclamation to prevent soil erosion in summer. In the humanities such as geography, history and bible knowledge, pupils can be exposed to knowledge that orients them to put into practice their societal values for the greatest benefit of the society at large. In geography, for example, pupils become assets to the society if they practise conserving natural resources because the gifts of nature cannot be replaced once they are carelessly used up. They can also advise elders on best areas to locate fields, shops, and huts and dip tanks. The pupils with the knowledge of history are deemed useful to the society when they know their identity, national ideology, national aspirations and values. Also, they are useful to the nation once they display an impeccable knowledge of national heritage. Pupils who are exposed to knowledge of religious education/bible knowledge usually exhibit a God-fearing behaviour. This knowledge is complemented by the one that pupils acquire from social sciences such as psychology,
sociology and philosophy. Pupils in this regard, are introduced to ethics. They display virtues of tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, reliability and loyalty. It is common knowledge that school leavers armed with the knowledge of social sciences usually appreciate conservation and preservation of both physical and man-made resources. It pains them to find national resources of this nature getting destroyed. The pupils desist from corrupt practices that cost the image of people, institutions and their nations. In the context of practical subjects such as Food Technology, Clothing Technology, Agriculture, Wood Technology, Metal Technology, Technical Graphics and Computer Science to cite a few examples, people are equipped with useful knowledge to help them raise the quality of life of people in their societies. In these practical subjects, school leavers do not need to pursue job-hunting adventures other than relaxing at home capitalising on their entrepreneurial skills that they will have accrued from the preceding practical subjects.

To wind up this paper, I argue that utilitarianism is a pillar upon which successful and effective curricula are anchored. Consequent upon the adoption of utilitarianism in curriculum review as quest to curriculum relevance, I make the ensuing six conclusions if utilitarianism is applied in primary and secondary schools’ curriculum review:

1. Utilitarianism means that the curriculum produces outcomes-based rather than outputs-based school leavers.
2. Utilitarianism is a philosophy that informs curriculum reviewers that outputs benefit societies in the short term, while outcomes benefit societies in the long term. Thus, outputs are content-based while outcomes are skills-based.
3. Utilitarianism is about education for public benefits rather than individual benefits.
4. Utilitarianism refines curricula to the extent that the education products develop the mentality to socially, politically and economically transform and develop their country rather than to destroy and vandalise its resources. Therefore, utilitarianism calls for a value-laden education system.
5. Utilitarianism is about curricula that seek to improve the current education products with the hope to produce better products in the future for the greatest good of the nation.
6. Any nation that dismisses utilitarianism in its curriculum review is casting a permanent curse on its citizens instead of blessing them so that they hope the ladder of progress in terms of pursuing national development agenda.

On the basis of the foregoing arguments for the need to cater for utilitarianism in the current curriculum review, one should be made aware that the present curriculum is academic in its outlook. It forces the nation to remain with an academic curriculum with no practical application that we are famous for. It is my conviction that all subjects offered in the primary and secondary school curricula embrace the practical application to real life situations that help solve national problems. An example of doing so in the primary school is through STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) on one hand. On the other hand, secondary schools can make STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). Both STEAM and STEM are made up of doing (hands-on) subjects which emphasise practical work with the intent to prepare learners for real life experiences before and after school life.
Bibliography


