



Marxist Perspectives on Educational Inequality in Zimbabwean Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper applies Marxist theory to analyse educational inequality in Zimbabwean primary and secondary schools. Drawing on the foundational work of Karl Marx and later theorists such as Althusser, Bowles and Gintis, the study argues that Zimbabwe's education system systematically reproduces class-based disparities rooted in broader socio-economic structures. Using a conceptual methodology and illustrative case studies such as elite urban institutions and under-resourced rural schools, the paper highlights how curriculum design, ideological messaging and unequal access to resources disproportionately benefit learners from privileged backgrounds. The analysis shows that while Zimbabwe's post-independence reforms expanded access to education, they failed to address deep-rooted structural inequalities. The education system continues to serve as an ideological and material instrument for class reproduction, aligning with capitalist labour demands and sustaining elite dominance. Although Marxist theory has limitations, particularly in accounting for other forms of identity-based exclusion such as gender and ethnicity, it remains a powerful framework for interrogating educational injustice in postcolonial societies. The paper concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, equitable resource distribution, and the promotion of critical pedagogy to foster a more inclusive and socially just education system.

Keywords: *Marxist Theory; Educational Inequality; Class Reproduction; Ideology; Curriculum.*

Introduction

Karl Marx (1818–1883), a seminal German philosopher, economist and revolutionary, fundamentally challenged the prevailing socio-economic order through his critique of capitalism. His works, notably *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867), underscore the centrality of class struggle, exploitation and the concentration of wealth and power within capitalist societies. Marx

argued that economic relations underpin social structures and that the bourgeoisie's control over resources and institutions perpetuates inequality across generations. Although Marx did not explicitly focus on education, his insights have been extensively adapted by subsequent theorists to scrutinise how educational institutions serve as mechanisms for maintaining class dominance and reproducing social hierarchies. In this view, educational systems are not neutral or purely developmental but are embedded with ideological functions that uphold the interests of dominant classes, shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours that reinforce existing power relations.

This paper seeks to apply Marxist theory as a critical lens to analyse educational inequality within Zimbabwe's primary and secondary schools. Zimbabwe's post-independence era has seen ambitious efforts to expand access to education and reduce disparities inherited from colonial rule; however, persistent inequalities continue to characterise the sector. Employing a conceptual methodology, the study synthesises relevant theoretical literature and contextualises it through illustrative case studies drawn from Zimbabwean schools, ranging from elite urban institutions to under-resourced rural schools. This approach enables an exploration of how curriculum design, ideological messaging, and resource allocation disproportionately favour learners from privileged backgrounds while marginalising disadvantaged groups. By critically engaging with both the potential and limitations of Marxist theory, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of how educational injustice persists in Zimbabwe's postcolonial context. Ultimately, it advocates for reforms centred on equitable resource distribution, curriculum transformation, and the promotion of critical pedagogies to foster a more inclusive and socially just education system.

A Marxist Analysis of Education

Marxist theory offers a critical lens through which to examine educational systems as mechanisms of social and economic reproduction. Rather than viewing education as a neutral or purely meritocratic institution, Marxist theorists argue that schooling serves the interests of the dominant class by legitimising inequality, shaping ideology, and conditioning labour. This framework is especially useful in analysing educational disparities in postcolonial contexts like Zimbabwe, where colonial legacies and capitalist structures continue to shape access, outcomes and content. Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism emphasises that the economic base of a society determines its social and ideological superstructure. Though Marx did not write extensively on education, his critique of capitalism laid the foundation for later theorists to interpret schools as institutions that reinforce class divisions. In capitalist societies, education often serves to prepare the working class to accept their subordinate roles, while justifying the success of the elite as a result of merit.

Louis Althusser (1971) expanded Marxist theory by introducing the concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), arguing that institutions like schools, media, and religion disseminate dominant ideologies that reinforce capitalist relations. Schools, in particular, promote values such as discipline, individualism, and meritocracy, masking structural inequalities by presenting them as natural or deserved. In Zimbabwe, even after independence, the curriculum continues to emphasise conformity and Eurocentric knowledge, limiting transformative potential and marginalising rural and low-income learners (Tikly, 2004; Desfor & Appelrouth, 2015).

Bowles and Gintis (1976) introduced the correspondence principle, arguing that the structure of schools mirrors the capitalist workplace. Traits such as punctuality, obedience, and competition are cultivated in learners to prepare them for roles in the labour market, especially for working-class students, who are conditioned for low-wage, repetitive jobs. In Zimbabwe, these dynamics are evident in how elite schools provide students with enriched learning environments and leadership opportunities, while under-resourced rural schools focus narrowly on examination compliance, reinforcing economic stratification.

While not strictly a Marxist, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) offers complementary insights through his concept of cultural capital. He argues that students from privileged backgrounds possess the linguistic styles, social behaviours, and symbolic knowledge that align with school expectations. This cultural alignment gives them an inherent advantage, often mistaken for natural intelligence or hard work. In Zimbabwe, children from affluent families typically thrive in English-dominated, Western-oriented curricula, while learners from rural areas are often alienated by content that reflects unfamiliar social norms and knowledge systems.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony adds another dimension to the Marxist critique by showing how consent to domination is secured through ideology rather than coercion. In the context of Zimbabwe, schools often promote the idea that success is purely a result of hard work, obscuring the structural barriers that impede the progress of low-income learners. Through textbooks, school mottos, and institutional rituals, the system instils a belief in meritocracy that discourages critical questioning. This creates what Bowles and Gintis call the "illusion of equality," leading marginalised learners to internalise failure as a personal deficiency rather than a systemic issue (Bhoroma, 2019).

The Relevance of Marxist Theory in Zimbabwean Education

Educational inequality in Zimbabwe is not merely the result of isolated mismanagement or cultural deficiencies; rather, it is deeply embedded within a broader socio-economic system that privileges elite interests. Marxist theory offers a critical framework to understand how education functions both ideologically and materially to reproduce class divisions. Despite post-independence policies aimed at democratizing access, significant disparities persist between rural and urban learners, as well as between public and private institutions. This section explores how core Marxist concepts such as curriculum control, class reproduction, ideological legitimization, and preparation for capitalist labour manifest within Zimbabwe's education sector.

Curriculum Control and the Interests of the Elite

Control over ideological instruments, especially the curriculum, is central to maintaining class dominance in Marxist thought. In Zimbabwe, the curriculum is predominantly designed and controlled by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), with minimal participation from marginalised communities (Nherera, 2000). Over 70% of curriculum decisions are made centrally, often without meaningful input from rural or disadvantaged groups (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 2020). This centralisation aligns with Althusser's (1971) concept of the Ideological State Apparatus, whereby dominant values and worldviews are disseminated through education systems to reproduce existing power relations.

While recent reforms, such as the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2015–2022), introduced subjects like heritage studies and entrepreneurship to foster relevance and contextual learning, implementation remains uneven. Urban elite schools, such as St George's College and Chisipite Senior School, benefit from abundant resources, including modern laboratories, ICT infrastructure, and expatriate teachers, enabling them to adopt new curricula effectively. Conversely, rural schools like Hlunguhlungu Secondary in Lupane lack electricity, laboratories, and qualified teachers, severely limiting curriculum delivery. According to the Zimbabwe Education Sector Strategic Plan (2020), over 60% of rural schools lack reliable electricity and access to digital learning tools.

Furthermore, Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011) argue that Zimbabwe's curriculum retains subtle elitism and urban bias, privileging Western knowledge systems and English language mastery. This marginalises rural and working-class learners, effectively acting as an ideological filter that reinforces the interests of the urban elite.

Reproduction of Class Inequality

Class reproduction remains a central concern in Marxist critiques of education. Socio-economic disparities are vividly reflected in patterns of school access and performance. A 2022 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report indicates that rural dropout rates are approximately 25% higher than urban counterparts, with poverty, early marriage, and long travel distances as major contributing factors (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2022). Although the Education for All (EFA) policy expanded enrollment post-independence, it failed to address qualitative disparities rooted in class and geographical location.

Children from affluent households typically attend private or well-resourced government schools, benefiting from advanced facilities, extracurricular programs, and highly trained teachers. For instance, Arundel School in Harare maintains a teacher-student ratio of 1:12 and offers STEM clubs and robotics programs, positioning its students favorably in national and international assessments (Mlambo, 2019). In contrast, schools like Gokwe Secondary in Midlands Province often face overcrowding, teacher absenteeism, and lack basic laboratory facilities, which hampers student learning outcomes (Dzvimbo & Moloi, 2013).

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital helps explain these disparities. Learners from elite families benefit from social capital, parental literacy, English language fluency and exposure to global cultures that align with institutional expectations. These embedded advantages perpetuate cyclical inequality, where education reinforces existing social stratification rather than enabling mobility.

Ideological Legitimation of Inequality

Education also reproduces inequality ideologically. Althusser's (1971) notion of the Ideological State Apparatus explains how schools normalise existing class structures by promoting meritocracy and individual responsibility, thus masking systemic barriers faced by disadvantaged learners. Slogans like "hard work brings success" and "every child can make it" are pervasive in school mottos, textbooks, and assemblies (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 2019). However, these narratives often ignore structural realities such as poverty, hunger, and emotional trauma.

Rural learners, for example, experience high levels of psychosocial stress due to poverty, food insecurity, and marginalisation factors that significantly impede academic performance (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2021). Yet, schools rarely address these issues pedagogically, maintaining a culture of silence. The rural school context tends to emphasise obedience and conformity, discouraging critical questioning - an approach aligned with Bowles and Gintis' (1976) concept of the hidden curriculum sustains passive acceptance of socio-economic positions.

Education as Preparation for Capitalist Labour

From a Marxist perspective, schools serve not merely as knowledge transmitters but as institutions conditioning learners for their roles within the capitalist economy. Zimbabwe's education system emphasises discipline, punctuality and obedience; traits aligned with workplace expectations, yet it inadequately prepares youth for the realities of a shrinking formal sector.

Despite efforts to promote technical and vocational education, these programs are underfunded, stigmatised, and often disconnected from labour market needs. For example, a 2022 survey by Mupinga and Bukaliya shows that over 70% of vocational graduates remain unemployed or engaged in informal sector activities. The Zimbabwe Youth Unemployment Rate exceeded 60% in 2022 (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2022), highlighting the dissonance between educational outputs and economic realities. Many rural youth, with limited access to quality training, are trapped in a cycle of underemployment or unemployment - what Marxists refer to as the "surplus population" (Marx, 1867). This systemic disconnect underscores the role of education in reproducing labour exploitation rather than fostering genuine social mobility.

Limitations of Marxist Theory

While Marxist theory offers a powerful lens for exposing educational inequality, it is not without its limitations. Critics argue that it overemphasises economic structures at the expense of other identity markers such as gender, ethnicity and language – factors highly relevant in Zimbabwe’s complex socio-political landscape. As Perera (2024) put it, the Marxist perspective overemphasises economic factors in the determination of societal changes and structures, thereby ignoring other equally important factors such as gender and race. Additionally, postcolonial theory offers insights into how colonial legacies shape education. A fuller analysis would benefit from integrating these perspectives alongside Marxist critiques (Johnson, 2024). Nonetheless, Marxist theory remains a valuable tool for analysing class-based inequality and institutional reproduction of privilege in Zimbabwe with reference to primary and secondary schools.

Recommendations

To address educational inequality in Zimbabwe, the following actionable steps are proposed:

- Revise the national curriculum for contextual equity: Adapt content to reflect local realities, indigenous knowledge, and linguistic diversity. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), in collaboration with local education experts and community representatives, can lead a phased rollout through curriculum review panels.
- Ensure equitable infrastructure and resource distribution by prioritizing investment in rural schools for textbooks, ICT, laboratories, and teacher housing by engaging stakeholders like the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), and development partners such as the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
- Promote inclusive and participatory policy-making by engage teachers, learners, and marginalised communities in curriculum design and education policy processes. Local school boards and provincial education offices can coordinate consultations during review cycles.
- Strengthen teacher training in critical and inclusive pedagogy by incorporate modules on social justice, critical thinking, and learner-centred methods in teacher education by engaging the teacher training colleges, universities, and ZIMSEC with support from academic institutions.
- Expand support systems for disadvantaged learners by scaling up scholarship programs, school feeding, and psychosocial services to reduce dropout and improve outcomes. With support from the Ministry of Public Service and NGOs, this can be integrated into existing social protection frameworks.

Conclusion

The Marxist theory remains a relevant and powerful framework for understanding educational inequality in Zimbabwe. It exposes how schools function not as neutral spaces but as institutions that reproduce class privilege through curriculum design, resource allocation, and ideological messaging. Despite reforms since independence, education in Zimbabwe continues to reflect colonial legacies and capitalist demands, advantaging elite learners while marginalising the rural and working-class majority. To move beyond critique, Zimbabwe urgently needs a transformative educational praxis. This means rethinking policy to ensure equitable resource distribution, redesigning curricula to reflect local knowledge systems, and promoting critical pedagogy that empowers learners to challenge structural injustice. Only through such systemic change can education fulfil its promise as a vehicle for social justice, not social reproduction.

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