

Research Article

DECOLONIZING EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE THROUGH A HERITAGE-BASED CURRICULUM: A REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

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The study adopts a reflexive approach, drawing on historical analysis, policy review, and interpretive critique. Reflexivity is central, as the researcher acknowledges positionality as both a product and critic of Zimbabwe's education system. The study interrogates how inherited education systems continue to influence educational outcomes, access, and identity formation. The paper reflects on my practice as a teacher, community psychologist and researcher engaging with Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum to advance decolonial aims in primary and secondary education. I combine autoethnographic vignettes, document analysis, and iterative classroom inquiry to examine how Heritage-based curriculum policies and syllabi reshape content, pedagogy, and assessment, and where contradictions persist. I argue that the Heritage-based curriculum meaningfully centres local knowledge, languages, and productive skills. The Heritage-Based Curriculum places emphasis on the impartation of problem-solving skills, entrepreneurship and students are viewed as co-creators of knowledge through the utilisation of local resources and cultural context. The Heritage-Based Curriculum fulfills the nation's aspiration of reconnecting the present education with the past and lost indigenous knowledge.

Nevertheless, sustained decolonization requires deeper shifts in teacher development, language policy, assessment regimes, and resources. It is observed that while the Heritage-Based Curriculum is aimed at redressing inherited flaws in Zimbabwe's education system, there are some areas that still need to be addressed. Therefore, I conclude the reflections with actionable recommendations for classroom, school, and policy levels aimed at the realisation of a liberatory education curriculum.

Keywords: African Education, Decolonial Education, Decolonial Community Psychology, Heritage-Based Curriculum, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction, Positionality and Methodology

As a product of an inherited colonial education curriculum in post-independence Zimbabwe, I am centrally positioned within this reflexive study. I bear the enduring scars of an education system designed along racial lines, one that primarily programmed African learners to become employees rather than creators or innovators. We were socialised to believe that success lay in passing checkpoint examinations, securing white-collar employment, and aspiring to lifestyles modelled after former colonial masters. In the process, the creative and

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inventive capacities embedded within our cultural and intellectual heritage were systematically suppressed during our formative years.

While the inherited curriculum appeared beneficial in the early 1980s, particularly through the social prestige and economic promise attached to Cambridge Ordinary and Advanced Level qualifications, these gains proved fragile. The introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) exposed the limitations of an education system disconnected from entrepreneurial and practical skills. As industries downsized, many school graduates found themselves unemployed, lacking the vocational and entrepreneurial competencies necessary for sustainable livelihoods.

Education, as a human phenomenon, has historically been embedded within culture and used by societies to understand, shape, and sustain meaningful existence. However, in the African context, education was deliberately manipulated by European colonisers as an instrument of domination, disempowerment, and cultural imperialism (Fanon, 1963). Western education marginalised African knowledge systems, undermined indigenous cultures, and eroded the dignity and self-worth of African societies (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). These processes contributed to enduring challenges across the continent, including poverty, dependency, limited innovation, and the suppression of creative and inventive thought (Rodney, 1972).

This study employs a reflexive case study approach to examine how education functioned as a tool of mental and cultural colonisation in colonial Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The analysis is organised across three historical periods: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial.

I write as a Zimbabwe-based community psychologist, educator, and reflective practitioner who has taught at junior, secondary, and tertiary levels. My positionality shapes what I intend to highlight particularly the tensions between curriculum, policy intentions and classroom realities, as well as the creative practices that teachers and learners negotiate within these constraints. Methodologically, the study draws on reflexive vignettes from my teaching practice, alongside policy analysis of the *Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2015–2022)* and the *Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC; 2024–2030)*.

An iterative inquiry cycle was employed, involving identification, planning, implementation, reflection, and refinement, to test incremental changes in pedagogy and assessment. The research adopts a liberatory and decolonial orientation, embracing indigenous methods such as dialogue, storytelling, lived experience, participatory approaches, and land-based inquiry. The integration of Hunhu/Ubuntu ontology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems provides the philosophical grounding for the study.

This approach aligns with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) assertion that Western research has historically served colonial interests, and that indigenous communities must reclaim research as a tool for self-determination. Consequently, this study deliberately employs decolonised methodologies that respect and centre indigenous epistemologies, countering Western research traditions that have classified, measured, and objectified indigenous peoples while marginalising their lived experiences. The study's assumptions are further supported by public policy documents and contemporary scholarship on the decolonisation of education.

1.1 Background

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in Southern Africa with an estimated population of 16.6 million people according to the 2022 census. It is a multicultural nation made up of several ethnic groups, each with its own language, traditions, and cultural practices. The Shona is the

largest ethnic group, making up about 70–75% of the population. They include sub-groups such as the Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Korekore, and Ndau. Shona languages and cultural practices are widely represented across the country. The Ndebele are the second-largest group, accounting for about 15–20% of the population. They are mainly found in Matabeleland North and South and parts of the Midlands. IsiNdebele is their main language, and they have a rich cultural heritage expressed through dance, music, and social organization. Zimbabwe also has smaller ethnic groups, including the Tonga found in the Zambezi Valley, the Kalanga located in south-western Zimbabwe, the Venda, Shangani and Sotho in southern parts of the country while the Nambya are found in north-western part of Zimbabwe. These groups contribute to the country's cultural diversity through their languages, customs, and traditional knowledge. There are also small populations of people of Asian and European descent, as well as immigrants from neighbouring African countries. Though numerically small, they form part of Zimbabwe's multicultural society.

Formerly known as Rhodesia, a colonial name derived from Cecil John Rhodes, an English man who led and financed its colonisation. The country derives its present name from Great Zimbabwe, an ancient Shona city also known as *Dzimbadzamabwe* (literally “House of Stone”). Built with dry-stone walls, Great Zimbabwe stands as evidence of sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems, artistic expression, and advanced architectural skills. It was the capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe during the Iron Age, reached an estimated population of about 20,000 people at its peak, and is the largest stone structure in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, it is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The chevron and herringbone patterns adorning the walls of Great Zimbabwe were symbolic rather than decorative, representing values such as fertility and unity. The site was also a centre of industry and commerce, facilitating trade in gold, ivory, and cattle. These features demonstrate that pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies possessed a well-developed, culturally embedded education system rooted in indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous education in pre-colonial Zimbabwe was transmitted through oral traditions, observation, and participation in music, dance, crafts, and other art forms. This value-laden system promoted communal life, ecological consciousness, and interdependence through specialised skills such as blacksmithing, hunting, mining, masonry, sculpture, music, pottery, and herbal medicine. It effectively sustained society by fostering cooperation, productivity, and social cohesion.

Formal education was introduced in 1867 with the establishment of the first mission centre at Inyathi. This was later followed by colonial education, formalised through ordinances that deliberately limited African advancement. The system was designed to produce semi-literate labourers who could follow basic instructions in English, serving colonial economic interests. A restrictive bottleneck structure ensured that only a few black students progressed beyond certain levels, while the majority were channelled into manual labour. Tragically, this inherited system remained largely intact for nearly four decades after independence.

The first major post-independence attempt to reform education was the Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999), popularly known as the Nziramasanga Commission. The Commission found that the colonial curriculum failed to reflect the values, aspirations, and lived realities of the black majority and perpetuated subtle forms of disempowerment. Despite these findings, meaningful reform was delayed until the introduction of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2015 a precursor to the HBC (2024-2030).

The CBC aimed to equip learners with skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, communication, teamwork, and technological competence (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Mashonaland West, 2019). Its implementation began with a pilot phase, followed by gradual rollout from 2017. However, poor funding, weak organisation, inadequate teacher training, and lack of teaching materials undermined its effectiveness. Many teachers struggled with continuous assessment and had to rely on discovery learning, while textbooks aligned to the new curriculum were published after implementation had begun. Despite these challenges, the CBC marked a significant shift through the introduction of formative assessment and the inclusion of practical subjects such as Agriculture, Physical Education, and Visual and Performing Arts at primary level.

The delays and implementation challenges were also highlighted in a doctoral study by Zazu (2016), which examined Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The study observed that although HBC featured prominently in political discourse, implementation remained largely rhetorical. Zazu recommended repositioning heritage education within the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework to promote sustainable use of heritage resources (UNESCO, 2010).

The Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2015–2022) underwent review in 2023 through broad stakeholder consultations. One major concern raised was the excessive number of learner projects, resulting in a recommendation to reduce projects from five to one per learning area.

The CBC was eventually succeeded by the HBC (2024-2030), which seeks to fully decolonise education. Anchored in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu, the HBC (2024-2030) aims to produce well-rounded learners who are culturally grounded, morally upright, creative, innovative, and socially responsible. This curriculum represents a liberatory approach that reconnects education with heritage, sustainability, and national development.

The HBC, introduced to replace the colonial education model, is designed to reflect and respect Zimbabwe's cultural diversity. The curriculum encourages the teaching and learning of indigenous languages such as Shona, IsiNdebele, Tonga, Kalanga, Venda and Shangani. Learners are taught in their mother tongue, especially at early childhood and primary levels, which helps preserve languages and improve understanding. The inclusion of cultural heritage through the teaching of subjects such as Heritage Studies, Social Studies, History, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems impart customs and values, local histories of different ethnic groups and cultural practices such as music, dance, food, and ceremonies. The HBC helps learners appreciate both their own culture and that of others.

The curriculum is guided by Hunhu/Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes respect for others, tolerance, unity and cooperation among different communities. The philosophy promotes peaceful coexistence among Zimbabwe's ethnic groups which is decolonial in nature as it redresses the ethnic boundaries which were magnified by the colonial government. The HBC promotes equal representation and national unity by recognising all ethnic groups both major and minor within the curriculum. Thus, removes cultural marginalisation, promotes national identity while respecting diversity. The HBC also encourages students to take pride in Zimbabwean heritage as a whole.

Studies on heritage-based education, including Zazu (2016), emphasise its importance as a decolonising tool aligned with the aspirations of the black majority. However, they also note persistent challenges in implementation. Integrating heritage education within Education for

Sustainable Development is seen as crucial for restoring African traditional knowledge as a driver of development.

Consultations by the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) revealed strong advocacy for moral and citizenship education grounded in discipline, productivity, and work ethic. The Commission emphasised teacher reorientation, parental involvement, and restorative disciplinary approaches aligned with Hunhu/Ubuntu philosophy (Mangena, 2007). This approach promotes compassion, respect, and critical consciousness rather than blind obedience (Madzore, 2024).

The HBC (2024-2030) brings in the African way of living into the classroom by promoting cooperative learning, learner participation, gender equity, respect for diversity, and multiculturalism. Scholars argue that such an approach advances epistemic justice and combats discrimination (Shuttle, 2001; Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Shizha, 2012; Muchenje, Goronga & Bondai, 2013). Respect for elders, hands-on learning, and moral development are also central, producing graduates who are intellectually capable, vocationally skilled, and ethically grounded (Majoni & Chinyanganya, 2014).

Citizenship education, previously marginalised, is central to the HBC (2024-2030). Nziramasanga (1999) defines citizenship as encompassing rights, duties, and responsibilities in a democratic state. When grounded in Hunhu/Ubuntu, citizenship education fosters responsible, productive, and critically conscious citizens.

Broadly, the HBC seeks to promote national identity, practical skills, innovation, and appreciation of Zimbabwean culture. It aligns with Education 5.0, adopted in higher and tertiary education in 2018, which expands the education mandate to include innovation, industrialisation, and production grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems. This alignment supports Zimbabwe's National Development Strategies (NDS1 and NDS2), which aim to transform the country into an upper-middle-income economy by 2030.

The approved rollout of the HBC (2024–2030) at primary and secondary levels further consolidates this vision. Heritage-labelled syllabi in Science and Technology, Social Sciences, and Physical Education and Arts emphasise project-based learning, community engagement, and continuous assessment. Despite ongoing challenges related to resources and teacher preparation, recent scholarship views the HBC (2024-2030) as a decisive decolonial turn that builds on and critiques the earlier competence-based reforms (Mashayamombe & Van den Berg, 2024).

1.2 Pre-Colonial Education: Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Pre-colonial education was built upon indigenous knowledge systems, it was community focused and involved passing on of knowledge from the elders to the young ones through informal lessons, oral presentation, observational learning, experiential also a form of on-the-job training. The knowledge generated was meant to serve the specific communities. The indigenous knowledge system was value-laden, imparted morals, survival skills, promoted the relationship between the people and their creator and encouraged sustainable use of the natural resources. The pre-colonial education and knowledge systems facilitated transfer of knowledge through elders, spiritual leaders and artisans served as educators. In essence, pre-colonial education was deeply embedded in the social fabric. It fostered identity, resilience, and communal responsibility. Its erasure under colonial rule disrupted generational knowledge transmission and cultural continuity.

The HBC (2024-2030) explicitly seeks to restore the social and cultural foundations of pre-colonial education by re-embedding learning within Indigenous Knowledge Systems,

community participation, and values such as Hunhu/Ubuntu. Through the teaching of heritage studies, indigenous languages, and community-based, project-oriented learning, the curriculum revives disrupted intergenerational knowledge transmission, strengthens cultural identity, and promotes communal responsibility, thereby addressing the historical dislocation caused by colonial education (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015).

1.3 Colonial Education: A System of Control

Colonial education in Zimbabwe was deliberately designed as a mechanism for controlling the indigenous population. It operated through a racially segregated dual-track system in which white Europeans and black Africans received vastly different forms of education, with access and resources allocated along racial lines. While mission schools provided limited access to schooling for Africans, they continued to marginalise Indigenous Knowledge Systems and African heritage in favour of religious instruction and vocational training.

African learners were denied the opportunity to study their own history, culture, and values, which were dismissed as primitive or immoral, while British history, literature, and values were prioritised. The imposition of English as the medium of instruction systematically displaced indigenous languages, undermining African identity. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, language is central to culture, identity, and worldview; colonialism therefore extended beyond territorial conquest to the colonisation of the mind through the suppression of African languages and the elevation of European ones. African children were taught to view their mother tongues as inferior and unsuitable for intellectual engagement, while Western thought systems were implanted through English-medium education.

The colonial curriculum also functioned as a tool of social engineering, aimed at producing a compliant and non-critical African population loyal to colonial authority. Inequality was entrenched through racially skewed funding structures: white education was well resourced, academically rigorous, and geared towards leadership and professional careers, whereas African education was underfunded, restricted to basic literacy and vocational skills, and largely administered through poorly supported mission schools. Vocational training for Africans was narrowly designed to supply manual labour in agriculture, carpentry, and domestic service, without developing intellectual, civic, or entrepreneurial capacities.

Table 1. Colonial Education Structures Supporting Eurocentric Ideologies and Long-Term Effects/Impacts

Colonial Legacy	Manifestation	Long-Term Effect
Segregated schooling	Dual-track system	Persistent inequality in access and quality
Missionary control	Religious bias	Weak state involvement in African education and demonisation of indigenous religion.
Vocational focus	Limited career pathways	Underrepresentation in professional sectors
English dominance	Cultural erasure	Marginalization of indigenous languages
Eurocentric curriculum	Identity distortion	Alienation from African heritage

Note. The table above provides an overview of the colonial design and effects on the black Africans in Zimbabwe.

1.4 The Heritage-Based Curriculum and Decolonizing Zimbabwean Education

The HBC was introduced to address the epistemic, linguistic, pedagogic, and structural legacies of colonial education in Zimbabwe, rather than to promote narrow cultural nationalism. Rooted in decolonial thought, the curriculum seeks to reposition Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the 16 indigenous languages, and community-based practices at the

centre of schooling, correcting their historical marginalisation under Eurocentric education models. Legitimising heritage-labelled subjects such as Agriculture, Design and Technology, and the Performing Arts, and recognising community members as knowledge holders, the HBC advances epistemic justice and affirms African communities as producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients of external canons.

The HBC aligns with Education 5.0's production-oriented ethos, which links education to innovation, industrialisation, and local value creation in pursuit of self-sufficiency and economic emancipation (MoPSE, 2018). From a decolonial perspective, such a focus reflects broader struggles to reclaim control over the means of production and to move beyond political independence toward substantive socio-economic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). However, decolonial scholars caution that production-oriented reforms risk reproducing colonial power relations if they uncritically adopt Western capitalist and neoliberal models that marginalise Indigenous Knowledge Systems and reinforce external dependence (Shizha, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The decolonial potential of the HBC therefore lies not in production per se, but in grounding innovation, sustainability, and development in Afrocentric epistemologies and local needs.

Decolonisation is further pursued through pedagogical and assessment reforms that shift learning away from exam-centred, transmission-based practices toward inquiry-driven, project-based, and community-linked approaches. Continuous assessment methods that value practical competence, cultural knowledge, multilingual expression, and problem-solving disrupt colonial assessment regimes that privileged abstract recall and English-language proficiency. Citizenship education, grounded in Hunhu/Ubuntu, also features prominently, fostering socially responsible, ethically grounded, and critically conscious learners rather than uncritical national subjects.

While implementation challenges remain, particularly around teacher preparedness, assessment pressures, language policy, and resourcing. The HBC represents a substantive attempt to transform Zimbabwean education into a culturally grounded, socially relevant, and economically purposeful system. Its decolonial intent lies in restoring epistemic agency, reconnecting education with lived realities and livelihoods of the ordinary citizens irrespective of their ethnicity, and challenging inherited hierarchies of knowledge, rather than in advancing exclusionary or nationalist agendas.

2. Reflexive Vignettes from Practice

2.1 Vignette 1: Mapping Community Heritage (Grade 6)

I opened a Heritage and Social Studies unit by asking learners to bring one story, song, or artefact from home that “teaches something.” In groups they mapped the origins (family, church, community), the practice (e.g., nhimbe/working party), and the value (cooperation, environmental respect). Learners compared these to textbook accounts and built a class “heritage map.” The unit’s assessment combined short reflections, an oral presentation in the learners’ strongest language, and a simple infographic. The change was palpable: quieter learners spoke confidently when permitted to narrate in Shona first, then code-switch to English which is a small linguistic decolonial act consistent with HBC’s valuing of local knowledge. This also applies to the application of other languages in different parts of the country.

2.2. Vignette 2: Productive Science (Junior/Grade 5 and 7)

Guided by the HBC's Junior Science and Technology syllabus, I framed a unit around safe fuel-efficient stoves. Groups researched local fuel options, interviewed elders about historic practices, built a prototype from recycled tins, measured boil times, and documented safety considerations. Assessment included a performance rubric, a community demo, and a brief written report. Teaching a topic on Design and Technology at Grade 5 level, rather than giving learners definitions of elements of design, I asked learners to construct building structures making use of recycled materials such as cardboard box, ice cream sticks, plastic, grass, wire and other materials. Learners saw science as tool-making rather than recall of facts only. Thus, achieving the goals of Education 5.0's that is productive orientated basic education.

2.3 Vignette 3: Rethinking History (Form 2)

We juxtaposed a colonial-era textbook excerpt on land tenure with oral testimonies gathered from grandparents. Students identified bias, reconstructed timelines including pre-colonial land stewardship, and debated how memory and evidence interact. The culminating task was a bilingual (English and indigenous language) focus group discussion episode. This aligned with the heritage-based History syllabus' focus on Zimbabwean experiences across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods.

3 How Heritage-Based Curriculum Advances Decolonization

The HBC (2024-2030) advances decolonisation by repositioning indigenous history, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and African languages at the centre of the school curriculum rather than at its margins. Through Heritage Studies and heritage-based syllabi, knowledge domains historically excluded under colonial education such as Agriculture, Design and Technology, and the Indigenous Visual and Performing Arts are legitimised as intellectually rigorous and socially valuable. The HBC's recognition of community members as resource persons, validates indigenous expertise in areas such as traditional dance, food systems, healing practices, and environmental knowledge. This diversification of what counts as knowledge directly challenges colonial epistemic hierarchies and affirms African communities as producers, not merely consumers, of knowledge.

Decolonisation is further advanced through pedagogical and assessment reforms that replace exam-centred, rote learning with project-based and performance-based continuous assessment. Learners demonstrate competence through artefacts, practical demonstrations, and community engagement rather than relying solely on timed pen-and-paper tests. The shift disrupts colonial assessment regimes that privileged abstract theoretical recall and English-language proficiency. Instead, it enables dialogic, inquiry-driven learning, values multilingual repertoires, and foregrounds problem-solving grounded in learners' lived realities. Educational attainment, therefore, moves beyond numerical grading to the demonstration of practical, cultural, and social competence aligning education with the everyday challenges and aspirations of indigenous communities.

The HBC's alignment with Education 5.0 further deepens its decolonial potential by explicitly linking schooling to production, innovation, and local value creation. The curriculum's extension of the heritage-based philosophy from higher education into primary and secondary schooling, addresses the long-standing colonial rupture between education

and livelihoods. While emerging implementation studies particularly in Heritage Studies formerly known as History at secondary level, reveal uneven uptake and persistent examination pressures, learner-perception research indicates that students recognise and value the curriculum's practical orientation and identity-affirming focus. These findings suggest that, despite structural constraints, the HBC represents a substantive shift toward an education system that restores cultural agency, epistemic justice, and socio-economic relevance.

3.1 Contradictions and Constraints

Despite the progressive implementation of HBC (2024-2030) in Zimbabwe, there still exist some constraints and contradictions that need to be addressed. One of the noted areas pertains to the persistent emphasis on recall type of assessment of public examinations. Without re-engineering high-stakes assessments, teachers fall back to the “teach to test approach.” Thus, missing the key objectives of the reforms contained in the HBC. Many teachers welcome HBC but report limited training time, materials, and community facilitation skills (Mazhindu, 2024). New continuous assessment demands add marking and coordination burdens. Implementation studies in Heritage/History confirm these stresses. It is observed that, although policy propagates the inclusion of indigenous languages as medium of instruction during the Early Childhood Education that is from ECD A to Grade 2, English remains the default language setting for textbooks and examinations. Multilingual assessment design lags behind classroom trans-languaging realities. Practical projects such as science prototyping, agriculture, design require consumables, tools, and space. The economic disparities between rural/urban and school-to-school risk reproducing inequity precisely where decolonization seeks repair. Teachers encounter overlapping documents such as the 2015–2022 framework, HBC circulars and updated syllabi, thus creating confusion. Hence, a clear, official and easily accessible Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education repositories and induction packs would reduce confusion amongst the teachers.

3.2 Practical Moves That Worked for Me

I found out that making use of local entry points was very effective in making students assimilate new learning concepts. When using local entry points, begin each unit with a community artefact, practice, or problem (seed varieties, praise poetry, brick making), then connect to disciplinary concepts. Translanguaging routines involve “Think-pair-share” in the strongest language first; switch to English for summary; accept bilingual artefacts with clear rubrics. Performance tasks with public audiences such as science exhibitions, mini-museums, podcasts, or market-day stalls motivate quality and make learning consequential. The use of Portfolio-based continuous assessment replaces one-off tests with curated evidence such as plans, prototypes, reflections, peer notes, aligned to HBC competencies. Another effective teaching approach was community co-teaching. It involved inviting artisans, farmers, and elders as guest mentors.

4. Recommendations

The section makes recommendations to teachers, schools, District Education Officials and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. In order to enhance the

implementation and effectiveness of HBC (2024-2030) and achieve its specified goal of decolonizing education in Zimbabwe, I set forth the following recommendations:

4.1 Epistemic: Validating indigenous and community knowledge alongside global canons

An epistemic approach to decolonising education requires recognising Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as legitimate, rigorous, and valuable forms of knowledge, rather than treating them as inferior to or separate from Western knowledge traditions. This involves intentionally positioning indigenous and community-based knowledge alongside global canons within the curriculum, allowing learners to engage critically with multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world.

To achieve this, dedicated curriculum time must be allocated to Indigenous Knowledge Systems within the official curriculum. This ensures that IKS is not reduced to a symbolic or superficial inclusion—often described as a “cosmetic dress-show”—but is treated as a core component of teaching and learning. By giving IKS equal status with other knowledge domains, the curriculum affirms the intellectual traditions, lived experiences, and historical contributions of local communities.

In addition, the curriculum should be developed through a co-creation framework that actively involves community elders, local knowledge holders, parents, and cultural practitioners. Such collaboration enables the identification, documentation, and meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge, values, and practices into various subjects. This participatory approach disrupts top-down, externally imposed curriculum models and restores communities as epistemic authorities in shaping what counts as knowledge in schools.

Furthermore, the development of context-specific learning resources is essential to support epistemic justice. Teaching and learning materials should reflect local realities, histories, environments, and cultural practices, drawing on community knowledge and locally available resources. Reducing reliance on Western-centric textbooks allows learners to see their own contexts and identities reflected in the curriculum, thereby enhancing relevance, engagement, and cultural affirmation. Through this process, education becomes grounded in learners’ lived experiences while remaining open to dialogue with global knowledge systems.

4.2 Linguistic: Elevating Zimbabwean languages as media of learning and assessment

From a decolonial standpoint, language is not merely a tool of communication but a carrier of culture, identity, and epistemology. Colonial education systems systematically privileged European languages, particularly English, while relegating African languages to informal or domestic spaces. Elevating Zimbabwean languages within education therefore constitutes an act of linguistic decolonisation, aimed at dismantling the coloniality of language and restoring linguistic dignity and equity.

Implementing and enforcing a robust language policy that positions Zimbabwean languages as primary media of instruction and assessment from early childhood through to tertiary education is central to this process. Learning in one’s mother tongue enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and conceptual development, particularly in the foundational years. From a decolonial perspective, this approach also strengthens learners’ cultural identity and sense of belonging, challenging the assumption that intellectual competence is tied to proficiency in colonial languages. Extending indigenous language use beyond early education counters the persistent hierarchy that reserves English for “serious”

or advanced knowledge, thereby affirming African languages as capable of carrying complex academic and scientific ideas.

Investment in local language material development is equally critical to sustaining linguistic transformation. Substantial funding must be directed towards the production of high-quality textbooks, digital resources, assessment tools, and creative literature in Zimbabwean languages. Such materials should reflect local realities, histories, and knowledge systems rather than being translations of Western texts. This process supports linguistic intellectualisation and reduces dependence on imported curricula, while also expanding the expressive and technical capacity of indigenous languages across disciplines such as science, technology, and mathematics.

Furthermore, effective implementation requires comprehensive teacher training in multilingual pedagogy. Teachers need both theoretical grounding and practical strategies for navigating linguistically diverse classrooms where multiple languages coexist. Multilingual pedagogy equips educators to use translanguaging, code-switching, and culturally responsive teaching methods without stigmatising learners' linguistic backgrounds. From a decolonial lens, this approach resists monolingual norms imposed by colonial schooling and instead embraces linguistic plurality as a resource for learning, inclusion, and epistemic access.

4.3 Pedagogic: Moving from transmission to inquiry, production, and community-linked learning

The pedagogic dimension of the HBC represents a deliberate shift away from the traditional transmission model of education, a model that was rooted in colonial schooling systems that prioritize rote memorization and passive reception of knowledge toward inquiry, production, and community-linked learning. From a decolonial perspective, this shift is essential for reclaiming education as a tool for local empowerment and self-determination.

Fully implementing school-based projects and other hands-on, project-based learning approaches ensures that students are not merely recipients of abstract knowledge but active participants in solving real-world problems. By engaging with tangible challenges in their own communities, learners develop critical thinking, innovation, and practical competencies that are directly relevant to their social and economic contexts. This approach aligns with decolonial theory by validating local knowledge, practices, and problem-solving strategies instead of relying exclusively on imported or Western-centric frameworks.

Integrating mandatory community engagement and field-based learning extends education beyond classroom walls and into the lived realities of students' communities. This fosters reciprocal learning, where students both learn from and contribute to local development. The practice challenges the colonial notion of education as a tool for producing detached, globally-oriented elites and instead situates learning within local epistemologies, promoting social responsibility, cultural continuity, and collective knowledge production.

Reorienting teacher training programs to prioritize inquiry-based, problem-solving, and production-oriented pedagogies ensures that educators are equipped to facilitate active, participatory, and contextually relevant learning. This contrasts sharply with the colonial legacy of teacher-centred, transmission-style methods that reproduce dependency on external knowledge systems. By empowering teachers to implement innovative and community-linked pedagogies, the HBC positions education as a transformative tool aligned with both national development goals and decolonial imperatives, emphasizing self-sufficiency, local innovation, and the centrality of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

4.4 Structural: Aligning assessment, teacher development, and resources with the above

A decolonial approach to assessment requires moving away from the colonial legacy of privileging rote memorization and high-stakes examinations. Instead, assessments should recognize and value practical skills, community-linked projects, critical thinking, and the application of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). This shift ensures that learners are evaluated not only on their theoretical understanding but also on their ability to apply knowledge in culturally and contextually meaningful ways. By embedding community relevance and practical competencies into assessment, education becomes a tool for local empowerment and self-determination, rather than merely producing learners who perform well on standardized tests designed around Eurocentric epistemologies.

Decolonial assessment in the Heritage-Based Curriculum should emphasize practical, contextually grounded, and culturally responsive methods that move beyond the traditional, examination-centred approaches inherited from colonial education systems. One key approach is project-based assessment, in which learners engage in hands-on activities that address real-world challenges within their communities, such as agricultural initiatives, environmental conservation projects, or the documentation of local cultural practices. This method prioritizes the application of knowledge and the development of practical skills, ensuring that students' learning is directly relevant to their social and cultural context.

Another effective method is portfolio assessment, which allows students to compile a body of work over time, including project outputs, reflective journals, and evidence of skill development. Portfolios provide a continuous and holistic view of learning, emphasizing the process rather than a single high-stakes result, and enable the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), oral histories, and traditional practices. Similarly, oral and performance-based assessment recognizes storytelling, debates, drama, songs, and community presentations as legitimate forms of demonstrating knowledge. These methods honour Zimbabwean linguistic and cultural heritage, validating modes of learning historically marginalized in Eurocentric assessment models.

Decolonial approaches should also make use of peer and community assessment, in which local elders, community experts, and peers contribute to evaluating students' work. This practice decentralizes authority from formal institutions and incorporates local perspectives, thereby valuing indigenous epistemologies. Additionally, problem-solving and innovation assessments which focus on students' abilities to creatively apply knowledge to address local challenges, fostering critical thinking and linking education to tangible outcomes in local development contexts should be utilised.

The use of reflective journals and self-assessment further supports decolonial pedagogies by encouraging learners to critically reflect on their experiences, cultural practices, and community engagement. This does not only enhance metacognitive skills but also reinforces the relevance of Indigenous knowledge in everyday life. Even when written assessments are necessary, they should be contextualized, integrating local case studies, examples, and cultural references, rather than relying solely on global or Western-centric knowledge that may be disconnected from students' realities. Collectively, these assessment methods align with the Heritage-Based Curriculum's goals of promoting culturally grounded, community-relevant, and skills-oriented learning while challenging the residual colonial emphasis on rote memorization and standardized testing.

The successful implementation of the Heritage-Based Curriculum depends heavily on teacher preparedness. Systematic, ongoing in-service training is essential to ensure that

educators are not only familiar with the curriculum's content but also confident and skilled in facilitating inquiry-based, community-linked, and production-oriented learning. Continuous professional development empowers teachers to navigate both Indigenous and global knowledge systems, allowing them to mediate learning in ways that validate local epistemologies while fostering critical engagement with external knowledge.

Transformative education requires adequate material and human resources. Schools must be equipped with sufficient funding, infrastructure, and qualified personnel to implement new pedagogical approaches effectively. Many institutions currently lack the resources necessary to support hands-on projects, community engagement, and locally relevant learning materials. Investing in resources that reflect local contexts and knowledge systems challenges the entrenched inequities inherited from colonial education systems, enabling schools to become sites of culturally responsive, contextually grounded learning.

Table 2. Recommendation for Teachers and Schools

Recommendation for Teachers and Schools	
1	Map local heritage assets (people, places, practices) and align them to term plans and assessment calendars.
2	Adopt bilingual assessment rubrics that separate “idea quality” from “English accuracy,” gradually increasing academic English demands without silencing learners. There is a need to minimise the use of the English language and emphasis on accuracy and fluency over acquisition of concepts as well as accommodating the use of indigenous languages in science, commercial and humanities subjects that is regrettably still lacking from junior primary to high school level.
3	Form Heritage-Based Curriculum lesson-study groups to co-design projects, share materials, and moderate continuous assessment.
4	Build low-cost maker kits (recycled tins, clay, wires, garden plots) to democratize productive learning.

Table 3. Recommendation for Districts and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

Recommendation for Districts and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education	
1	Publish a definitive Heritage-Based Curriculum repository (framework, circulars, syllabi, exemplars) with version dates; pair with short teacher induction modules.
2	Reform high-stakes assessment to include performance tasks, bilingual response options, and community-validated projects, aligning with HBC and Education 5.0 aims.
3	Resource equity mechanisms (seed/tool libraries, mobile labs, micro-grants) targeted to under-resourced schools.
4	Scale teacher professional development in project design , community engagement ethics, and multilingual pedagogy, grounded in classroom cases like those above.

5. Conclusion

As a researcher grounded in the Zimbabwean context, I critically acknowledge that colonial education profoundly shaped not only the institutional structures of the education system but also the collective psychological disposition of successive generations. This colonial legacy entrenched epistemic hierarchies and cultural dislocations continues to influence educational policies and identity formation in Zimbabwe today. In reference to the Competence-Based

Curriculum (2015-2022), Bhurekeni, (2020) posits that the curriculum continues to shape student identity formation by privileging certain cultures, languages, and forms of knowledge thus further entrenching the undesirable elements of the discredited colonial education.

Many educators and policymakers, today were themselves products of the colonial education system including myself, which complicates efforts to decolonize education. The internalization of colonial values such as the superiority of Western knowledge and the utility of English language continues to influence curriculum choices, pedagogical methods, and policy priorities. Colonial education in Zimbabwe was never intended to empower the African majority. It was a tool of control, designed to produce compliant labourers and suppress resistance. Its legacy is not just historical; it lives on in the structures, ideologies, and contradictions of post-independence education. To move forward, Zimbabwe must confront and dismantle these inherited systems, reclaiming education as a space for liberation, identity, and transformation. The reforms in education that have culminated in the introduction of HBC are positive efforts being made towards decolonising education.

HBC offers a concrete pathway for decolonizing Zimbabwean schooling by centering heritage, validating multilingual repertoires, and prioritizing production and community engagement. The HBC embraces diversity by promoting indigenous languages, cultural values, and inclusive education. Heritage-Based Curriculum recognises the importance of inclusion of all languages spoken in Zimbabwe from Early-Childhood Education level. HBC centres Indigenous Knowledge Systems within the curriculum which help impart customs and values, local histories of different ethnic groups and cultural practices. The Hunhu/Ubuntu philosophy which underpins the HBC inculcates values of humanase, which helps students to embrace tolerance, respect for others, diversity and coexistence of different ethnic groups. Through this approach, the education system helps learners understand, respect, and value the different ethnic groups that make up Zimbabwe, fostering unity in diversity. My classroom trials show that when learners' worlds become the curriculum's starting point, participation deepens and the boundary between "school knowledge" and "life knowledge" softens. Incorporating students' world-views in the learning process is critical as it facilitates application of knowledge to solve real life problems found within their local communities. This is a departure from the colonial education that would make students recite poems and songs such as 'London Bridge is falling down'. Students did not have an idea about London Bridge, let alone relate to its significance in their lives. HBC also promotes entrepreneurship and critical thinking rooted in heritage. However, true decolonization is structural: assessment, teacher development, language policy, and resources must be remade to sustain these shifts. If we continue to recapitulate thoughtfully and reflexively together, Heritage-Based Curriculum can help our classrooms become sites where Zimbabwe's past, present, and desired futures co-create with each other.

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See attached Data on videos and photographs: <https://ln.run/sC1xs>

APPENDIX A

Glossary

African Education - It refers to a racially segregated and deliberately limited system of schooling which was provided to Indigenous Africans in Rhodesia by the colonial state and missionaries. The colonial curriculum focused on basic literacy, vocational skills such as building for boys or cooking for girls, and learning the colonizer's language, often delivered by missionaries with a predetermined agenda emphasizing subservience, rote learning, and denigrating indigenous culture. Access to education was limited, segregated, and intended to maintain colonial control and an unequal social hierarchy, providing only basic training for manual and clerical roles rather than promote intellectual equality or social mobility.

Decolonial Community Psychology - It is a branch of psychology which is purposed to challenge Western or Eurocentric dominance by centring Indigenous and marginalised knowledge, experiences and ways of being. Decolonial community psychology aims to dismantle colonial legacies, promotes liberation, focusing on justice, self-determination as well as creating equitable and diverse knowledge systems. It strives to undo the damage of colonial biases and shifting from universal standards to context specific, liberatory approaches.

Decolonial Education - It is a transformative approach that actively dismantles colonial legacies within educational systems, challenging Eurocentric worldviews and power structures to create inclusive, equitable learning environments that centre the histories, knowledge, and perspectives of previously subjugated Indigenous peoples in the Global South, aiming for liberation from coloniality and promoting diverse forms of knowing. It is a shift from adding diverse voices to fundamentally rethinking the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutions to address historical inequalities and ongoing power dynamics as the case in Zimbabwe which has introduced a Heritage-Based Curriculum.

Heritage-Based Curriculum – An approach to education that uses a country's heritage, its history, culture, traditions, local knowledge systems, values, natural resources, and community experiences as foundation for teaching and learning.

Hunhu/Ubuntu philosophy - Samkange and Samkange (1980) defines Hunhu/Ubuntu as a comprehensive ethical, social and political worldview that guides behaviour, leadership, justice and identity rooted in Africa communal values.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems - Osman, (2014) defines Indigenous Knowledge Systems as traditional practices, cultural values, and spiritual beliefs that have been passed down through generations.

O' Level – Ordinary Level is an internationally recognised secondary school qualification awarded as part of the General Certificate of Education (GCE). It is commonly administered in countries that follow or adapted the British education system, including Zimbabwe, the UK (historically), Singapore, and others. It assesses whether learners have mastered the essential knowledge, skills, and competencies in various subjects by the end of lower secondary school.

A' Level – Advanced Level is an internationally recognised pre-university qualification awarded as part of the General Certificate of Education (GCE). It represents the final stage of secondary education in systems influenced by the British model, including Zimbabwe, UK and Singapore.

Zimbabwe - A Southern African country which is well-known for its diverse heritage and culture. The country was formally colonised by Britain in 1890 and re-gained its independence on 18 April 1980. Zimbabwe is made up of different ethnic and racial groups. It recognises 16 official languages.

What “Decolonizing Education” Means?

In this paper I take *decolonizing education* to mean at least four changes:

Epistemic: validating indigenous and community knowledge alongside global canons.

Linguistic: elevating Zimbabwean languages as media of learning and assessment.

Pedagogic: moving from transmission to inquiry, production, and community-linked learning.

Structural: aligning assessment, teacher development, and resources with the above.