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**EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ZIMBABWE:
Some Key Issues and Questions**

FOREWORD

The Human Resources Research Centre (HRRC), which is based in the University of Zimbabwe's Faculty of Education, opened in January 1988. The HRRC's decision to initiate an Occasional Paper series was based on the realization that there is a dearth of published research and policy-related material, focusing on the special needs of sub-Saharan Africa and limited publication outlets for African scholars.

Papers in this series are intended to disseminate research findings and to stimulate policy dialogue. The series includes works which, in the opinion of the HRRC Editorial Board, contribute significantly to the state of knowledge about human resources issues and warrant wide distribution. Occasional papers are widely circulated in Zimbabwe and internationally. Items in the series are selected by the Editorial Board. The contents of individual papers do not necessarily reflect the positions or opinions of either the University or the HRRC.

Dr. O.E. Maravanyika, Chairman of the newly formed Zimbabwe Educational Research Association (ZERA), provides a provocative and informative assessment of key issues and questions related to educational research in Zimbabwe. This paper also provides an overview of key research units and activities in the country and makes recommendations about areas for future research on research itself.

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Victor Levine
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EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ZIMBABWE: SOME KEY ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at mapping out key issues and teasing out key questions that we need to consider when examining the state-of-the-art in educational research in general and implications of these for educational research in Zimbabwe in particular. It tries to provide an analytical framework on the basis of which relevant data on educational research in Zimbabwe can be elicited. It will not however attempt to discuss all the issues or answer all the questions raised within the suggested framework due to constraints of time and space. It will simply consider the nature of educational research, suggest a framework of analysis, and provide a few Zimbabwean examples to support the conceptual framework of analysis.

THE NATURE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

According to Shaeffer (1983 p. 9)

research is all things to all people, differently perceive, defined, and classified by producers and consumers, participants and subjects, and academics and policy makers. Too much concern for definition if not a dangerous thing can often be a fruitless and frustrating activity obscuring the very concepts being defined.

In spite of this cautionary note, educational research could be defined as

...a process or an activity which is a systematic attempt to solve problems or provide answers of interest to education through the use of objective and intensive scientific methods of analysis directed towards providing information or knowledge through which education can be made more effective, or the research process may or may not have a theoretical basis or even contribute to theory and yet can provide useful information leading to important decision-making which in turn may promote effective learning (Sebeko, 1984).

A good example of the latter would be the case of a dedicated but probably poorly educated rural primary school teacher who due to a shortage of books and other resources, tries out heuristic alternatives in terms of materials production and delivery systems to achieve the same objectives as with conventional materials.

Whichever view of educational research one ultimately adopts, it appears that it is concerned with rational enquiry into social issues which, when resources permit, must be applied to the solution of critical educational problems in a manner consistent with a particular country's stated political, social, economic and cultural objectives. Educational research cannot be a neutral scientific activity. It is very much a cultural phenomenon tied to subtle but significant factors such as ideology and world view, communication patterns, and decision-making styles. It is indeed a social and political process. An examination of patterns of research interests over time within a particular country is likely to reveal, in the majority of cases, a link between the focus of research topics and the main policy priority areas whether initiated by local authorities and researchers, or subtly influenced by donor

interests. In post-independence Anglo-phone Africa for example, the tendency was that educational research was initially concerned with finding ways of making maximum use of scanty resources in the light of burgeoning enrollments in schools, in other words equity-oriented research. As the systems attempted to stabilize, the tendency was to examine issues concerned with the qualitative improvement or transformation of the systems in line with the declared economic, political and social goals.

Educational research in Zimbabwe is no exception. It has largely been influenced by post-independence issues such as racial integration of schools (Atkinson, 1982), the administration of the integrated system (Chikombah, 1984), and the provision of locally made teaching materials for the expanded secondary school system (Dock)¹. In addition, the Ministry of Education's Evaluation Unit has looked into such issues as wastage by examining the problem of school dropouts. It has also been involved in evaluation research of such projects as the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teacher Education Course (Zintec), Zimbabwe Science (Zim-Sci) and Technical Kits projects, all these representing attempts to monitor and manage the process of educational change.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework used in this paper is based largely on experiences from the Third World environments rather than from the developed world. It is an adaptation from Shaeffer (1983). The key issues for discussion include the nature of educational research which we have discussed above, research climate, re-

1 Mr Dock and his Zimbabwe Science team developed locally made science teaching materials popularly known as Zim-Scimaterials.

search capacity, research paradigms, research training facilities, dissemination of research findings, funding and utilization.

An alternative and more detailed analytical framework was suggested by organizers of a workshop on "The State of Educational Research in Eastern and Southern Africa and Potential for Regional Co-operation" in Nairobi in 1985. The framework included the quantity of educational research in the country; the doers of educational research; loci of educational research; topics of research categorized by institutions; patterns of research interest over time; motivations behind research done; main types of research methodology; main users of educational research; educational research outside educational institutions; main modes of dissemination; funders of educational research; main obstacles to the development of research; general place of educational research in the nation; kinds of local and regional co-operation and examples of successful local and regional collaboration in educational research. The framework adopted from Shaeffer which we are using in this paper however, includes most of the above issues.

Research Climate

This refers to the social, political and cultural context that surround the research process. What value assumptions underlie the processes of enquiry and experimentation? Where do these value assumptions come, that is, are they foreign or local in origin? Is there a match between the educational ideology and that of the country? Generally the ideology a country adopts tends to shape the analysis of contemporary problems. Indeed even the definition of a problem would largely be influenced by the ideology adopted. A more insidious problem sometimes arises in developing countries from the inherent ideological conflict emanating from the interaction of a country's adopted ideology, its inherited ideology from the colonial era, and the varying ideological persuasions of the academic elites and political elites. It is not unusual in Africa to find that in a particular country, the ideology for the struggle for independence was probably largely nationalistic, the post-independence ideology adopted by the ruling

party could be progressive or socialist, and the dominant ideology operating in schools would be liberal humanist bequeathed by the colonial administrators. This might continue even long after independence through the locals who received a western education and would find themselves in management positions or through continued links with the west through various aid projects and manpower training programmes. Such ideological conflict might lead to inertia in research especially if the ruling party saw itself as the arbiter of truth.

Closely linked to ideology is the problem of the cultural base of the research done. To what extent are the researchers free to experiment with new methods of collecting and analysing data considered more sensitive to their cultural milieu and still be able to retain academic legitimacy? Does the funding of research stimulate imaginative independent research or restrict it to particular subjects or methods? Are researchers free to evaluate and criticize each other? Is there dialogue between the researchers and consumers of research, for example research institutions and government? What practical steps do faculties of education or individual departments take to stimulate research or ensure that all members of faculties take part in research or are aware of the research activities of colleagues in their faculties and elsewhere?

Answers to these and other related questions are likely to indicate the nature of research climate which in turn may facilitate or inhibit research activities. In Zimbabwe, there has largely been little conflict of interest in educational research between the politicians, bureaucrats and academics in spite of the apparent underlying ideological dichotomy between the government's stated Marxist ideology and the inherited classical humanist ideology still operating in schools. This could be attributed to close collaboration between Ministry of Education officers involved in research and Faculty of Education lecturers. Indeed there has been joint evaluation research between Ministry of Education Officers in the Ministry's Evaluation Unit and some lecturers in the Faculty of Education for example in the evaluation of the Zim-Sci project.

The creation of permanent committees, for example the Liaison Committee, and other adhoc committees between the Faculty of Education and the Ministry of Education has also helped to create an atmosphere of mutual trust between them. Moreover some of the Ministry of Education Officers are registered higher degrees students in the Faculty of Education, a bigger group and comprising more senior officers having registered in the last couple of years through the Basic Education and Skills Training (BEST) Project largely funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This interaction has probably reduced chances of mutual suspicion developing. But both sides are aware of the ideological dichotomy in the system as evidenced by the findings to the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production (Zimfep) schools evaluation by the ministry of Education and certain aspects of the BEST projects evaluation by some lecturers from the Faculty of Education. Both reports point in part to the contradictions between stated government policy and actual practice in some schools.

The government has also as a matter of policy encouraged the use or engagement of local expertise in both government-funded and donor-funded projects. Where expatriates are used they are expected, as far as is possible, to work with a local researcher or researchers. This is intended not only to build a pool of local expertise but also to develop a local research culture through the construction of instruments deemed sensitive to local concerns and issues.

A lot of educational research is taking place in the Faculty, most of it intended for obtaining higher degrees but there is little open discussion of proposals or findings - either at faculty level or at departmental level. A number of academic staff who have been on staff development programmes overseas, are back in the faculty but little is known outside their departments about their research interests or their findings in their degree theses. More could be done to encourage the interchange of ideas which might in turn stimulate more research activity and discussion in the faculty.

Research Capacity

This includes a country's ability to mobilize its human and material resources towards building a research infrastructure and tradition capable of meeting its research needs. Thus in discussing this concept, we are interested in identifying who does research? What facilities exist for training or improvement of research skills? What is the quality of research produced? Who uses the research findings? In short, we are concerned with a country's ability to generate, conduct, evaluate and use educational research.

In Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe's Faculty of Education is probably the main generator of educational research. In addition, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Development Co-operatives and Women's Affairs, which is responsible for pre-school education, also produce some research. Research at the university includes that by lecturers and research fellows intended for general publication or for higher degrees. Students' research ranges from projects and linking studies by Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students to theses by Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) and Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil) students. In addition there are also guest researchers, these include scholars and lecturers on sabbatical leave from their universities and are on attachment to the University of Zimbabwe in order to get assistance in their data collection; and consultants hired for example to evaluate donor-funded projects based in the university as in the case of the Zim-Sci Project's initial evaluation.

The Ministry of Education's Evaluation Unit has carried out some interesting evaluation research and surveys for example the evaluation of the Zim-Sci., Zimfep, Technical Kits and Zintec Projects and its survey of school dropouts. The Ministry of Community Co-operatives and Women's Affairs has carried out research on the provision of pre-school facilities in the country as a basis for planning strategies for providing more pre-schools in both rural and urban areas.

The focus of the different research done appears to be influenced by the level of the researcher and the use he/she intends to put the findings to. For example B.Ed. Linking Studies and Dip.Ed. projects are really attempts at synthesizing various concepts learnt during the students period of study. They largely tend to concentrate on classroom practice skills and evaluation techniques to improve teacher effectiveness. M.Ed. research topics and themes on the other hand tend to be more demanding as some of them probe into educational policy issues, resources allocation, curriculum planning and development, programme planning and evaluation and adult and teacher education just to name a few. Backed by a fairly comprehensive compulsory research methods course, the quality of the research produced is generally quite rigorous and academically respectable as evidenced by external examiners' comments over the years.

An analysis of the areas of research interests of the 1982 twenty students registered for M.Phil. and D. Phil. degrees showed that 10 were in teacher education, seven in curriculum development and evaluation, two in adult education and one in the history of education. However, an analysis of 48 pre-registration proposals intended for M.Phil. and D.Phil. degrees largely by officers from the Ministries of Education and Labour and Social Services indicated a much wider choice reflecting the job interests of the students. Three were in educational planning, 12 in project design and evaluation, five in computer science, six in economics of education, seven in curriculum design, nine in school supervision, six in distance education and four in teacher education. The officers intended to register under the auspices of the USAID funded BEST project which aims at improving the administrative and professional skills of these senior officers at their places of work. This amply demonstrates a characteristic feature of post-independence research in Zimbabwe, that it is directly applicable to the country's developmental aspirations.

Research by lecturers and research fellows at the university is generally funded by the Research Board. The research Board provides funds for both basic and applied research and also

provides travel funds to enable researchers to attend workshops, conferences and seminars where they read papers.

Students research is generally funded by the students themselves unless they are sponsored, in which case the sponsors meet the research costs. Government research officers in the ministries that engage in educational research do so as part of their normal duties so the funds come from the government in the form of the officers' regular remuneration and the relevant government department's travel and subsistence votes. In the case of joint projects between the government and a donor agency, a research and evaluation component is usually incorporated in the original project budget.

Compared to other countries in the region, Zimbabwe has not made much use of international agencies like the Rockefeller Foundation, The International Development Research Centre and The Swedish International Development Authority for both local and transnational research. A country like Kenya for example has used their facilities quite extensively. One advantage of using such donor facilities is that local researchers are exposed to the international educational research community and hence helps to reduce the isolation researcher in the developing world sometimes experience. But research organization is not simply a technocratic scientific matter. It is an issue of politics and government and is caught up in both international and local politics. International agencies and organizations have their own agendas and they tend to fund research projects that are in line with their own interests. In Zimbabwe USAID and SIDA for example have funded evaluation research of the projects they originally funded. Individual researchers have also approached donors for research funding but there is little publicity given to both the research and the findings.

As part of encouraging both local and regional co-operation in educational research the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is helping in the stimulation of educational research through the Educational Research Network of Eastern and Southern Africa

activities (ERNESA). A group of interested researchers is in the process of registering a recently formed Zimbabwe Educational Research Association (ZERA). This has been made possible through IDRC sponsorship. The Association hopes to encourage the carrying out and dissemination of research both in the country and at regional level.

USAID and SIDA among others have helped in the creation and subsequent funding of activities of the Human Resources Research Centre in the Faculty of Education. The centre is expected to augment research capacity in the faculty by providing human and material resources that will enable relevant research training of locale through degree and non-degree programmes and courses.

Research Paradigms and Research Training

Mention has already been made above of the extent to which researchers are free to experiment with new research techniques and still be able to retain academic credibility and legitimacy. Although in theory educational research has been dominated by the two dominant paradigms namely the quantitative and the qualitative, in practice, it is still largely the quantitative paradigm that has more legitimacy. This has had a backwash effect on educational research training programme where the more psychometric and statistical designs tend to have precedence over the more qualitative analytical or historical designs.

In the developing world where research traditions are less well established, opportunities to experiment with new approaches and ideas are sometimes lost because of the influence the West still has on research agendas. Donor agencies, expatriate experts, consultants and the provision of scholarships to locals to study overseas help to consolidate the existing paradigmatic institutional and resource hegemony of the transnational system of knowledge production. Opportunities to indigenize development thinking influenced by the objective conditions obtaining in the Third World are invariably lost. The search for new paradigms need not be

a reinterpretation of the Marxist versus liberal traditions. Marxism and liberalism could be just two ways of being Western. What is needed is a fresh objective analysis of the two traditions with a view to elicit from them what could be applicable in the developing world within the cultural milieu of the country or countries concerned.

In Zimbabwe, the predominant research paradigm has largely been positivistic. For example research by Chikombah, and Atkinson, evaluation research of such projects as the Zim-Sci, Zintec and Zinfep, (all quoted above) and the majority of dissertations and thesis by higher degrees students in the Faculty of Education all tend to have a strong positivistic bias. This could be attributed to the training the researchers had which was predominantly in western universities and the constant contact the country still has with the western world through donor agencies, consultants, external examiners, scholarships for higher degrees in western countries and most local lecturers invariably spend their sabbatical and contact leave in some western universities or educational institutions.

Research Training

A survey of research training facilities and programmes in a cross-section of educational institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa by Namuddu (1986) revealed some characteristic features of the research environment in the region especially with regards to training. Namuddu's survey revealed a shortage of research facilities such as equipment and space. In some cases there was no qualified personnel to train researchers. Where qualified personnel existed in some cases the faculties or departments lacked a clear consistent policy on acquisition, utilization, allocation and sharing of resources. Invariably research methods courses were given to a department which tended to give the course its own bend resulting in courses becoming narrow, psychometric and statistical. Some of the teaching was reported as degenerating into teaching for proposals of dissertations and theses rather than teaching to understand wider conceptual and analytical issues. Students came out with little or inadequate research concepts and

a fear of statistics. Their strategy was to survive through the course. She also found out that the lecturers of the research courses were not necessarily the supervisors of the students' theses. Thus students were sometimes confused by conflicting advice from the research methods tutors and from theses supervisors.

As far as non-university research units are concerned, she found out that they had few trained and experienced researchers and there was little or no interaction between training and on-going major research projects in the country.

In Zimbabwe, research training facilities at the university have improved considerably in the last couple of years especially with the inauguration of The Human Resources Research Centre which is offering courses in computers to both staff and students. Although there are no formal training programmes for M.Phil. and D.Phil. students, there are training programmes for Dip.Ed. and M.Ed. students. These programmes have to some extent experienced the short-comings Namuddu mentions in her survey, however, on-going measures are being taken to rectify the situation. Probably to the extent that research should reflect the cultural context, within which it is operating, to that extent trainers should be familiar with the local research environment. The tendency to sometimes use visiting scholars to organize research methods courses has not always yielded the best results.

Outside the university, there is very little formal educational research training taking place.

Dissemination of Research Findings

The main modes of disseminating research findings appear to be journals, research reports, theses, conferences and research workshops, usually attended predominantly by researchers themselves. Rarely are research findings immediately directed at policy-makers in order to influence policy decisions. Consequently educational research does not seem to have an impact on policy

unless it is commissioned by policy-makers themselves. Experience in the developing world where resources are limited indicates that policy-makers initiated research tends to be evaluation research which is intended to influence immediate policy-decisions. In the majority of cases such evaluation is a joint venture between a donor agency and a government and the funds for the evaluation usually are provided by the donor agency.

In Zimbabwe most of the research done by students is disseminated through dissertations and theses whilst that by staff members is disseminated through journals abroad or disseminated as research reports. Research by Government ministries, which is largely evaluation research, is usually published by the relevant ministries. To date, the country has had no journal of educational research. The launching of the Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research is a milestone in this area. One hopes its launching will encourage research activity and also stimulate discussion among researchers themselves and consumers of research.

Conclusion

This paper is intended to stimulate interest in research on the state-of-the-art in educational research in Zimbabwe. It has attempted to provide a useful tentative framework on the basis of which more information can be gathered through designing sensitive instruments. In short, there is a need for a more systematic analysis of educational research done in the country so far. This could lead to the production of a more comprehensive research index indicating researchers, their research interests, sources of funds and where the research is published.

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