



Exploring the Relevance and Quality of the VaRemba Initiation School Curriculum and its Impact on Formal Schooling in a Rural District in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study explores the relevance and quality of the VaRemba initiation school curriculum and analyses its impact on formal education. A case study design was used to come up with a descriptive, interpretive as well as an evaluative account of the initiation curriculum and its impact on formal schooling in Chomusenda village in Mberengwa district of Zimbabwe. Interviews, questionnaires, observations and analysis of records were used to gather data from teachers, initiates and elderly community members. The study established that the VaRemba initiation curriculum perpetuates gender stereotypical roles and has some aspects which are unsustainable and in tension with formal schooling. Girls are channeled towards reproductive roles and the private sphere while boys are geared for productive roles and public sphere. High dropout from formal schooling is witnessed soon after initiation, as the initiation curriculum seems to tell initiates that they are 'ripe' for adult life. However, the curriculum has aspects that contribute to moral development of young people. The study recommends a paradigm shift, to embrace the ubuntu philosophy in the two education systems as a way to harmonise them.

Introduction

The question 'Education for what?' is increasingly coming to the forefront, focusing on quality and relevance of education, its content and pedagogical methods, notably in the perspectives of education for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2008:5). The quest for quality and relevant education has led to concerted efforts in some education systems to rethink what knowledge is worked with in education systems, and how different knowledge systems articulate attempts to improve educational quality and relevance. Thus we witness an unprecedented interest, especially in postcolonial nations, to include indigenous ways of knowing into formal education as a way of strengthening human knowledge and practices for a better life. It has emerged in many studies that there is need to draw on or integrate traditional knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing into formal curricula and pedagogies (Hogan, 2008; Lotz-Sisitka, *et al.*, 2006b; Miller, *et al.*, 2006; Shava, 2005; UNESCO, 2004). Several studies, especially in the southern African region, show a concern for how best indigenous ways of knowing can be put to use to enhance learning and/or practice in formal and non-formal institutions (Odora Hoppers, 2001; O'Donoghue, 2005; Shava, 2005). This current trend seems, however, to not adequately engage with the possible negative outcomes of some of the indigenous practices.

One such instance is the complex knowledge–practice environment surrounding initiation rites in indigenous cultures. Some researchers (Le Roux, 2004; Janssen, 2007) look at anthropological–political formulations of male initiation in terms of the cultural necessity surrounding the practice. Le Roux, *et al.*, (2007), however, take this research a step further and identify concerns about the link between initiation rituals, stress and the onset of schizophrenia in initiates. None of the reviewed research on initiation processes, however, considers the initiation process as a curriculum or a socialisation process that runs parallel to the formal school curriculum with the potential to disrupt or complement it.

In view of this gap, we saw it necessary to engage with various other socialisation forces that also play a significant role in shaping the cognitive and moral development of communities in discussions on educational quality and relevance. We therefore chose to interrogate the relevance and quality of an indigenous initiation curriculum of the VaRemba people of Mberengwa district in Zimbabwe as well as assess its impact on formal schooling.

When exploring issues of relevance and quality in the context of a university programme, Ketlhoilwe and Maila (2008) noted that the terms ‘relevance’ and ‘quality’ are perceived differently by different scholars and researchers. There are however, agreed upon indicators of quality and relevance in education. For instance, the director general of UNESCO, Kaichiro Matsuura, points out that quality must be seen in light of how societies define the purpose of education UNESCO (2004). He further adds that two principal objectives are at stake: the first is to ensure cognitive development of learners. The second emphasises the role of education in nurturing the creative and emotional growth of learners and in helping them to acquire values and attitudes for responsible citizenship. The director general also adds that quality must pass the test of equity. Shumba, *et al.* (2008) add that education of good quality and relevance empowers people, including the poor, to meaningfully act on the challenges posed by risk and vulnerability. Lotz-Sisitka (2008) interprets Shumba, *et al.*’s conception of quality and relevance as collective agency, which is a critical factor in enhancing educational quality.

Reading through the above conceptions of quality and relevance, we conclude that education would be considered to be relevant and of good quality if it develops learners’ cognitive skills as well as their values and attitudes in a way that contributes to a wider re-orientation of society towards equity and sustainability. Andrews (2004) also sees education of good quality to be crucial, especially for rural people, in achieving both the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) goals of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting gender equity and ensuring environmental sustainability.

Background, Study Purpose and Research Objectives

For more than 10 years one of the researchers has been teaching at a school in Mberengwa rural district in the midlands province of Zimbabwe. She observed that the VaRemba people who reside in the community still practice initiation ceremonies with utter conviction. VaRemba, also known as Lemba, Balemba, VaSena, VaSoni, VaMwenye or VaLepa, are of the (Zhou) (elephant) totem. They claim to have come to Africa from Iraq, and they consider themselves to be Israelites who migrated to Africa after the Babylonian invasion of 586/7 B.C. (Le Roux,

2004). As Israelites, they then profess to be descendants of the biblical Abraham who was given instructions by God:

Genesis (17:10-14): ... God said to Abraham, 'this is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you should be circumcised. ... For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. ... any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people: he has broken my covenant.'

Of much interest to the educator, were behaviour changes apparent in students soon after graduating from the initiation school. The most prominent changes included poor participation in schoolwork, high school dropout rates, especially amongst girls, and stronger social associations along ethnic lines. It was against this background that the researchers found it compelling to investigate aspects of the VaRemba initiation curriculum, so as to probe its relevance and quality as well as assess its impact on formal education. In exploring the relevance and quality of the VaRemba initiation curriculum, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- to gather information on the VaRemba initiation school curriculum;
- to probe the relevance and quality of the VaRemba initiation curriculum;
- to analyse the impact of the VaRemba initiation curriculum on formal education; and
- to suggest possible recommendations that can harmonise the education systems.

The study was carried out in the full spirit of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as we are halfway through the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) (UNESCO, 2005). We also took cognisance of the fact that ESD promotes indigenous, traditional and local knowledge, and values the importance of cultural issues in identity formation and in ensuring social cohesion and relevance (Lotz-Sisitka, *et al.*, 2006b; UNESCO 2005). However, we also embrace the idea that the ESD context offers the opportunity to be critical of cultural values and beliefs that 'work against' ESD principles (*ibid*). An ESD framework further required us to engage with complex and tension-laden cultural issues, as we were aware that our suggestions could be contrary to some expected norms.

We also consciously chose the gender dimension to interrogate the element of equity in establishing the relevance and quality of the initiation curriculum as well as its impact on formal schooling. For us this is the equity test for the curriculum as proposed by the director general of UNESCO (2004). On the other hand, the gender equity test would show the position of the initiation curriculum in the context of numerous calls by international initiatives; Millennium Development Goal 3 as well as the Education for All Goal 5, which both call for the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality at all levels by 2015 (UNESCO, 2005; Lotz-Sisitka, *et al.*, 2006c).

Methodology

A case study design was adopted to come up with a descriptive, interpretive and evaluative account of the initiation curriculum. The design made use of suitable instruments such as interviews, questionnaires, document analysis and observations to gather information for interrogating the relevance and quality of the VaRemba initiation school curriculum.

The design further used techniques such as comparison, contrasting, classification and evaluation to further explore the relevance and quality of the initiation curriculum as well as to make inferences on its impact on formal learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data was used, although quantitative data generated from questionnaires involving a small number of respondents in the case study context was used descriptively to complement qualitative data. The size of the sample was not adequate for making statistically significant conclusions, but in the context of the case study design, the use of various instruments allowed for a certain measure of methodological triangulation. Brannen (2008) supports using mixed methods, and states that mixed methods may be used within another research strategy, for example a case study design in which a number of different methods are embedded. Bryman (2008) also indicates that quantitative and qualitative research can be combined in the research process to increase the validity of the study.

The research was conducted in Chomusenda community of Mberengwa district in 2007. This rural community has a total of 28 villages, four primary schools and one secondary school. The study was undertaken mainly with secondary school teachers and students, the reason being that most of the initiates were in secondary school.

Ten out of 15 teachers (66.7%) who had been at the secondary school for a minimum period of five years were given questionnaires. The five-year period guaranteed that the teacher had an appreciable experience in dealing with initiates. The main purpose of the teacher questionnaire was to generate descriptive data that could inform insights into the impact of the initiation curriculum on formal schooling in the school concerned.

Questionnaires were also used to probe the initiation curriculum with new initiates. Out of 23 boy initiates, 15 (65.2%) answered the questionnaire and eight girl initiates out of 12 (66.7%) answered the questionnaire. We thought questionnaires would allow respondents to freely express their views, attitudes, perceptions and experiences concerning the initiation curriculum. Some questionnaire items were designed to gather information on the curriculum knowledge as well as the philosophy behind it.

We only managed to deal with one group of initiates. Administrative as well as financial constraints prohibited us to follow-up with other initiates who had gone through the initiation school in previous years. This was a major limitation of the study. However, as researchers we believed that triangulating data gathered from initiates with that gathered from other sources using other tools would help to develop trustworthiness within this case study context. Given that the data sample was small, and the case context was limited to one school, we can only draw tentative conclusions from the study. Its value is more in opening up the issues for further probing, than for making definitive conclusions.

Interviews were also used to gather data. Some of the information that emerged from the questionnaire was used to develop further perspective on the interview data. The interviews were targeted at elderly men and women in the community. We used interviews to gather more in-depth data about their experiences and feelings, and to examine their attitudes, interests, concerns as well as their interpretation (Gay & Airasian, 2000) of the initiation curriculum and its relationship to formal schooling. Through interviews, we sought to jointly construct meaning with interviewees (*ibid*) concerning the initiation curriculum.

A total of 12 interviewees, seven women and five men, participated in the research. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that the interviewer was free to formulate other questions as judged appropriate in order to facilitate specific and detailed response for the purposes of observing the reaction, and discerning perceptions and attitudes of different people with regards to initiation ceremonies.

The study also used observation as a data-gathering technique where initiates were observed in naturally occurring interactions, especially at school. This was done over a three-month period. As observers, we could not get access to the actual physical initiation school because of the sacredness and secrecy surrounding these institutions. Our observation was therefore concentrated on pre- and post-initiation behaviours and responses of initiates.

The study further relied on record analysis. We specifically looked at absenteeism and dropouts using school attendance registers and we used progress records to make inferences on school performance. Analysis of records enabled us to gather numerical data that enabled us to explore the relationship between the initiation curriculum and the formal learning context, through comparison, contrasting, classification and evaluation. The use of various sources of data allowed for data triangulation in the case study. The assumption underlying this was that no single source would provide sufficient data to furnish all the research objectives.

The study was not without challenges. One big challenge was that most people in the community were not willing to openly discuss the facets of their cultural practice. Some potential respondents would ask for payment as big as an ox; others would not take part for fear of victimisation by senior members of their community; some simply did not want to 'sell out', since to divulge the VaRemba initiation curriculum to a *mushenji* (non-VaRemba) would be violation of VaRemba secrecy protocols. At one of the schools, an initiated teacher tried to prevent the completion of questionnaires by both teachers and students, threatening the researchers with whipping and reporting the matter to the chief. These potential respondents chose not to participate in the research.

These challenges were overcome through various research ethical considerations. We upheld the principles of informed consent, right to confidentiality, and access and acceptance. For access and acceptance, we sought permission to carry out the study in the village. Permission was granted by the school head and the local village headman. We did this at the beginning of the study and this offered us the opportunity to present our credentials as researchers as well as establish and identify with cultural ethics of the community (Cohen, *et al.*, 2002).

To guarantee informed consent, we were guided by four elements: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension (*ibid*). All the participants were made aware of the nature of the research and we made sure that all participants were mature individuals and capable of making decisions. We also took advantage of the fact that one of the researchers was a teacher at

one of the schools in the community. This helped to reduce the degree of suspicion, and willing respondents talked at liberty.

Findings

Data analysis is presented in two categories. The first category reports on the aspects of the initiation curriculum. The second category assesses the impact of the initiation curriculum on formal education in the school concerned. Data on the curriculum aspects of the initiation school was gathered from pupils who had just graduated from the initiation school, as well as from community elders, as discussed above. Teachers, observations and record analysis provided data used to assess the impact of the initiation school on formal education.

Aspects of the initiation curriculum

To gather and analyse information so as to answer the question 'education for what' we used Cornbleth's (1990) two major themes of curriculum. The first is that curriculum is conceived as what actually occurs in learning situations, that is, an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge, and milieu. Of particular concern here, is curriculum knowledge, which is selection, organisation, treatment and distribution of knowledge to students. The researchers looked at what is taught and how it is taught during initiation.

The second theme is that curriculum is contextually shaped. The relevant context is both structural and socio-cultural. By structure, Cornbleth (1990:6) means 'established roles and relationships and operating procedures, shared beliefs and norms'. The socio-cultural context looks at social, political and economic conditions, traditions, ideologies and events that actually or potentially influence curriculum. With this theme in mind, we looked at the underlying philosophy of what is taught to initiates. In other words, we were concerned about why it is taught.

The initiation school curriculum for both boys and girls

In the initiation school curriculum is divided on gender lines, that is, females follow a curriculum that is different from that of males, although there are some common aspects for both (see Table 1). Some general features of the initiation curriculum are:

- Initiates call this initiation kutamba which literally means playing, or ngoma, which means drum.
- They leave their homes for a period of one to three months when undergoing training.
- They are taught to respect elders.
- They are taught discipline.
- They are severely punished, especially by whipping for minor mistakes.
- Initiates acquire new names on completion.
- Their heads are clean-shaven on their return.
- Celebrations are held on their return from the initiation school.
- Singing, dancing and poetry are taught and are the most preferred methods of teaching.

Table 1. Distinctions in the initiation curriculum aspects for males and females

Curriculum aspects for males vs curriculum aspects for females	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boys go for initiation at the age of around 10 to adulthood with the majority going for initiation at the age of 12 to 16 or at puberty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girls go for initiation at their first menstruation period or in the next winter if the girl's first menstrual flow was not in winter.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The initiation school, led by a <i>nyamukanga</i>, is established on the mystical basis. A <i>nyamukanga</i> is a specially trained traditional surgeon. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school is led by an elderly woman who takes charge of the girls during the period.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates confess wrongdoings if any, such as adultery, murder, or witchcraft. If young, then their parents confess on their behalf. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The girls are not permitted to meet their parents during the initiation period.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school is established near a mountain or river in a forest away from settlements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school is established in the home of an elderly woman.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiation is a bridging course between boyhood and manhood. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The course is an initiation from girlhood to womanhood.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The removal of the foreskin of the male organ is the most important activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virginity is checked.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates are taught to fend for their families by hunting, hence they are taught to be good runners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are taught gender domestic chores, that is, the duties of a woman in the home. They are also taught to take care of their future husbands.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are taught to be heads of their families and to play a superior role over women. In a family where the father has died, the eldest initiated son, even though a teenager, makes decisions. His mother cannot make any decision without his consent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are taught not to argue with initiated men and senior women, but to take instructions as given. Girls should kneel and bow, or lie on the ground in the presence of males and senior women, especially soon after initiation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates and their instructors (<i>vadhahi</i>) carry whips on leaving the initiation school. The new initiates spend two to three weeks carrying the whips wherever they are until they are instructed to throw them away by their seniors. On return whips are crackled and this continues sporadically up to the time when they are thrown away. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The girls are trained to endure hardships and to persevere in marriage through deliberate harsh treatment during initiation. They are beaten, pinched and forced into icy water on a winter morning. They should not cry or complain or protest when treated badly but persevere so that even if their future husbands ill-treat them, they will endure.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates leave the initiation school in white shorts and sometimes with white T-shirts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girls do not have any gender-specific dress code.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A cow is normally slaughtered for a male initiate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A goat is normally slaughtered for a daughter initiate.

The song below is a typical song sung by female initiates at the initiation school.

Call: *Kuwerere Kuwee Kuwerere-e x 2*

Vana vaye vakura

Varume mochifara

Mofarira vakadzi.

Response: *Haye-e kuwerere-e, kuwerere kuwe kuwerere.*

The English translation goes:

Call: The children have grown up

Men should be happy and

Be pleased to take these mature girls for wives.

Impact of initiation curriculum on formal schooling

The impact of the initiation curriculum on formal schooling was assessed using indicators such as observable behaviour changes of pupils, participation in class and dropout from school.

Behavior change after initiation: Teachers were asked to rate observable behaviour changes in recent graduates from the initiation school on a scale ranging from poor to excellent. The scale used observable behaviour indicators such as class participation and pupil–pupil interactions as well as teacher–pupil interactions. Teachers were also asked to infer on less obvious and fluid attributes like attitude of initiation school graduates towards peers, teachers and school in general. Tables 2 and 3 show the number of teachers with a particular opinion per observable behaviour change indicator in boys and girls, respectively.

Table 2. Behaviour changes noticed in boys after initiation. n=10

Indicators	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Class participation	2	7	1	-
Interaction with VaRemba classmates	-	1	-	9
Interaction with VaShenji classmates	7	2	1	-
Attitude towards initiated male teachers	-	-	2	8
Attitude towards uninitiated male teachers	5	3	1	1
Attitude towards initiated female teachers	-	1	4	5
Attitude towards uninitiated female teachers	7	-	3	-
Attitude to co-curricular activities, e.g. sport	-	-	3	7

Teachers used the following terms to describe new male initiates: rowdy, aggressive, arrogant, violent, boastful, bully, stubborn, pompous, rude, cheeky and proud. They reported that new initiates' participation in class becomes very low. They interact with other VaRembas well but are unwilling to associate with non-VaRembas. They look down upon the uninitiated, including their male and female teachers. However, they become active in sport.

Table 3. Behaviour changes noticed in girls after initiation. n=10

Indicators	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Participation in class	4	5	1	-
Interaction with initiated classmates	-	-	3	7
Interaction with uninitiated classmates	4	5	1	-
Attitudes to male teachers (initiated or not)	-	-	2	8
Attitude to female teachers (initiated or not)	2	8	-	-
Attitude to school activities, e.g. sport	1	3	6	-

Teachers described girl initiates as patient, respectful, passive, shy, reserved, morally loose and withdrawn. The girls' participation in class becomes low. They develop a very positive attitude towards men, including their male teachers, and a negative attitude towards female teachers. One teacher described them as 'morally loose'. His comment on girls' attitudes towards male teachers was:

... you want to make us lose our jobs if we tell you the truth. These newly initiated girls behave in an inviting way that one is tempted to propose love to them. The temptation to 'taste' those who have been initiated is also great on our part.

A significant number of students drop out of school after initiation due to pregnancies and early marriages on the part of girls and negative attitude on the part of boys. Statistics of dropouts between January 2006 and February 2007 obtained from one of the schools in the area revealed the dropout rate with associated reasons as shown in Tables 4 and 5. Researchers used surnames and confirmations from teachers to establish whether the victims of school dropout are from the VaRemba or from non-VaRemba families.

Table 4. Dropout rate for boys (January 2006 and February 2007) (Total 16)

Reason for dropping out	Number of dropouts	
Lack of fees	2 (VaShenji)	3 (VaRemba)
Negative attitude towards school	1 (VaShenji)	10 (VaRemba)

Table 5. Dropout rate for girls (January 2007 and February 2007) (Total 25)

Reason for dropping out	Number of dropouts	
Lack of fees	4 (VaShenji)	3 (VaRemba)
Marriage and pregnancy	4 (VaShenji)	14 (VaRemba)
Percentage dropout due to marriage and pregnancy	VaShenji 16%	VaRemba 56%

The school had a total enrolment of 351 students (195 males and 156 females). Of the 195 males 142 were VaRemba and out of the 156 females, 99 were VaRemba. A total of 41 students (25 girls and 16 boys) (11.7%) dropped out of school during this period. The dropout rate for girls at 7.1% was much higher than that of boys, which stood at 4.6%. The total dropout for the VaRemba children 30 (8.5%) was also much higher than that of their VaShenji counterparts, which stood at 11 (3.1%). As shown in Table 4, 18 of the 25 dropouts were due to pregnancy and marriage, 14 (56%) being VaRemba. Teachers and elders interviewed also concurred that dropout from school among the VaRemba children was more pronounced amongst those who have gone through the initiation school.

Absenteeism from school was also very pronounced amongst VaRemba children especially when the initiation school took place during the school term. Teachers expressed that initiates lose out on their school time and they seem to come back disinterested in their schoolwork. However, all the interviewed elders expressed the desire to have the initiation school restricted within the school holidays.

Discussion

To explore questions relating to the relevance and quality of the initiation curriculum we used a statement by the UNESCO director general who, in the opening statement on an Education for All Global Monitoring Report noted that the principal objectives of quality education are cognitive and emotional growth of learners, values and attitudes for responsible citizenship as well as equity (UNESCO, 2004). Shumba, *et al.*'s (2008) suggestion that education should be empowering coupled with Amartya Sen's theory of human capabilities, which argues for people's abilities to make choices that they have reason to value (Sen, 1990), also shaped our vantage point on the relevance and quality of the initiation curriculum and its relationship to formal education. As highlighted in preceding sections, we also drew on recent discussions in Education for Sustainable Development to help highlight some of the social issues emphasised in the UNDESD, particularly gender-related issues.

The study established that the initiation curriculum seemed narrow and specific in terms of what is taught. Curriculum content seems not to have evolved enough to prepare young people for today's complex world, characterised by poverty, food insecurity, disease and challenges associated with globalisation. For example, it is difficult to conceptualise why initiates are taught to fend for their families by hunting in an area that is now semi-desert in outlook with no more wild animals at all. This brings little immediate relief to communities and appears to do little

to address issues of relevance in the context of increased poverty, climate change that is visible through successive droughts, environmental degradation, economic hardships and diseases.

Teaching methods used show that the delivery of the initiation curriculum follows what Freire called banking education (Freire, 1970), in which school elders know and learners are to be filled by knowledge. Such learning situations regard reality as static, changeless and predictable (*ibid*). This is in sharp contrast with the principles of ESD, in which both learners and educators are expected to actively engage in the learning process so as to raise personal and communal awareness, creativity, participation, responsiveness and understanding of sustainable practices (Shumba, *et al.*, 2008; Lotz-Sisitka, *et al.*, 2006b).

As shown in Table 1, the curriculum content is designed along gender lines. It sets one form of knowledge to be suitable for women and not for men and vice versa. Even the ceremony practices after graduating from the initiation school show discrimination on gender basis. The slaughtering of an ox for male initiates and goats for females shows that males are regarded as superior to their female counterparts. Gifts for graduates also put initiates into stereotypic gender roles. Males get garden and other farming tools, while females get kitchen utensils. All these practices contribute to the perpetuation of particular gender stereotypes.

The initiation curriculum therefore greatly reduces women's space and their capabilities. In terms of 'space', Weston in Jickling (2005) speaks about the social, psychological and phenomenological preconditions as well as the conceptual, experiential and physical freedom to move and think. Socially, physically and psychologically the initiation curriculum does not teach women to think or move out of the private sphere, which is the home. In other words it does very little to empower women as Shumba, *et al.* (2008) suggest. Chikunda, Marambire and Makoni (2006) observed similar gender traits with the Shangaans of southeastern Zimbabwe.

The initiation curriculum also poses some tensions with formal schooling. The aim of formal education, though it is also riddled with subtle gender stereotypes, is to expose both girls and boys to equal curriculum opportunities so as to foster the maximum potential of individuals and widen their career choices in life, or as Sen's language says, broaden their capabilities. The girl from the VaRemba is put in a predicament. On one hand are the international bodies such as the Jomtein Conference, the Dakar Framework for Action and the Beijing Declaration that believe in the emancipation of women and subsequently closing the gender gaps between females and males through formal education. On the other hand, initiation school undermines the efforts and directs women to remain in subordination to men.

Formal schooling thrives on active participation, competition and critical analysis of situations. The same girl who is taught under initiation to be humble, voiceless and submissive to males is required to be critical and compete against males in order to be successful in formal school. The cognitive dissonance availed to her by the two situations is likely to affect her performance in one of the education systems. Interviews with teachers revealed that girls seem to care less about their schoolwork and generally they perform lower than boys after initiation. Some parents, especially the very poor, are not even very keen to send girls to formal school. This is in contrast to the intentions of international bodies such as UNESCO, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Education for All agenda.

The initiation curriculum has the potential to impact on the mental schemes of women in particular and the society in general. It can create and perpetuate the perception of masculinity and femininity as hierarchical contrasts where the categories associated with masculinity are perceived superior and dominant and the categories associated with femininity viewed as inferior and subordinate. Such a curriculum teaches women to internalise their own subordinate status and view themselves as being of lesser value; their sense of their own rights could therefore become diminished (Ankerbo & Hoyda, 2003). In this way, women could be led into a situation where they contribute to their own subordination and reproduce unequal gender relations. In the initiation curriculum elderly women are the ones who play the major role of educating young women into subordination. Bourdieu in Ankerbo and Hoyda (2003:17) call this form of male dominance symbolic violence. This is not power based on physical force or coercion, but is an invisible form of power where the dominated women are socialised into *doxa* (18), which means taking things for granted. Under the VaRemba culture, women take their subordination as natural and hence (paradoxically) perpetuate it through the initiation curriculum and do not see any need to critique the status quo. This makes it more difficult for women to become empowered to meaningfully act on the challenges posed by vulnerability and risk and their sources (UNESCO, 2006).

The initiation school restricts women's space both in terms of their condition and position in society. Condition refers to women's material state that is their immediate sphere of experience (Ankerbo & Hoyda, 2003). As discussed above, the curriculum tends to restrict women's experiences to the reproductive sphere. Reproductive work involves care and maintenance of the household and its members (SARDC-WIDSAA, 2000). This includes bearing and rearing of children, water and fuel collection, food preparation and family health care (*ibid*). Women are not prepared by the initiation curriculum to participate in productive work, such as fishing, farming and formal employment, which remains the domain of men.

Position refers to women's social and economic standing relative to men (Ankerbo & Hoyda, 2003). Position is measured by male-female disparities in income and employment opportunities, participation in political bodies, access and control of resources and benefits, vulnerability to poverty, violence, and so forth (SARDC-WIDSAA, 2000). It is evident that the VaRemba initiation curriculum, which perpetuates female subordination, cannot aim to improve the position of women. Femininity attributes such as passivity, humility, obedience and rigid stereotypical thinking taught to young women in the initiation school can not lead to empowerment as suggested by Shumba, *et al.* (2008). That is, the curriculum cannot breed women who are eager to participate in political bodies and who would seek to improve their access to and control of resources and benefits. Instead, the product of the initiation curriculum is a woman who is vulnerable to poverty and violence. As reflected in the data, young women are taught to persevere in hardships caused by male violence and poverty. The initiation school does not teach them to be critical and question their condition and position in society but to internalise and naturalise their own subordinate status and exclude themselves from spheres or activities that society deems masculine or public. This is all against the principle of social sustainability that calls for fairness in the access to and benefits from earth's resources (Lotz-Sisitka, *et al.*, 2006b).

The VaRemba initiation school also compromises the retention of girls in school and this compromises the efforts of Education for All initiatives, the Millennium Development Goals, and all other directives that work towards gender equality in education. It seems the curriculum tells girl initiates that they are 'ripe' for marriage. Songs sung by girls in the initiation school, such as the one described above, are evidence of this. This song is used as part of the initiation training. The words of the song advertise the girls for marriage; hence the girls feel very mature and ready to begin their own families. They dash into marriages and some of them are impregnated at a tender age since they go for initiation at their first menstruation period or a few months later. Researchers noted that men also seem to take advantage of the girls' docility to propose to them and marry them soon after they graduate from initiation (Chikunda, *et al.*, 2006).

Nevertheless, the initiation curriculum has some positive aspects that deserve mentioning. For instance, there are key values in the VaRemba initiation curriculum that are quite commendable. The practice of confession and wearing white clothes in the case of males; and being given new names on the closure of the initiation school is symbolic of a new start by people who have been cleansed and have gone through a process of reflection, after which they emerge 'pure'. If they do not confess it is alleged that serious illness or death may befall them since the school is established on the basis of magic and insists on purity. All this, barring the embedded issues linked to gender relations outlined above, is likely to instill the sense of *ubuntu*/humanness in initiates and he or she is expected to live a life guided by this philosophy.

Virginity is also checked in girls during initiation. Although the practice is controversial and degrades women, in some circles where the threat of HIV/AIDS is difficult to assimilate, it is said to be a 'good practice' because girls would not indulge in sex before initiation for fear of humiliation. It should be noted here, however, that virginity testing has been critiqued by feminists and human rights activists who show concern for women's privacy. What is significant here, however, is that there is no follow-up after initiation to see if these girls continue to abstain from sex before marriage, and the initiation curriculum ironically does not teach girls how to manage sexual relations in a context of HIV/AIDS risk.

Preparation for adult life is also very visible in the VaRemba initiation school. Boys are taught to be breadwinners and fend for their families. On the other hand girls are taught to be custodians of provisions as well as major players in the primary socialisation of children. Although this gender division of roles is not quite palatable to many feminist theorists (Gaidzanwa, 1992; Stromquist, 1997; Unterhalter & McCowan, 2005), it is however seen as functional to the proper running of the family by some functionalists such as Talcott Parsons and cultural feminists who argued that women are naturally suited to the 'expressive' role of childcare, whereas men are more suited to 'instrumental' role of competing in the labour market (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004:168).

As shown by the discussion above, the issues are extremely complex. Supported by the principles of Education for Sustainable Development, we strongly believe that gender roles should not disadvantage one gender over the other. While the sample of our study was small, and the site limited, we argue through this case study analysis that opportunities do exist to improve the quality and relevance of the initiation curriculum by reorienting its goals towards

achieving both the EFA and MDG goals of enabling students to complete schooling, by focusing on the capabilities necessary for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting gender equity and ensuring environmental sustainability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It has been observed in this paper that initiation is part of the VaRemba epistemology. It is an integral part of VaRemba culture and *ubuntu* ('humanness'). In spite of the weaknesses visible in the initiation curriculum, there are positive elements as well. There is need therefore to blend the positive aspects with the current formal school curriculum to produce a person who is educated for modern challenges and risks such as HIV/AIDS and environmental risks, and who is able to assimilate the values of *ubuntu* in their broadest sense. For instance, the VaRemba initiation school can be credited for equipping youngsters with some real family life education and skills that are useful later on in life. As observed by Kenyatta (1953), knowledge imparted to initiates results in them being able to confidently face the challenges of adolescence as they are taught about how their bodies work, relationships, responsible sexual behaviour, sexual health and conception. We thought Kenyatta's argument would be stronger if this knowledge dissemination were not just a one-off event and if it could continue well beyond initiation ceremony and in formal school as well, particularly with the current challenges of HIV/AIDS that face youth today.

True *ubuntuism* is flexible. The starting point should be that of appreciating the uniqueness of a particular group of people. Preconceived ideas that 'African cultures are primitive and as such belong to the past and can only be looked upon as antiquarian relics fit only for the museums' (Kenyatta, 1953:124) should be done away with. There is something that can be learnt from such practices like the VaRemba initiation. It should be borne in mind that this initiation ceremony does not concern only sex. A number of things are taught. Kenyatta (1953:109) succinctly puts it thus: 'the youth is taught with equal vividness and dramatic power the great lesson of respect for elders, manners to superiors of different grades, and how to help his/her country'. Any education system that lacks such tenets would definitely produce what Makuvaza (1996:56) termed the 'educated, uneducated professionals' *vanhu vasina hunhu*/people without 'humanness'. Character building cannot be left to chance and it makes sense to take such positive elements from our heritage like VaRemba initiation curriculum to build a genuine education system. However, as discussed in this paper, cultural practices may also need to be critically evaluated, and not just taken for granted.

It is the argument of this paper that initiation, like any other traditional practice, should be reformed so that it helps to create a gender-responsive environment. Negative elements that continue to disadvantage the girl child's education should be dispensed with tactfully through persuasion and incentives. An important aspect of *ubuntu* is that it encourages cooperation and against this background the VaRemba people can be persuaded to cooperate with central government, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders to eliminate those elements that militate against the education of the girl child. There is also a need to broaden the scope of the initiation curriculum and blend it with formal schooling so as to prepare

young ones for the complex world we are living in today – to take on more contemporary issues and to assist young people to learn to address these, while also teaching them to value the completion of formal schooling. The potential of integrating more up-to-date environmental knowledge into the initiation curriculum may also be an area worth exploring in future research in more depth.

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