

# Darting from Pillar to Post: Policy Inconsistency and Stakeholder Contestations in Curriculum Review

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## EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 01 November 2023

Revised: 01 February 2024

Accepted: 05 February 2024

Published: 14 February 2024

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DOI: [10.38140/ijer-2024.vol6.02](https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2024.vol6.02)

**Abstract:** One of the most contentious issues facing politicians and scholars in the 21st century is the future of the school curriculum in a rapidly changing and highly digitised global village. This study explores stakeholder perspectives on Zimbabwe's school curriculum and their input during its review amidst the challenge of balancing traditional education with emerging technological, economic, and social demands. This reflects a global dilemma where schools strive to adapt to rapid changes without overwhelming the curriculum, highlighting the critical role of policy reform in navigating these pressures. Using capability theory as the theoretical lens and critical discourse analysis as the research design, this qualitative study generated data from 19 primary documents published on Zimbabwe's 2023 curriculum review. Parents, school administrators, teachers, and teacher trade unions complained about curriculum overload, the wrong timing of consultations, poor remuneration for teachers, and the need for a technical and vocational-oriented curriculum. While government policymakers argued that Curriculum Assessment Learning Activities

(CALA) promote learners' creativity, research, and problem-solving skills, the user system vehemently opposed the curriculum overload caused by CALA. Each learner was expected to do a CALA project in every subject they were taking. Stakeholder contestations pressured policymakers to dart from pillar to post in search of a curriculum to pacify competing and conflicting interests. Therefore, policy reformers must seriously consider curriculum review input from the users if impending curriculum changes are to be successful following the review process.

**Keywords:** Curriculum review, curriculum overload, Curriculum Assessment Learning Activities, policy inconsistency, stakeholder contestation.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most critical issues facing politicians and scholars in policy reform is the future of the school curriculum in a fast-changing, volatile, highly digitalised, and globalised world. Schools in both developed and developing countries face pressure to keep pace with technological, economic, political, and social changes (OECD, 2020; Xhemajli, Malaj & Mehmeti, 2023). Policymakers recognise the need to add new content, learning activities, and subjects to schools as they try to keep up with the constantly evolving techno-economic and socio-political dynamics (Chisholm, 2005; Erstad & Voogt, 2018; Majoni, 2017; Min, Lee & Kubow, 2022). However, these review and reform initiatives often result in work overload for teachers and learners as new content is added to already overcrowded curricula.

Curriculum overload, also known as curriculum overcrowding, has been reported in developed countries such as the United Kingdom (England and Wales), the Netherlands, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia (Erstad & Voogt, 2018; OECD, 2020; Voogt, Nieveen & Klopping, 2017). In the developing world, countries like China, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Angola, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have also experienced curriculum overcrowding (Majoni, 2017; Kurata, 2023). Though not entirely new, this problem has grown significantly in recent years due to

### How to cite this article:

Chimbi, G. T. (2024). Darting from pillar to post: Policy inconsistency and stakeholder contestations in curriculum review. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Education Research*, 6, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijer-2024.vol6.02>

pressure to include digital literacy, creativity, research skills, environmental awareness, and other 21st-century related competencies in the school curriculum. As a result, curriculum overload often triggers demands for curriculum review from stakeholders to remove excess content, create space for new subjects, and map the future trajectory of education.

Curriculum review is important for improving the quality of learning objectives, content, learning organisation (methodology), and assessment procedures in schools. Singh (2020, p. 289) remarks that "a regular review of the curriculum and teaching methods can help to ensure that courses remain applicable and current in times of rapid change." The threat of school knowledge becoming obsolete is more real in the 21st century than ever before. Curriculum review is therefore simultaneously concerned with "a legacy from the past and aspirations and anxieties about the future" (Williamson, 2013, p. 2). Though the future cannot be fully predicted, planning for it remains critical as it reduces anxieties and uncertainties. The future of schools and classrooms is at the heart of the curriculum review process.

Without discarding the past and the present, curriculum review remains focused on the future. Mapping the future of what is taught in schools, how it is taught, and how it is assessed is the foundation of all curriculum review projects. This is because aligning school knowledge with rapid changes in society is not only inevitable but also a priority if the curriculum is to remain relevant to the individual and societal needs of learners. The aims of the current study are, therefore, dual and futuristic. Firstly, it identifies and critiques the contributions made by different stakeholders during the curriculum review consultations. Secondly, it examines the potential of these contributions in mapping the future trajectory of Zimbabwe's school curriculum. Two questions underpin this study:

- What contributions were made by contesting stakeholders during curriculum review consultations?
- How do these contributions shape the future trajectory of Zimbabwe's school curriculum?

## **2. Review of Key Drivers to Curriculum Review**

A substantial body of literature exists on the push factors for curriculum review and the subsequent policy reform processes that almost always follow (Erstad & Voogt, 2018; Majoni, 2017; Singh, 2020; Thornhill-Miller, Camarda et al., 2023; Williamson, 2013; OECD, 2020). The key drivers for curriculum review consultations with stakeholders include socio-economic-technological changes in society, international trends in education in the 21st century, curriculum overload, CALA corruption by teachers, and the lapsing of curriculum cycles. These are discussed below.

### **2.1 Socio-economic-technological changes**

The 21st century is characterised by rapid changes from an industrial to a knowledge-centred society, driven by the use of digital technologies in social, economic, political, and educational spheres. These socio-technological changes are happening so quickly that schools are struggling to keep up. Erstad and Voogt (2018, p. 3) point out that "social transformations are rapid, while educational processes, including curriculum development, are slow." This creates a major challenge for education, as the pace of change necessitates constant curriculum reviews to ensure that what is taught and learned in schools remains relevant to the needs of 21st-century learners and society. Since knowledge is constantly evolving, schools are finding it essential to empower learners with skills rather than just processed knowledge so that they have the competencies to search for new knowledge on their own (Alam, 2022; González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022).

In today's rapidly changing, knowledge-centred global village, the teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge for learners, as was the case in previous centuries. As a result, the 21st-century curriculum focuses on critical thinking, computational and digital skills, adaptive learning, personalised and collaborative problem-solving (Saad & Zainudin, 2022). Therefore, the need to

develop the 4Cs - creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication (Thornhill-Miller, Camarda et al., 2023) - and keep pace with socio-economic-technological changes are key drivers for curriculum review and subsequent reform in both the industrialised North and the developing South.

## **2.2 International trends in 21<sup>st</sup> century education**

In developing countries like Zimbabwe, there is a pressing need to keep up with international trends in education. This serves as a crucial catalyst for curriculum review and subsequent reforms. Lwazi Sibanda, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology Education at the National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe, explains:

The curriculum review is important so that, as a nation, we can align ourselves with global trends in education. Education is dynamic and not static. Therefore, we must ensure that it remains in line with global trends, allowing our learners to acquire the necessary skills that will benefit them in life (The Herald, 2023).

International trends in education emphasise the development of learners' research abilities, as well as their individual and collaborative problem-solving skills, instead of simply memorising and regurgitating knowledge to pass exams. In an effort to synchronise curriculum reform with international trends, project-based research was introduced in Zimbabwean secondary schools in September 2017. However, due to resistance from various stakeholders, such as school administrators, teachers, learners, and parents, research projects were withdrawn from schools in March 2018 (Chimbi & Jita, 2021). Nonetheless, without proper consultation and consensus from stakeholders, research projects were reintroduced under a new name in May 2021: Curriculum Assessment Learning Activities (CALA). Unfortunately, CALA resulted in curriculum overload and faced severe criticism from curriculum users. This put pressure on the Zimbabwean government to initiate a curriculum review in 2023 and engage with restless stakeholders.

## **2.3 Curriculum overload**

Curriculum overload due to CALA affects not only teachers and learners but also parents and guardians. They are equally affected because their children constantly seek their assistance with CALA projects. In primary and secondary schools, students are expected to complete a CALA project for every subject they are taking (Spiked, May 2023). For example, Grade 7 students are expected to complete six CALA projects for the six subjects they are examined. Similarly, a Form 4 (Ordinary Level) student taking 10 subjects is expected to complete 10 projects. These projects contribute 30% to the students' final examination marks. In Zimbabwe, there is a popular joke that men deliberately arrive home late, after their children have gone to bed, to avoid exposing their ignorance when they are unable to answer questions about the CALA projects (The Sunday Mail, 2023). "The CALA issue needs to be addressed because you will find that parents end up doing the assignments instead of the learners" (The Herald, 2023). Given the situation where teachers and examination officers can never be sure if the CALA projects submitted by learners are their own work, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) has sought to address the curriculum overload for teachers, learners, and parents caused by this unpopular curriculum innovation.

## **2.4 CALA corruption by teachers**

A unique push factor for Zimbabwe's 2023 curriculum review is the unethical practice stimulated by CALA among poorly remunerated teachers (Chanda, 2022; Vinga, 2021). Zimbabwean teachers are paid a meagre US\$250 a month, making some unscrupulous individuals exploit CALAs as an income supplementing opportunity. The Sunday Mail (2023) reported that one worrying aspect about CALA is that it has allegedly led to corruption among some teachers, who are reportedly being paid to either award more marks to candidates or write coursework on behalf of learners. The illicit practice of

teachers selling CALAs to learners in Zimbabwe appears to be widespread, and government officials are aware of it.

Without examining the root causes of this malpractice, Evelyn Ndlovu (Zimbabwe's Minister of Primary and Secondary Education) chastised teachers for turning CALA into a cash cow. She fumed in Parliament: "I do not understand why a black teacher should sabotage a child by doing work for them. You are cheating the child, and tomorrow that child will be destitute because when he/she goes to university, he/she will fail" (Ignite Media Zimbabwe, 2022). The Minister implored the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) – an agency set up by the government – to investigate and arrest corrupt teachers. She advised parents and guardians to report teachers who sell research projects to ZACC. However, the Minister seemed to conveniently forget that the parents and guardians give the students the money to buy CALAs from 'corrupt' teachers. Is it, therefore, possible for parents and guardians to report themselves to ZACC when they are partners in the crime? The corruption allegations and other controversies surrounding CALA and the end of the seven-year curriculum cycle were key drivers for Zimbabwe's curriculum review.

## **2.5 Lapsing of seven-year cycle for new curriculum (2015-2022)**

Zimbabwe's competence-based curriculum, also known as the new curriculum, was introduced in 2015. The seven-year cycle of this curriculum came to an end in December 2022. Following the completion of this cycle, the Zimbabwean government initiated a curriculum review process to determine the future direction of teaching and learning in schools. During the Secretary's Merit Award ceremony, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE), Tumisang Thabela, announced that all individuals were invited to participate in the curriculum review consultations. The goal of these consultations is to gather suggestions on what aspects should be retained or discarded for the next cycle (Zimbabwe Situation, 2023). Ultimately, these consultations aim to map out the future trajectory of education in Zimbabwean primary and secondary schools.

## **2.6 Theoretical framework: Capability approach**

The current study on Zimbabwe's 2023 curriculum review process and the stakeholder consultation it involved is illuminated by Sen's (1999) capability theory. In his seminal work, "Development as Freedom," Sen (1999) argues that regardless of education, individuals possess inherent energy and talent that can be harnessed to improve their personal and community lives. Humans have the ability to make choices that can foster individual development and societal well-being, provided they are granted the freedom to unleash their potential by those in leadership positions. The capability approach focuses on "what people can potentially do" (Forcher-Mayr & Mahlke, 2020, p. 123) when they are given the freedom to contribute to matters that directly and indirectly impact their present and future livelihoods.

The capability theory was chosen as an appropriate framework for the current study because people's freedom to make choices forms the foundation of Sen's concept of development. Sen (1999, p. 3) argues that "development can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy." The curriculum review consultation process in Zimbabwe allowed stakeholders (including parents, teachers, and learners) to determine what should be taught in schools, a freedom they had not previously been granted. In Zimbabwe, as well as in many developing countries, curriculum decision-making has traditionally been reserved as a privilege for politicians and policymakers. However, stakeholders now have the ability to decide both the content and methodology of education, provided the government allows them the freedom to make such choices. The curriculum review consultations empowered stakeholders to exercise their capabilities and shape the future direction of school education. For example, parents have the ability to contribute ideas regarding the education of their children as long as policymakers grant them the freedom to do so. The curriculum

review consultations provided stakeholders with the opportunity to exercise their freedom of choice. However, the true potential of the capability approach can only be realised when policymakers implement the recommendations generated during these consultations in the curriculum development and dissemination processes.

### 3 Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used for this desktop study. The data was gathered from publicly available information (the internet) to explore Zimbabwe's curriculum review, which took place between January and May 2023. The study utilised critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the research design. According to Mullet (2018, p. 116), "CDA is a qualitative analytical approach that critically describes, interprets, and explains how discourses construct, maintain, and legitimise social inequalities." Critical discourse analysis helps uncover explicit and subtle power dynamics, injustice, and marginalisation issues in research that focuses on contested topics such as curriculum review processes. The government provided an opportunity for various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, teacher unions, students, and others, to express their opinions on Zimbabwe's current curriculum and future policy direction, partly due to numerous complaints about the existing school curriculum. Curriculum discourse analysis was chosen as the appropriate research design because the consultation meetings allowed marginalised stakeholders, who had a history of being silenced in Zimbabwe's curriculum reforms, to have a voice.

#### 3.1 Data collection

Data were collected from various primary sources, including curriculum review announcements and documents from the government, stakeholder consultation meetings, newspaper articles, and social media chats found on Google and the internet. Specifically, the social media chats on Facebook that responded to government announcements regarding the curriculum review process were identified and analysed. The primary focus of this research is on newspaper articles that discuss stakeholder input during the consultation meetings. In order to investigate the curriculum review process in chronological order, Table 1 presents a list of 19 online newspaper articles and government announcements that were collected and analysed.

*Table 1. Selected primary data sources*

S/N	Source & Date	Title	Major Issues raised
1	Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) May 24 2021	Urgent revival of Continuous Assessment Learning Activities (CALA): An unwelcome waste of limited learning time	- benefits of continuous assessment - criticisms against hurried implementation - rushed in-service training for teachers - teachers lack motivation due to poor salaries - schools lack resources
2	Zimbabwe Situation January 11 2023	Competence-based curriculum set for review	- end of 7 year-cycle for 2015-2022 curriculum - invitation to participate in review process
3	The Sunday Mail March 5 2023	Growing push for curriculum review	- curriculum overload for learners & parent - lack of resources for CALA - CALA corruption by teachers - some benefits of CALA

4	The Sunday Mail April 13 2023	Review of new curriculum on course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consultants hired to lead review process</li> <li>- input from stakeholders coming in</li> <li>- 2023-2030 framework to be produced after stakeholder consultations</li> </ul>
5	The Mirror April 15 2023	Ministry starts work on 2023-2030 curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consultants engaged for terminal evaluation of curriculum 2015-2022</li> <li>- successes &amp; challenges discussed</li> <li>- need for a technical-vocational oriented curriculum</li> <li>- engagement with media managers</li> <li>- Vision 2030 - production of critical and skilled human capital</li> <li>- review to feed into new curriculum for 2023-2030</li> </ul>
6	Chronicle May 10 2023	Government reviews schools curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- parents' concerns over CALA</li> <li>- skills-based curriculum a response to international trends</li> <li>- change from manual to digital/e-learning</li> <li>- funding challenges to reform</li> </ul>
7	Africa Press May 16 2023	Zimbabwe reviews school curriculum amid concerns over CALA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CALA burdening pupils</li> <li>- teachers, learners, parents overloaded</li> <li>- CALA not standardised</li> <li>- widens rural-urban schools gap</li> </ul>
8	Spiked May 2023	Curriculum review necessary: ARTUZ speaks out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teachers union criticised timing of review</li> <li>- should have been done end of 2022</li> <li>- sceptical of the benefits of consultation</li> <li>- consultation guided by a predetermined questionnaire</li> <li>- limiting independent contributions from participants</li> </ul>
9	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education May 17 2023	Media Announcement: National curriculum review consultations from 23 to May 24 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- nationwide review consultations from 23 to May 24 2023</li> <li>- invitation to all stakeholders</li> <li>- every school a consultation centre</li> </ul>
10	Facebook May 2023	The review of the curriculum framework for primary and secondary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teacher input not taken seriously</li> <li>- reviews done by officials with children learning outside Zimbabwe</li> <li>- lack of resources for practical subjects</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- give teachers better remuneration first</li> <li>- review is government deception</li> </ul>
11	NewsDay May 17 2023	Review of New Curriculum Flawed: Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teachers unions criticise review</li> <li>- review flawed, rushed, non-consultative</li> <li>- review to sanitise government decisions</li> <li>- no genuine commitment to collect stakeholders' input</li> <li>- review a sham/deception/fake</li> <li>- ministry spokesperson denies these shortcomings</li> <li>- claims all stakeholders consulted</li> </ul>
12	The Sunday News May 21 2023	Curriculum review: Shaping a progressive education system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- praises for review process</li> <li>- developing tech-voc education</li> <li>- reducing high-stakes exam dependency</li> <li>- reduce content overload</li> </ul>
13	New Zimbabwe May 23 2023	Curriculum review consultations draw fire; parents, teachers demand CALA scrapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- widespread calls to dump CALA</li> <li>- CALA abused as a money-making venture</li> <li>- reduce CALA to four at primary &amp; 8 at secondary</li> <li>- CALA does not reflect learner performance</li> <li>- done by parents/guardians, teachers &amp; can be bought</li> <li>- most schools have no computers &amp; internet access</li> </ul>
14	Voice of Africa Zimbabwe May 23 2023.	Curriculum review outreach meeting in Zimbabwe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CALA to be retained with some adjustments</li> <li>- teachers guiding learners to make review input</li> <li>- primary school learners unsure of what review entails</li> </ul>
15	Bulawayo 24News Online May 23 2023	Zimbabwe curriculum review consultations start	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CALA under spotlight</li> <li>- invitation for stakeholders to visit schools &amp; make contribution</li> <li>- all schools as consultation centres</li> <li>- stakeholder contributions to be used to finetune curriculum 2023-2030</li> </ul>
16	Bulawayo 24 News Online May 23 2023	Cala not fit for purpose in Zim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CALA fit for first world countries</li> <li>- Zim lacks digital technology, internet coverage, financial resources</li> <li>- CALA practicable on paper</li> <li>- rural learners disadvantaged</li> </ul>
17	Totem Network Africa May 23 2032	Zimbabwe curriculum review: No to CALA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Criticisms against CALA</li> <li>- Lack of ICT gadgets</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not all households have phones &amp; internet</li> <li>- Schools not equally resourced for CALA</li> <li>- Learners overloaded</li> <li>- Causing substance abuse</li> <li>-Internet exposing learners to pornography</li> </ul>
18	The Herald May 25 2023	CALA making learning difficult for pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents against CALA</li> <li>- Learners overloaded</li> <li>- Parents forced to assist</li> <li>- CALA expensive</li> <li>- Not all families have internet &amp; phones</li> <li>- No internet in rural areas</li> </ul>
19	ZimbabweNow June 10 2023	New curriculum review process on schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review progressing as planned</li> <li>- Government to produce 2023-2030 curriculum framework</li> </ul>

**Source:** Table developed by author

### 3.2 Data analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, with researchers moving back and forth between the two processes. The aim was to identify, select, and interpret primary sources that focused on the curriculum review process and stakeholder consultation. The reviewed primary sources and the main issues raised are summarised in Table 1. Key issues from each primary source were selected using content analysis. These issues were then synthesised into six themes using critical discourse analysis, which will guide the presentation and discussion of the data in the following sections.

## 4. Presentation of Results

The main stakeholders who participated in the curriculum review consultations in Zimbabwe from January to the end of May 2023 were government officials, media managers, parents, teachers, teacher trade unions, and learners. The stakeholders made significant contributions regarding the timing of the review consultations, concerns about a flawed reviewing process, calls for improved working conditions for teachers, criticisms of CALA, and the need for a technical-vocational oriented curriculum reform.

### 4.1 Review consultations wrongly timed

Curriculum 2015-2022 expired at the end of 2022. Although it has officially expired, the curriculum is still being used in Zimbabwean schools in 2023. Curriculum review consultations with stakeholders were conducted in May 2023, almost six months after the expiration of Curriculum 2015-2022. Munyaradzi Masiyiwa, Deputy Secretary General of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers' Union in Zimbabwe (ARTUZ), remarked that the review is highly necessary but has come at the wrong time. The lifespan of a curriculum is seven years, and this current curriculum was supposed to be reviewed in 2022 since it was established in 2015. Therefore, the review was delayed (Spiked, 2023).

Masiyiwa also stated that the government did not adequately raise awareness among parents, teachers, and students about the value of the review process and how their contributions would help shape the future of Zimbabwean education. He also added that stakeholders have no choice but to follow the already-designed questionnaire, which limits their input. The leaders of the teachers'



union in Zimbabwe see little value in the review exercise, as they believe it is an attempt by the government to silence concerned stakeholders without any commitment to implementing changes based on the feedback received from the curriculum users.

#### **4.2 Consultations a flawed window-dressing charade**

Teachers' unions criticised the curriculum review consultations as the culmination of government deception. The process was supposed to legitimise curriculum decisions that had already been made by policymakers and politicians. A questionnaire was developed in advance by MOPSE for use in consultations held in schools on May 23 and 24, 2023. The secretary-general of the Educators Union of Zimbabwe mocked this as a sham curriculum review, stating, "The ministry prepared their own questions from which they expect their own answers" (NewsDay, 2023). Similarly, Takavafira Zhou, President of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), denounced the curriculum review consultation as a charade, saying, "It was a pre-determined process done quickly to legitimise results drafted at headquarters. It lacked consultation with important stakeholders such as teachers and teacher unions, which are critical in implementing curriculum review" (NewsDay, 2023).

However, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MPOSE), Taungana Ngoro, denied allegations that the curriculum review process was flawed. "We are leaving no place and no one behind. We are ensuring that we obtain the opinions of all those entitled to contribute to the curriculum review process" (NewsDay, 2023). He also added, "We understand that there is a group of union leaders who always have something negative to say, but that does not reflect the reality on the ground." The contrast between the union leaders and the government spokesperson highlights the polarisation of the politics surrounding the curriculum review in Zimbabwe.

#### **4.3 Improve working conditions for teachers**

It wasn't just teachers' unions who criticised the government's handling of the curriculum review consultations. Parents and teachers were also dissatisfied with the lack of attention given to the important issue of teachers' low pay. One parent, Eddie Slimlee Chiduku, expressed their frustration on Facebook in May 2023, saying, "First, let's focus on improving teachers' wages. Sadly, those who are conducting the review have nothing to lose, considering that their own children attend school abroad." Similarly, the Secretary-General of the Educators Union of Zimbabwe, Tapedza Zhou, also expressed that:

The entire process regards teachers and their working conditions as secondary in the development of the curriculum framework. Policymakers need to understand that the curriculum review process is closely tied to the review of the living and working conditions of the individuals responsible for implementing it (NewsDay, 2023).

The curriculum review questionnaire, prepared by Ministry of Education officials, did not address the issue of teachers' salaries. This omission gives the impression that the government does not prioritise the welfare of teachers or consider it an important issue.

#### **4.4 The anti-CALA crusade**

Since its launch in May 2021, CALA has faced significant criticism from stakeholders and users. The Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) criticised this curriculum innovation as "an unwelcome waste of limited learning time" (ARTUZ, 2021), particularly because it was introduced during a period of partial lockdown due to COVID-19. Parents and guardians expressed their frustration with CALAs, as they added to the already excessive workload placed on learners. Munyaradzi Masiyiwa, the Deputy Secretary General of ARTUZ, explained, "CALA has placed immense pressure on parents, teachers, and learners. Just imagine an O-level student doing 10

subjects, which means 10 CALA activities to be done" (Spiked, 2023). Professor Lwazi Sibanda also highlighted the issue, stating, "Even on the streets, you can see placards advertising services to complete CALA assignments" (The Herald, 2023).

In addition to these concerns, parents in both urban and rural areas of Zimbabwe are facing severe financial challenges in supporting their children's research projects. Learners require Android phones, laptops, and internet connectivity to conduct research. Unfortunately, data bundles in Zimbabwe are very expensive. Furthermore, money is needed to print various materials for the research portfolios. Mrs. Manzini noted, "Guardians often prioritise more essential needs like food over spending money on printing these required papers" (The Herald, 2023). Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who make up the majority in Zimbabwe, struggle to complete the research tasks as they lack computers or cell phones for research and downloading information. "Most schools lack computers, Internet access, and sufficient resources to support this curriculum" (New Zimbabwe, 2023). Even for those fortunate enough to have these resources, internet connectivity is unreliable due to frequent power cuts and inadequate technological infrastructure.

#### **4.5 CALA must be removed or modified**

The two-day consultations held on May 23 and 24, 2023, throughout Zimbabwe drew criticism from stakeholders, who called for the abandonment of CALA (New Zimbabwe, 2023). Nxumalo Siyanda, a parent, expressed, "As long as you suspend that CALA thing because it's driving me nuts. I can't come home from work and find my kid waiting for me to help him with that difficult homework every day" (Facebook, May 2023). While most corruption allegations surrounding CALA as a money-making venture have focused on teachers, it appears that teachers are not the only ones guilty of selling CALAs. New Zimbabwe (2023) reported, "Some citizens have seen a lucrative opportunity to make money by charging a fee to complete the CALA exercises on behalf of learners." Consequently, advertisements indicating the availability of services (for a fee) to do CALAs can commonly be seen on walls in Zimbabwe's cities and towns. Takavafira Zhou, President of PTUZ, explained, "The number of burdensome CALAs must be reduced to four at the primary level and eight at the secondary level. CALAs should be more relevant and focus on the development of skills rather than simply writing 5-10 pages" (New Zimbabwe, 2023). During the curriculum review sessions, parents and teachers' unions were clear that CALA must be modified or completely removed from the school curriculum.

#### **4.6 Need for technical-vocational curriculum**

A key contribution from technocrats in the MOPSE was the proposal to shift the focus of education away from academics and towards a curriculum that includes a strong technical and vocational component. This new curriculum aims to equip students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for both life and work, as stated in The Mirror (2023). To align with international trends, teachers and educationists have also emphasised the importance of developing critical digital and computational skills in Zimbabwe's post-2023 curriculum. Education specialist Jobert Ngwenya, quoted in The Sunday News (2023), emphasised the significance of vocational and technical education in empowering learners with marketable skills, reducing unemployment rates, and promoting economic growth. Taking into account stakeholder input, it is clear that the future trajectory of Zimbabwe's curriculum must be centred around a technical-vocational orientation. This curriculum should prioritise the development of learners' 21st-century digital literacy and life-long learning skills.

### **5. Discussion of Findings**

The curriculum review consultations created an ideal opportunity for curriculum wars to explode in Zimbabwe. The issues raised during curriculum review consultations reflect a serious tug-of-war between government interests on the one hand and the interests of parents, teachers, teachers'

unions, and learners on the other. Writing on resistance to curriculum change by history teachers in England, Smith (2020, p. 27) observes that "Curriculum wars such as this, of course, are far from unique." Curriculum contestations between policymakers (who are government officials in the Zimbabwean context) and the user system (represented by parents, teachers, and teachers' unions) revealed that not all policy imperatives are a priority for policy users in Zimbabwe's 2023 curriculum review. For instance, while policymakers were in favour of CALA, the user system was strongly opposed to it because of the curriculum overload it caused for both teachers and students. Findings emerging from Zimbabwe's curriculum review consultations speak to existing literature which imagines curriculum as a battleground and teachers as soldiers of reform who are expected to implement a policy they never crafted (Burley, 2012; Cuban, 2006; Taylor & Guyver, 2011; Ditchburn, 2015). Curriculum wars have been witnessed in Britain, the USA, Australia, and many other developed and developing countries.

The 2023 curriculum review process in Zimbabwe provided an opportunity that ignited curriculum wars in a country where the voices of the subaltern are often trampled and suffocated by an autocratic state. In a study conducted in Britain, Smith (2020, p. 27) reports on "the role of ordinary practising classroom teachers in actively resisting curriculum at the macro-level...by writing to elected representatives, joining online campaigns, or responding to government consultations." In Zimbabwe, contestations on curriculum selection and the methodology to deliver it have been simmering since the days of Robert Mugabe as President (1980-2017). However, stakeholders were not offered a free platform to air their views (Chanda, 2022). The curriculum review consultations conducted in May 2023 offered stakeholders a chance to express their opinions. The tone in the contributions made by parents and teachers' unions reflects anger and frustration mainly because a dictatorial government often imposes curriculum reforms in Zimbabwe on a resistant user system. This reform imposition and the resistance it creates results in policymakers darting from pillar to post as they try to come up with a curriculum that may satisfy the competing interests of the contesting and conflicting stakeholders.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study on the 2023 curriculum review process in Zimbabwe has shown that there are deep-seated contestations and serious conflicts of interest between policymakers (who represent government interests) and stakeholders who are the end-users of the curriculum. Parents, teachers, and teacher trade unions feel that teachers are not adequately remunerated, as salaries are far below the poverty datum line. Furthermore, the consultations revealed that both teachers and learners are overworked due to the overloaded curriculum. Despite opposition from policymakers, there was unanimous agreement among stakeholders that CALA must either be completely scrapped from the curriculum or reformed to manageable levels.

In light of the contributions made by stakeholders during the curriculum review consultations, the current study recommends that policymakers take the views of the subaltern and impoverished parents, teachers, and teachers' unions seriously. There is a need to design a new curriculum that reduces curriculum overload so that end-users are not overburdened. If project-based learning is to continue, albeit in a substantially revised form, teachers need to be empowered with project supervision skills and be adequately remunerated. This will prevent them from relying on CALA to supplement their meagre salaries.

Future research can follow post-review developments and check if stakeholder contributions are being implemented or not. Policy analysis studies are needed to examine the content and methodology of the new school curriculum that the government of Zimbabwe will develop for the next seven-year cycle (2024-2030). It is critical to explore if stakeholder input during curriculum review consultations has been incorporated into the 2024-2030 curriculum. Stakeholders need a sense of ownership of the curriculum they are expected to implement; otherwise, they will resist and reject

it. They have done so in the past and only implemented it under duress and protest. If stakeholder input is not factored into the new 2024-2030 curriculum, then the whole curriculum review consultation process will go down the annals of history as a window-dressing charade, a waste of financial, material, and time resources.

## 8. Declarations

**Funding:** No funding was received to conduct this desktop study.

**Acknowledgements:** There are no acknowledgements to make.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Data availability:** The data for this study were sourced from publicly accessible literature. No new datasets were created. For specific details, refer to the references provided in the article.

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