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A Cart Before the Horses: Challenges of a Heritage Based Curriculum in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) in secondary schools, with particular focus on Masvingo Province. Guided by Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Constructivist Learning Theory, the study investigated the extent to which secondary schools have been prepared and supported in transitioning to the HBC, introduced under the Education 5.0 framework and phased in from 2025. A qualitative, interpretivist research design was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and policy document analysis involving thirty teachers and ten school heads across ten purposively selected secondary schools. Findings reveal significant gaps in teacher professional development, limited resource availability, and inconsistent stakeholder understanding of HBC principles, with implementation largely characterised by top-down policy imposition. The study concludes that while the HBC holds transformative potential for decolonising pedagogy and fostering culturally relevant learning, its impact remains constrained by insufficient systemic readiness. It is recommended that the government invest in structured teacher training, adequate resourcing, and participatory reform processes. This paper contributes empirical evidence to the growing scholarship on curriculum reform in post-colonial African contexts, offering context-specific insights to inform policy and practice in Zimbabwe's ongoing educational transformation.

Keywords: Curriculum reform, Education 5.0, Heritage-Based Curriculum, Indigenous knowledge systems, Secondary education

Introduction

Globally, curriculum reform has emerged as a critical response to the evolving demands of the twenty-first century, with nations increasingly repositioning their education systems to reflect cultural identity, economic aspirations, and the imperatives of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021; Apple, 2019). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, post-colonial states have grappled with the challenge of dismantling inherited Eurocentric curricula and constructing education frameworks that are contextually responsive and nationally affirming (Dei, 2018; Tikly, 2020). Zimbabwe is no exception to this global trend. Since independence in 1980, the education system has undergone several overhauls, signaling enduring tensions between inherited colonial frameworks and contemporary development goals (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024; Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025). The most recent overhaul, the Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) was formally adopted through the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2024–2030 and piloted in secondary schools from 2025, as part of a broader strategy to align education with Education 5.0, Zimbabwe's national framework for fostering innovation, cultural affirmation, and industrial development, in pursuit of upper-middle-income status by 2030 (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education [MoPSE], 2024; Gory et al., 2021).

Three key concepts underpin this study. The Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) refers to Zimbabwe's reformed educational framework that centres indigenous knowledge systems, cultural heritage, and community-linked learning as the

foundation of schooling. Education 5.0 denotes Zimbabwe's human capital development model that repositions secondary and tertiary education as a driver of innovation, industrialisation, and community service. Ubuntu philosophy, derived from the Nguni Bantu expression umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu ("a person is a person through other persons"), is an African humanist ethic emphasising communal responsibility, interdependence, and shared dignity, which provides the moral and epistemological grounding of the HBC (Letseka, 2012). Grounded in these principles and in inquiry-based learning, the HBC replaces the Continuous Assessment Learning Activities (CALA) model with school-based, heritage-focused project assessments, intended to enhance student engagement with national heritage and practical competencies (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025).

Theoretically, Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970/2000) offers a valuable lens through which to interrogate the HBC's emancipatory potential. Rejecting the traditional "banking" model, where learners are passive recipients of knowledge. Freire advocated for problem-posing education that positions the learner as a co-constructor of knowledge and a transformative agent within their environment. The HBC echoes this philosophy by replacing rote CALA assessments with project-based learning, aiming to cultivate students' critical consciousness and community agency (MoPSE, 2024). Yet, Freire's framework cautions that without dialogic praxis and genuine conscientização, the awakening of critical consciousness and education risks becoming a transactional exercise that reproduces existing power relations rather than dismantling them. Concerns raised by teacher unions regarding ideological bias and structural disempowerment within the HBC resonate with this Freirean warning that education is never politically neutral; it either domesticates or empowers.

Within the secondary school context, early implementation of the HBC has faced significant challenges. Studies conducted in Gutu and Mutare districts reveal that teachers had not received adequate in-service training following its May 2024 rollout; findings also point to delayed resource provision, rushed dissemination of guidelines, insufficient capacity-building workshops, and unclear monitoring frameworks and all of which undermine effective integration into classroom practice (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mashayamombe & van den Berg, 2024). Key structural barriers, including shortages of instructional materials and qualified Heritage Studies teachers, further impede curriculum fidelity at the secondary level (Mashayamombe & van den Berg, 2024).

Notwithstanding these contributions, existing studies have predominantly focused on Gutu and Mutare districts, leaving a notable geographical and empirical gap regarding HBC implementation in Masvingo Province. Prior research has also largely examined isolated dimensions of the reform without offering a holistic interrogation of the interplay between policy design, institutional readiness, and classroom practice. Moreover, there is limited scholarly attention to the voices of secondary school teachers and administrators as frontline agents of curriculum change. This study investigates: (1) the extent of HBC policy implementation in secondary schools; (2) teacher preparedness and capacity to deliver heritage-focused, inquiry-based pedagogy; and (3) the infrastructural and systemic enablers and barriers affecting rollout. By interrogating these dynamics in Masvingo Province, the study contributes empirical insight into how transformational curriculum reforms can be actualised in contexts where policy ambition often outpaces institutional readiness.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and supported by principles of Constructivist Learning Theory. Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional lens through which to examine Zimbabwe's implementation of the HBC in secondary schools, particularly the tensions between curriculum intent and pedagogical realities.

Freire's critical pedagogy

Freire (2000) conceptualises education as a deeply political and emancipatory act. Rejecting the "banking model" of education, where learners are treated as passive vessels to be filled with information, he advocates for a dialogic, problem-

posing pedagogy in which learners become active agents in co-constructing knowledge and transforming their realities. Within this framework, curriculum should not be imposed but should emerge from a participatory process rooted in the lived experiences of learners and educators (Shor, 1996). Freire's concept of false generosity where top-down policies masquerade as liberatory reforms, provides a critical lens through which to assess the gap between the HBC's emancipatory rhetoric and its implementation realities. Without dialogic engagement and capacitation, the HBC risks reinforcing the very power hierarchies it seeks to dismantle (Bhurekeni, 2020; Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024).

Freire's Critical Pedagogy is directly applicable to this study in that it provides a framework for interrogating whether the HBC's rollout in Masvingo Province secondary schools reflects genuine emancipatory intent or constitutes a top-down imposition dressed in cultural language. The theory guides the analysis of whether teachers and learners have been meaningfully engaged as dialogic partners in the reform process, or whether they remain passive recipients of a centrally prescribed curriculum, effectively reproducing the hierarchical structures the HBC purports to dismantle.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivism, as articulated by theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996), posits that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction, reflection, and engagement with real-world contexts. Learning is not simply the absorption of facts but the result of meaningful encounters that integrate prior experience and cognitive scaffolding. The HBC's emphasis on school-based projects, community engagement, and heritage inquiry aligns with constructivist principles. However, successful implementation depends on whether educators are equipped to facilitate learner-centred pedagogies, foster critical inquiry, and contextualise content. As Gudyanga (2024)highlights, many Zimbabwean secondary school teachers remain entrenched in traditional instructional approaches, lacking the methodological training to fully operationalise constructivist strategies.

Constructivist Learning Theory is relevant to this study insofar as the HBC's core design centred on project-based learning, heritage inquiry, and community-embedded assessment is inherently constructivist in orientation. This study applies constructivist principles to evaluate whether secondary school teachers in Masvingo Province possess the pedagogical competencies necessary to create learner-centred environments. Specifically, the framework informs the investigation of whether the transition from CALA to school-based projects has been accompanied by the requisite instructional scaffolding, collaborative professional development, and resource provisioning that constructivist pedagogy demands.

Together, these theoretical frameworks equip this study to probe whether the HBC fosters authentic educational transformation or remains a symbolic policy divorced from classroom praxis. Freirean theory illuminates the political and emancipatory dimensions of the reform, while constructivism addresses its pedagogical and methodological demands, together guiding this study's central inquiry into whether reform has been prematurely imposed without the necessary systemic foundations.

Literature review

Curriculum reform is a dynamic and context-sensitive process requiring coherent alignment between policy vision, pedagogical strategy, and institutional capacity (Fullan, 2020). This review synthesises international and regional scholarship to situate Zimbabwe's HBC within broader debates on postcolonial curriculum transformation, teacher preparedness, pedagogical shifts, and implementation challenges, while consistently foregrounding the gaps this study seeks to address. The review argues that regardless of geographical context, the most persistent impediment to curriculum reform is the misalignment between ambitious policy design and the institutional conditions required for its enactment, a pattern this study identifies as acutely present in Zimbabwe's HBC rollout.

Curriculum reform in postcolonial contexts: International and African perspectives

Globally, curriculum reform has been driven by the imperative to realign education systems with evolving socio-economic, cultural, and developmental priorities. In Finland, curriculum reform has been characterised by teacher autonomy, collaborative policy development, and sustained professional development, yielding high levels of implementation fidelity and learner outcomes (Toom & Husu, 2021). Singapore's curriculum transformation success has been attributed to systemic coherence, where policy design, teacher training, and assessment frameworks are deliberately integrated (Deng, 2022). These international examples consistently demonstrate that reform succeeds where teachers are positioned as co-creators rather than passive recipients of change where a lesson directly relevant to the Zimbabwean experience.

In contrast, curriculum reforms across the Global South have frequently encountered structural and epistemological tensions. In Latin America, progressive curriculum reforms inspired by Freirean pedagogy revealed that even philosophically rich frameworks struggle without adequate teacher preparation and institutional support (Motta & Cole, 2022). India's National Curriculum Framework, while advocating constructivist and child-centred learning, has faced significant implementation resistance due to entrenched examination culture and insufficient teacher reorientation (Batra, 2021). These cases highlight a recurring global pattern: the ambition of reform policy frequently outpaces the readiness of implementing institutions. Postcolonial theorists such as Ngũgī wa Thiong'o (2012) and Wa Thiong'o (1986) further argue that authentic decolonisation of education requires not merely content indigenisation but a fundamental epistemological repositioning that dismantles the cognitive frameworks inherited from colonial schooling, a challenge that technical curriculum reform alone cannot resolve.

Within sub-Saharan Africa, comparable tensions are evident. Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), introduced in 2017 and expanded through 2022, encountered widespread resistance from educators due to inadequate training, unclear assessment frameworks, and a disconnect between formative assessment ideals and centralised examination culture (Tuwor & Sossion, 2022). South Africa's successive curriculum reforms continue to reveal challenges of policy ambiguity, conceptual vagueness, and teacher disempowerment (Motala & Vally, 2021). Ghana's standards-based curriculum reform similarly faltered due to logistical delays, insufficient teacher orientation, and limited learning materials in rural areas (Akyeampong, 2021). Conversely, Rwanda has demonstrated more promising outcomes by embedding school-based continuous professional development, instructional coaching, and institutional ownership into its reform strategy (Uworwabayeho et al., 2021). The consistent lesson from this body of evidence which this study upholds, is that curriculum reform fails not due to flaws in policy design alone, but because of persistent disconnects between policy intent and classroom practice. This gap is equally evident in Zimbabwe's HBC rollout, yet remains under-examined specifically within Masvingo Province's secondary schools.

The Heritage-Based curriculum: philosophy and policy foundations

Zimbabwe's HBC represents a deliberate epistemological shift, anchoring education in Ubuntu philosophy, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural heritage, while aligning with the Education 5.0 framework's goals of innovation, industrialisation, and national development (MoPSE, 2024). Replacing CALA with heritage-based school projects, the HBC aspires to cultivate learners who are culturally grounded, critically conscious, and economically productive (Chigwida & Modiba, 2024). Theoretically, this aligns with Freire's (2000) vision of education as a liberatory act and contemporary socio-cultural learning theories that emphasise contextually situated knowledge construction (Moll, 2020). The HBC further reflects global trends toward culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2020). However, the study takes the position that while the philosophical foundations of the HBC are well articulated in policy documents, empirical evidence on how these principles translate into actual classroom practice in secondary schools

remains critically insufficient, particularly beyond the Gutu and Mutare districts which a deficit of this study directly addresses.

Teacher preparedness and professional development

The centrality of teacher preparedness to reform success is well established internationally. Recent scholarship affirms that sustained, job-embedded professional development is the single most significant predictor of successful curriculum implementation (Opfer, 2022; Vescio et al., 2023). Yet in Zimbabwe, the HBC rollout has been characterised by the cascading model of in-service training, a model widely criticised for diluting pedagogical rigour and failing to reach teachers in remote areas (Christenson & Makokoro, 2023; Walker & Hennessy, 2022). Studies in Gutu and Mutare districts confirm that many secondary school teachers received insufficient orientation to the HBC's epistemological underpinnings, lacked confidence in integrating indigenous knowledge into formal syllabi, and reported reform fatigue resulting from rapid successive curriculum changes (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mashayamombe & van den Berg, 2024). This review argues that without a fundamental overhaul of professional development infrastructure, the HBC's ambitious pedagogical aspirations will remain unrealised in Masvingo Province's secondary schools, as existing studies have not yet examined this question with the depth it demands.

Pedagogical shifts, assessment, and implementation challenges

The HBC demands a fundamental rethinking of pedagogy and assessment, transitioning from examination-driven modalities toward constructivist, learner-centred, and culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2020). Heritage-based projects are intended to position learners as active co-constructors of knowledge, drawing on indigenous technologies, local histories, and community practices (MoPSE, 2024). However, evidence consistently shows that legacy habits from colonial and postcolonial examination-oriented systems continue to dominate classroom interactions, with teachers prioritising syllabus coverage and exam preparation over pedagogical innovation (Gudyanga, 2024; Ngwenya, 2020). Assessment under the HBC also introduces challenges of reliability, comparability, and quality assurance; teachers have raised concerns over unclear rubrics, inconsistent moderation procedures, and insufficient assessment literacy training (Christenson & Makokoro, 2023).

These challenges are not unique to Zimbabwe. In Australia, recent curriculum reform reviews have revealed that teachers continue to struggle with operationalising new assessment frameworks without sustained professional support and clear implementation exemplars (Poulton, 2023). In Canada, curriculum reforms emphasising indigenous knowledge integration have encountered resistance rooted in teachers' limited familiarity with indigenous epistemologies and the absence of community-linked support structures (Battiste & McLean, 2021). In the United Kingdom, post-pandemic curriculum reforms have similarly highlighted the tension between ambitious policy redesign and the practical capacities of teachers operating in under-resourced environments (Brooks, 2021). These international parallels reinforce this study's central argument that pedagogical transformation requires more than policy prescription which demands deliberate, systemic enablement at the institutional level, a condition conspicuously absent from Zimbabwe's HBC implementation to date.

Summary and identified gaps

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that curriculum reform succeeds only where policy ambition is matched by teacher empowerment, institutional readiness, and participatory implementation processes (Fullan, 2020; Tikly, 2020; Deng, 2022). While existing Zimbabwean studies have begun to document HBC implementation challenges in selected districts, they have examined isolated dimensions of the reform and have not provided a holistic, context-specific analysis of Masvingo Province's secondary schools (Chitamba & Chitamba, 2025; Mashayamombe & van den Berg, 2024). The voices of frontline practitioners remain insufficiently foregrounded. This study addresses these gaps by offering a comprehensive empirical investigation of HBC implementation in Masvingo Province, interrogating the interplay between policy design, teacher preparedness, pedagogical

practice, and systemic readiness and maintaining throughout that the cart has, indeed, been placed firmly ahead of the horses.

Methodology

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which privileges the exploration of subjective meanings and socially constructed realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative research design was adopted, consistent with this interpretivist stance, as it facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and institutional contexts regarding the rollout of the HBC in Zimbabwean secondary schools. The research was conducted in Masvingo Province, where purposive sampling was employed to select ten secondary schools, comprising thirty teachers and ten school heads, chosen on the basis of their direct involvement in HBC implementation. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, with this triangulation enriching the depth and credibility of the findings. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and emerging themes across the multiple data sources, enabling a nuanced interpretation of curriculum implementation realities that quantitative methods would not have captured effectively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection Informed consent was sought from all participants, who were assured of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participants' identities were anonymised throughout the study to protect privacy and professional standing. Permission to conduct research in the selected schools was also granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education through the Masvingo Provincial Education Directorate. The researcher adhered to the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and non-maleficence throughout the research process.

Results

This study explored the implementation of Zimbabwe's HBC in secondary schools, critically examining the alignment between policy and practice, teacher preparedness, pedagogical transformations, and systemic constraints. Data were drawn from document analysis, interviews with educators and school leaders, and field observations. The findings are presented thematically to capture the multidimensional realities underpinning HBC reform in Zimbabwean classrooms.

Policy ambition versus classroom realities

A prominent theme was the disconnect between the aspirational language of policy and the grounded realities of practice. Although the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2024–2030) articulates a vision for culturally responsive, learner-centred education, findings reveal that many secondary schools continue to rely on traditional, teacher-led instructional approaches. Heritage content was often superficially addressed, with educators unclear on how to embed it meaningfully within daily teaching. As one secondary school teacher observed:

"We are told to integrate heritage, but there is no syllabus example or scheme of work for that. We are improvising."

Policy documents emphasised the development of national identity and innovation through education; however, the lack of operational clarity in syllabi and assessment guidelines left most teachers uncertain and inconsistent in implementation.

Insufficient teacher preparedness

Across all sampled schools, teacher preparedness emerged as a critical barrier. Many teachers acknowledged hearing about the HBC through official circulars or single-day workshops, but few had participated in substantive professional development specific to HBC pedagogies. Most participants described training as generic, rushed, and disconnected from actual classroom needs. One urban school educator reflected:

"We did not receive any specific training on heritage-based projects, just a workshop with PowerPoint slides."

This gap in capacity is compounded by the continued use of a cascading training model,

which often dilutes content as it moves through hierarchical administrative layers, leaving frontline educators with inadequate support.

Pedagogical tensions and assessment confusion

Although the HBC envisions constructivist, participatory learning such as storytelling, apprenticeship, and community-based projects and observed classroom practices showed minimal deviation from the rote memorisation and summative testing culture of previous curricula. Teachers expressed scepticism about the practicality of heritage-based projects given large class sizes, limited resources, and lack of guidance. A teacher from a mission school noted:

"We are still using end-of-term tests. Projects are hard to supervise, mark, and standardise."

The abrupt transition from CALA to heritage-based projects left schools without proper assessment rubrics, moderation protocols, or exemplar work. As a result, many teachers reverted to traditional modes of evaluation to maintain academic consistency, inadvertently undermining the reform's pedagogical intent.

Systemic constraints and institutional gaps

The effective implementation of the HBC is also hindered by systemic and structural limitations. Schools, especially in rural settings, reported chronic shortages of textbooks, learning materials, ICT tools, and infrastructural resources. These deficits significantly limited opportunities for innovative or experiential learning as envisioned by the HBC. One rural school head lamented:

"We do not even have electricity, let alone books on indigenous knowledge or internet for research."

Moreover, the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation systems meant that many schools engaged with the HBC superficially, often adapting or selectively applying elements without accountability mechanisms to ensure fidelity.

Philosophical ambiguities and curriculum tensions

While the HBC was lauded in policy rhetoric as a tool for cultural revitalisation and educational emancipation, findings suggest ambivalence among educators and stakeholders. Some viewed the curriculum as a positive shift towards Africanising education, while others feared it might be used for ideological indoctrination or political socialisation, rather than critical empowerment. One school administrator noted:

"It feels like we are being told to look backward instead of preparing learners for the global future."

This tension between emancipatory education and state-centric narratives echoes broader postcolonial curriculum debates, raising questions about whose heritage is valorised and how. It also highlights the importance of creating structured dialogue platforms through which educators can critically interrogate the HBC's philosophical intent rather than receiving it uncritically.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and contested terrain of curriculum reform, where the transformative aspirations of Zimbabwe's HBC collide with the structural, pedagogical, and epistemological realities of secondary school practice in Masvingo Province. This discussion interrogates the findings through the dual theoretical lenses of Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Constructivist Learning Theory, while drawing on current comparative literature to contextualise and deepen the analysis. Alternative perspectives on the reform are also considered in order to provide a balanced and comprehensive scholarly account.

Policy ambition versus classroom reality: the Freirean paradox

The central tension emerging from this study and the disconnect between HBC policy ambition and classroom practice can be powerfully explained through Freire's (2000) concept of false generosity, wherein reform policies are presented as liberatory yet are designed and delivered in

ways that reproduce existing power hierarchies. The findings reveal that despite the HBC's emancipatory rhetoric of cultural revitalisation, decolonisation, and learner agency, its implementation has followed a distinctly top-down trajectory, with teachers receiving prescriptive directives rather than being engaged as dialogic partners. This mirrors Freire's warning that education divorced from genuine dialogue and conscientização risks becoming another instrument of domestication rather than emancipation.

This observation resonates with Tikly's (2020) analysis of curriculum reform in postcolonial African states, where he argues that superficial indigenisation of content, without corresponding transformation of pedagogical relationships and power structures, reproduces colonial epistemologies under a nationalist veneer. Similarly, Motala and Vally (2021) found in the South African context that curriculum reforms that bypass teacher agency and critical ownership tend to generate compliance rather than transformation. The HBC, as evidenced by this study, risks following this same trajectory in Masvingo Province.

It should be acknowledged, however, that some scholars offer a more optimistic reading of state-led curriculum reform. Tikly (2020) and Molla (2020) argue that in post-colonial contexts where civil society and professional teacher organisations remain under-resourced, state-driven reform may represent the only realistic vehicle for systemic educational change. From this perspective, the top-down character of the HBC's implementation, while problematic, may also reflect pragmatic governance constraints rather than ideological bad faith. This alternative reading does not invalidate the study's critical findings but invites a more nuanced assessment of the conditions under which reform agency operates in Zimbabwe.

Teacher preparedness: A constructivist crisis

The findings on teacher preparedness constitute perhaps the most significant indictment of the HBC's implementation process. The near-universal report of insufficient, generic, and rushed training reflects a profound misalignment between the constructivist pedagogy embedded in the HBC's design and the professional development infrastructure provided to support it. Constructivist theory, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978) and extended by Moll (2020), posits that meaningful learning including teacher learning occurs through scaffolded, socially situated, and contextually relevant engagement. A single-day PowerPoint workshop, as described by participants, represents the antithesis of constructivist professional development and cannot reasonably be expected to produce the deep pedagogical shifts the HBC demands.

This finding is consistent with Opfer (2022), who argues that professional development that is episodic, decontextualised, and non-collaborative produces minimal change in teacher practice, regardless of curriculum ambition. Vescio et al. (2023) similarly contend that sustained teacher learning communities, embedded within school practice, are far more effective in producing instructional transformation than cascade training models. Comparatively, Rwanda's investment in school-based coaching, peer mentoring, and iterative professional learning communities produced significantly higher levels of teacher confidence and pedagogical innovation than reforms relying on top-down dissemination (Uworwabayeho et al., 2021). Zimbabwe's HBC, without a comparable investment in teacher professional development, risks replicating the failures of Kenya's early CBC implementation rather than its subsequent gains (Tuwor & Sossion, 2022).

Pedagogical tensions and assessment confusion: constructivism unrealised

The observed persistence of rote memorisation, summative testing, and teacher-centred instruction in Masvingo Province's secondary schools, despite the HBC's constructivist aspirations, reflects what Gay (2021) identifies as the implementation paradox of culturally responsive pedagogy: transformative pedagogical frameworks are frequently adopted at the level of policy discourse while remaining largely absent from daily classroom practice. The constructivist vision of learners as active co-constructors of knowledge requires not only a philosophical shift but also tangible changes in classroom organisation, time allocation, resource

provisioning, and assessment design and none of which were systematically addressed during the HBC's rollout.

The abrupt replacement of CALA with heritage-based projects, without accompanying rubrics, moderation frameworks, or exemplar work, created an assessment vacuum that many teachers resolved by reverting to familiar summative practices. This finding aligns with Poulton (2023), who observed in the Australian curriculum reform context that assessment reform without explicit guidance consistently produces inconsistency, grade subjectivity, and teacher disengagement. Ngwenya (2020) reinforces this in the Zimbabwean context, noting that the pressure to prepare learners for national examinations that continue to privilege cognitive outcomes creates a structural contradiction that effectively neutralises classroom-level constructivist innovation. From a Freirean perspective, this assessment confusion is symptomatic of a failure to engage teachers and learners in genuine dialogue about what knowledge is valued and how it should be demonstrated.

Systemic constraints: infrastructure as a barrier to emancipatory education

The systemic and infrastructural barriers identified in this study including chronic shortages of textbooks, ICT resources, electricity, and learning materials, particularly in rural schools constitute what Tikly (2020) terms the material conditions of educational inequality, which fundamentally constrain the realisation of curriculum reform ambitions. A curriculum that aspires to innovation, digital literacy, and heritage inquiry while being implemented in schools without electricity or internet connectivity reflects a profound disconnection between policy design and lived educational experience. Akyeampong (2021) documented in Ghana how the absence of basic learning infrastructure in rural schools effectively created a two-tier reform progressive in urban settings, nominal in rural ones, a pattern this study finds clearly mirrored in Masvingo Province.

The absence of robust monitoring and evaluation systems further compounds these limitations. Without accountability mechanisms to assess implementation fidelity, schools engage with the HBC selectively and superficially. Deng (2022) argues that curriculum coherence and the alignment between policy intent, resource provisioning, teacher practice, and assessment is the foundational condition for reform sustainability, and its absence in Zimbabwe's HBC rollout explains much of the implementation dysfunction this study has documented.

Taken together, the findings paint a sobering portrait of a curriculum reform whose philosophical ambition significantly outpaces its systemic readiness. Through a Freirean lens, the HBC's implementation in Masvingo Province reflects a form of top-down imposition that, despite its emancipatory language, has not engaged teachers, learners, and communities as genuine agents of educational transformation. Through a constructivist lens, the reform has failed to provide the scaffolded, socially situated, and resource-supported professional environment necessary for new pedagogical practices to take root. As Fullan (2020) observes, the deepest reforms are those that change not only what teachers teach but how they think about teaching and this kind of transformation requires time, trust, and systemic support that the HBC's current implementation trajectory has yet to provide.

Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine the implementation dynamics of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum in Masvingo Province's secondary schools, with particular attention to teacher preparedness, pedagogical transformation, and systemic readiness. The findings unequivocally demonstrate that while the HBC represents a philosophically rich and nationally significant educational reform, its rollout has been characterised by a systemic unpreparedness that has substantially undermined its transformative potential. Teachers have been inadequately trained, assessment frameworks remain unclear, resources are chronically insufficient, and the voices of frontline practitioners have been largely excluded from the reform process. These conditions have produced a pattern of performative compliance rather than genuine pedagogical transformation, a curriculum that has been implemented in name but not yet in spirit.

Through the dual theoretical lenses of Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Constructivist Learning Theory, the study concludes that the HBC's current implementation trajectory risks perpetuating the very hierarchical and disempowering educational structures it sought to dismantle. Unless the foundational conditions of dialogic engagement, sustained professional development, adequate resourcing, and participatory policy design are deliberately established, the HBC risks joining the long list of well-intentioned but under-resourced curriculum reforms across the postcolonial world that promised transformation yet delivered, at best, symbolic change. The metaphor of "a cart before the horses", which structures this study, thus captures an educational reality that demands urgent and sustained institutional attention.

Limitations of the study

This study acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study was confined to Masvingo Province, and while it provides rich, context-specific insights, its findings may not be directly generalisable to other provinces or school types across Zimbabwe. Second, the qualitative nature of the study means that findings reflect the subjective experiences and perceptions of participants at a specific point in time, and may not capture the full spectrum of HBC implementation experiences across the country. Third, given that the HBC was only piloted from 2025, this study captures early-phase implementation realities, and some of the challenges identified may be addressed as the reform matures. Fourth, access to schools in some remote areas of Masvingo Province was constrained by logistical factors, which may have limited the representativeness of the rural school sample.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several productive avenues for future scholarship on the HBC in Zimbabwe. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies to track how implementation dynamics evolve over successive phases of the HBC rollout, assessing whether systemic readiness improves with time and policy adjustment. Comparative studies across multiple provinces would also be valuable in establishing whether the challenges identified in Masvingo Province are nationally consistent or context-specific. Additionally, future research should foreground learner perspectives, a dimension largely absent from the current HBC scholarship and to assess the curriculum's actual impact on student engagement, cultural identity, and learning outcomes. Research into the effectiveness of different professional development models for HBC implementation would further contribute to evidence-based policy refinement.

Recommendations

Drawing directly from the empirical findings and theoretical analysis of this study, the following recommendations are made to key stakeholders:

First, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should urgently invest in structured, subject-specific, and school-embedded professional development programmes for all secondary school teachers involved in HBC implementation. Cascade training models should be phased out in favour of peer mentoring, collaborative curriculum inquiry, and ongoing instructional coaching anchored in school-based learning communities, as evidenced by successful reform models in Rwanda and Finland.

Second, MoPSE should develop and disseminate comprehensive implementation resources, including detailed syllabi, assessment rubrics, exemplar heritage-based projects, and moderation guidelines, before proceeding to full national rollout. Assessment frameworks must be aligned between school-based evaluation and national examinations to eliminate the structural contradiction currently forcing teachers to choose between HBC pedagogy and exam preparation.

Third, the government should establish a dedicated HBC resource provisioning fund to ensure that secondary schools, particularly those in rural and under-resourced settings, have access to the textbooks, ICT infrastructure, and heritage materials necessary to operationalise the curriculum's project-based learning requirements.

Fourth, a participatory reform governance structure should be established, through which secondary school teachers, school

heads, subject specialists, and community representatives are meaningfully involved in curriculum interpretation, adaptation, and review. This dialogic approach is essential to building the teacher ownership and buy-in that the current top-down implementation model has failed to cultivate.

Fifth, the government should establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for HBC implementation, with regular school-level assessments of implementation fidelity, teacher confidence, and learner outcomes. This framework should be designed to generate evidence that informs iterative policy refinement rather than punitive accountability.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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