



CHALLENGES FACED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ZIMBABWE LOCALISED ADVANCED LEVEL GEOGRAPHY SYLLABUS: A CASE OF GWERU DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the challenges in the implementation of Zimbabwe's localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. The Post-positivist framework underpinned the concurrent triangulated mixed methods design of this study. Observation and content analysis triangulated data gained from questionnaires and interviews. The population comprised of nineteen Advanced Level Geography schools in Gweru district offering the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus, three hundred former Advanced Level Geography students, three hundred and twenty-six current Advanced Level Geography students, and three relevant officers. A sample of twelve schools was selected by stratified random sampling to include rural day schools, mission schools, low-density high schools and high-density high schools as school type in the districts, and purposive sampling used to select teachers, students and officers respectively. Findings indicated that teachers employed teacher-centred approaches, lacked adequate instructional media and resources, had challenges in syllabus interpretation, and students had negative attitudes towards certain syllabus topics.

Key Words: localised geography syllabus, implementation challenges, teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2002 Zimbabwe introduced a move from the traditional University of Cambridge Advanced Level Geography syllabus, replacing it with a localised syllabus that differed slightly in content and structure by incorporating topics of local interest. Consideration of challenges faced in the implementation of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus seems to have received little or no empirical research attention, and tends to elude syllabus developers. This has implications on the effectiveness of implementation of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus in terms of teaching and learning and student performance.

In Zimbabwe, the responsibility of curriculum development, research and curriculum review lies with the Curriculum Development Unit recently named Evaluation and Syllabus Development (ESD) unit, and Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), which are semi-autonomous government agents within the Ministry of Education Sport Arts and Culture. In order to carry out this enormous mandate, ZIMSEC, works in close consultation with other stakeholders on curriculum matters, such as teachers through subject panels (Gatawa 1990). There are various phases, for example, diagnosis, planning, implementation, stabilisation and evaluation, involved in the process of curriculum development. This study concerned itself mainly with the design, dissemination and implementation stage of curriculum development with specific reference to the localisation of the Advanced Level syllabi in Zimbabwe by the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) in 2002. The study investigated challenges being faced by schools and teachers in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus since its introduction in 2002 with a view to offer suggestions on future improvements as far as development and implementation of the syllabus is concerned. It focused on teachers, students, learning resources and time allocation among other factors that play a crucial role as far as syllabus implementation is concerned. One of the researchers taught the Advanced Level Geography from 1998 to 2005 and is currently a Deputy Principal Marking Supervisor in the Human Geography paper two, code 9156/2. Issues experienced during the years of teaching and several years as a senior examiner of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus motivated the interrogation of challenges faced in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus.

The implementation of new programmes and curricular innovations are critical components of educational reform (Chavhunduka and Moyo 2003). Localisation of Advanced Level curricula in Zimbabwe in 2002 came with a number of changes in almost all subject areas of the school curriculum. In Geography, there has been a general updating and rationalisation of topics while other traditional areas such as Hazardous Environments and Environmental Management aspects have been integrated into Physical and Human Geography. Determination of how the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus is being implemented becomes of scholarly interest as to establish challenges encountered and the way forward or solutions.

The implementation stage of a syllabus is the most vital stage in curriculum change (Fullan 2001). On the other hand, syllabus implementation is the single most difficult phase of curriculum development (Mampuru 2001). Thus syllabus implementation is a crucial, difficult and unavoidable phase in curriculum development. This is because without implementation, a syllabus cannot be evaluated to ascertain its strengths, successes, shortcomings and weaknesses. Syllabus implementation is crucial as it is at this stage that the syllabus is consumed by its target users, especially the learners. It is a systematic process of ensuring that the new syllabus reaches the immediate beneficiaries, the learners (Mampuru 2001). Whichever way we look at it, syllabus implementation involves two major stakeholders: the teachers

and learners. This is because teachers are the main interpreters or implementers, and the learners are the main targets or direct consumers of the syllabus (Alonsabe 2005).

2. THE PROBLEM

Since the localisation of the Advanced Level syllabi in high schools in Zimbabwe in 2002, numerous challenges have been felt experientially in the absence of scientific determination. However, challenges should not be viewed as threats to the curriculum but should be seen as opportunities to improve on future revision or design and implementation of the localised Advanced Level curriculum. This study interrogated the implementation of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus and offers suggestions on future improvement as far as the localised syllabi at high school level in Zimbabwe is concerned. The main guiding research question was: What challenges are faced in implementing the Advanced Level Geography syllabus?

3. METHODOLOGY

To navigate this study, the researchers chose a triangulated mixed methods design as the strategy for this study undergirded by the post-positivist framework. The triangulated mixed methods design enabled for the collection of data that gave useful information about the implementation of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus in Gweru district high schools. (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Thus, in this research interviews were employed as a follow-up to questionnaires. Observations and content analysis were used to check the validity and complement the data gained from questionnaires and interviews (Wolcott 2001). The strategy used was the concurrent triangulation strategy which uses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection concurrently in order to best understand the phenomenon of interest (Creswell 2009). In this study concurrent procedures entailed collecting both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time during the study, followed by integrating the information of the overall results (Creswell 2009). In this study, the researchers used both quantitative and qualitative methods in an attempt to confirm and cross validate or corroborate findings.

The population was made up of twenty-five Advanced Level Geography teachers, a hundred and three former Advanced Level Geography students, three hundred and twenty-six current Advanced Level Geography students, one Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) Geography subject Manager, one Evaluation and Syllabus Development officer (ESD) and one Geography inspector from the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (Ministry of Education). Gweru district is one of the ten education districts in Midlands province of Zimbabwe. The district has been preferred in this study because the education district comprises of different types of school categories such as rural day schools, rural mission schools, high-density urban schools and low-density urban schools. Furthermore, the researchers for this study are based in Gweru District, and so it was ideal, in terms of financial and time limitations to conduct the study in Gweru district. As noted earlier, Gweru district has nineteen Advanced Level schools offering Advanced Level Geography. This study targeted all the nineteen schools but then a sample of twelve schools was selected by stratified random sampling, that is, dividing the schools into homogeneous groups (groups containing similar characteristics) that is rural day schools, mission schools, low-density urban schools and high-density urban schools. The twelve schools represented 63% of the total number of high schools in Gweru district. This guaranteed equal representation of different school categories in the sample. The researchers managed to administer a questionnaire to each of the twenty-one (84%) teachers who were present at their stations at the time of study.

From a population of three hundred and twenty six current students, stratified random sampling was used to select 287(88%) current Advanced Level Geography students to fill in a questionnaire. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who had done Advanced Level Geography in Gweru district high schools. Out of the one hundred and three former Advanced Level students, the researcher managed to administer a questionnaire to 52(50%) students. The former students were either working in schools as relief teachers or studying at Midlands State University. We purposively selected twelve teachers to be included in the sample for the qualitative data. The sample for the interview represented (12)48% of the total number of teachers teaching Advanced Level Geography. Purposive sampling involved selecting subjects because of some characteristic they possessed (Patton 2002). Purposive sampling for interviewing twelve teachers was done in order to gather specific information from the Advanced Level Geography teachers who have taught and supervised the previous external Cambridge Advanced Level Geography examinations as well as the current localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus.

The data led to participants outside the cases (schools) such as officers from ZIMSEC, Ministry of Education and Syllabus Development ESD) Unit. These officers were selected through purposive sampling by virtue of their positions or roles. All these were key, information-rich people as far as the implementation of the localised Advanced Level Geography was concerned. This assisted the researchers to gather data about their observations, opinions and experiences and have a better understanding of how the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus was being implemented.

The study employed a mixed method approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data; therefore, the researchers found the use of questionnaires, interviews, observations and content analysis as ideal data collection instruments for the study. It was important to attend to issues of validity in this research (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison 2011). In this study validity was employed to establish how sound or effective the measuring instruments were or the degree to which the instruments measured what they were supposed to measure (Kumar 2005; Haralambos and Holborn 2008). In this regard instruments were pre-tested with participants not included in the sample, resulting in modifications. Similarly expert review of instruments aided validity and reliability. Reliability had to do with consistency or repeatability of the instruments and high reliability was obtained when the instruments gave the same results and when the instruments were pre-tested in one of the schools in the population which was not part of the final sample, as Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011) advise, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in this study. Consequently the data that emerged were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

4. RESULTS

The Geography subject manager from ZIMSEC, the research and curriculum development officer from ESD unit, the Geography inspector in the Ministry of Education, and the Advanced Level Geography teachers were interviewed to find out challenges faced by teachers and schools in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. The Advanced Level Geography teachers also completed a questionnaire to establish the challenges faced by teachers and schools in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. Three officers, one from ZIMSEC, ESD and Ministry of Education respectively were interviewed on the challenges faced by schools and teachers in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. The following excerpts illustrate challenges faced in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus as revealed by education officers in the interview:

Resources such as textbooks are expensive to buy. Teachers are not undertaking fieldwork. In schools without examiners, students are performing dismally and teachers are failing to implement the localised syllabus (ZIMSEC, interview, 20/10/10).

Poor syllabus interpretation, since no orientation or induction was done before implementation of the localised syllabus. No in-service, staff development, workshops or seminars were done. Teachers seem to be concentrating on teaching for examinations rather than teaching the general content according to the localised syllabus (ESD, interview, 13/09/10).

A number of challenges are being faced by teachers/schools due to the present economic environment. Schools are operating without adequate recommended textbooks. No Geography rooms. Resources, for example, weather instruments, maps, and the available textbooks in the market are very expensive. Relief teachers or untrained teachers or unqualified teachers, (those with Diploma in Education Secondary) are teaching the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus (Ministry of Education, interview, 10/08/10).

The responses from the officers revealed a number of challenges encountered in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus such as lack of resources including relevant textbooks, teaching materials, and appropriate instructional media. Teachers were not carrying out fieldwork studies and were teaching for examinations. In-service, staff development workshops were not done in schools and teachers indicated that they had problems in interpreting the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. Relief teachers or untrained teachers were also found teaching in schools. In schools without examiners, students were performing dismally and teachers were failing to implement the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus.

Twenty-one Advanced Level Geography teachers completed a questionnaire on challenges they were facing as schools and as teachers in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus and the following results emerged (see Table 4.37 below).

Table 4.37 Challenges faced by teachers in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus
N=21

Question	Responses
What problems, challenges and or constraints do you face in implementing the localised 'A' Level Geography syllabus? As a teacher and as a school.	<p>As a Teacher: Lack of textbooks; money for fieldwork; lack of resources; gap between 'O' and 'A' level; questions too difficult; no time to do fieldwork; shortage of instructional media; time is limited; lack of money to buy fieldwork materials; no resources to teach Coastal Regions and Peri-glacial; too many topics to be covered over 2 years; large classes; textbooks not addressing current issues shortage of relevant textbooks; too much load syllabus too long; Attitude of students towards certain topics such as Climatology and, Sketch map and Geomorphology.</p> <p>As a School: Lack of funds to buy new textbooks; lack of resources for fieldwork; no internet; department not supported; lack of funds to do distant fieldwork; large classes; high teacher turn out; no Geography room and, no departmental storerooms or libraries.</p>

When teachers were asked on sections of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus they found that most difficult to teach, the following topics were identified, that: *Sketch map, Surveys, Diagram Techniques, Climatology, Industry, Coastal Regions, Glacial and Peri-Glacial Environments and Regional and Economic Development*. Some of the reasons given were: lack of equipment and resources to carry-out fieldwork, lack of relevant sources and up-dated texts, students had a negative attitude towards *Sketch map* and *Climatology*; topics that were too scientific and too broad.

On challenges teachers were facing in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus as teachers and as schools they referred to lack of textbooks, money for fieldwork trips, lack of resources, gap between Ordinary and Advanced Level content, questions asked in examinations being too difficult, the timetable not allowing teachers to do fieldwork, and shortage of instructional media. They also revealed that the syllabus required them to cover too many topics over 2 years against large classes, textbooks not addressing current issues, shortage of relevant textbooks and too much overload. At School level, they raised issues such as lack of funds to purchase textbooks, lack of resources to carryout fieldwork activities, lack of internet facility, large classes, high teacher turn over, and absence of specialist Geography room and departmental storerooms or libraries.

Twelve Advanced Level Geography teachers were also interviewed to find out the challenges they were facing in implementing the localised syllabus confirmed the above as evident in the excerpts below.

Lack of resources, textbooks and teaching materials (interview, 10/09/10,).

Not comfortable to teach Map work, Climatology, Biogeography, Regional and Economic Geography and Transport and Trade. Students have negative attitude towards some of these topics (interview, 15/09/10). Difficulties in interpreting certain sections of the localised syllabus (interview, 25/09/10). Lack of financial support by schools to support fieldwork activities (interview, 06/10/10).

The ZIMSEC, ESD and Ministry of Education officers and Advanced Level Geography teachers' interviews, and a questionnaire item completed by the teachers revealed a number of challenges that the schools and teachers were facing in implementing the localised syllabus. Some of the indicated challenges were: problems of interpreting the syllabus; lack of resources such as relevant textbooks, teaching materials and appropriate instructional media; large classes; attitude of students towards certain topics; and lack of funds in schools to buy resources and support fieldwork activities.

5. DISCUSSION

The questionnaire for teachers and in-depth follow up interviews with officers (from ZIMSEC, ESD and Ministry of Education) and Advanced Level Geography teachers revealed that there were a number of challenges that different types of schools and teachers were facing in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. Table 4.37 shows that schools were operating without adequate resources such as textbooks, teaching materials, funds to carry-out fieldwork activities and support from the heads of schools. This confirms findings of the Nziramasanga Commission (1999), which observed that generally, secondary schools were under-resourced and that textbooks were in short supply. However, Chiromo (2010) advises that teachers should be innovative and improvise science teaching and learning materials where possible, instead of waiting to be supplied with conventional apparatus. Admittedly, schools and teachers should not wait to be provided with conventional teaching and learning instructional media but rather they should improvise and improve the teaching and learning of the Advanced Level Geography syllabus.

Teachers were not carrying out fieldwork studies and were teaching for examinations. The study revealed that teachers were concentrating on teaching for examinations using teacher centred approaches such as lecture methods, demonstration methods and all kinds of drill methods instead of employing interactive teaching methods. Winter (1998), in his study of education in Asia pointed out that some of the greatest problems of curriculum reforms are examinations. This means that if teachers are not exposed to in-service and staff development to deal with newly introduced syllabi, they will resort to teaching for examinations in order to acquit themselves.

Teachers were also facing challenges in interpreting the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus. When teachers were asked on topics of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus that they found most difficult to teach, the following were identified: *Sketch map; Surveys; Diagram Techniques; Climatology; Industry; Coastal Region; Glacial and Peri-Glacial Environments and Regional and Economic Development*. The former and current Advanced Level Geography students listed some of the topics of the syllabus that they found most difficult to learn as: *Climatology; Sketch map; Geomorphology and Hazardous Environments*.

Another challenge revealed by almost all the teachers, as indicated in (Table 4.34), was the students' negative attitude towards certain topics, such as, *Climatology, Sketch maps and Geomorphology*. In response to the interviews and the questionnaire, some respondents attributed this negative attitude to the fact that students viewed these topics as very difficult. Usually, teachers who do not use interactive teaching methods that arouse students' interest exacerbate the situation. Kroma (1996) cited in Chiromo (2010) argues that if Science and Mathematics were to gain popularity, capture the interest of third world pupils and challenge their intellect, the content must be made more appealing by linking it to their immediate experiences and making it relevant to their daily activities. One way of achieving this in Geography teaching and learning would be through application of ethnobased teaching and learning skills as a starting point where the topics to be taught are linked to students' environmental interaction experiences. Students tend to understand the concepts taught better when they can relate them to everyday life. Therefore, Geography teachers should attempt to contextualise what they teach by making reference to students' environmental experiences. The students should be exposed to interactive teaching methods, such as, fieldwork, problem solving, simulation games, concentric approaches, integrative approach and systems approaches as recommended by the Advanced Level Geography syllabus. In fact, methodologies least employed and never employed by Advanced Level Geography teachers are the ones advocated for by Kroma (1996).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are some of the challenges faced in implementing the localised syllabus: schools were operating without adequate resources such as textbooks, teaching materials and funds to carry-out fieldwork activities; teachers were not carrying out fieldwork studies; teachers were teaching for examinations; difficulties in interpretation of the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus; and students had a negative attitude towards certain topics such as Climatology, Sketchmap and Geomorphology. The teachers were facing a number of challenges in the implementation of the localised syllabus such as inadequate resources, syllabus interpretations and negative attitude of students towards certain syllabus topics. Changes without sufficient time for preparation have often proved more harmful than useful as reflected by challenges being faced in implementing Advanced Level Geography syllabus. In light of the above, a few suggestions can be proffered:

- Local scholars should be encouraged and supported financially to write textbooks, publish research papers with current information and case-studies, which include local, regional and global examples as demanded by the Advanced Level Geography syllabus. If all the schools have access to internet, it will assist to provide the most recent materials, and to add on, journals can be purchased and teachers will have relevant information (Nieven 1999; Bredekamp 1995; and Sheridan, 1990).

- In view of these challenges faced in implementing the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus, Geography teachers, as implementers, should chart the way forward on how best to implement the localised Advanced Level Geography syllabus as enunciated by the national curriculum policy.
- The ESD, ZIMSEC and Ministry of Education Sport, Arts and Culture should make an effort to review the syllabi after every five years as stipulated in the circular B 15 of (2000).
- ZIMSEC as an examination board should make it a policy that examiners' reports are published timeously every year. There is also need for Advanced Level Geography to have practical examinations in the form of projects through fieldwork activities to be examined internally.

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