



Eight Years of a Two-Tiered Curriculum: Lessons from Selected Secondary Schools in Zambia

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Abstract: This paper is based on a study of lessons learnt from the implementation of a two-tier curriculum in Zambian secondary schools. The study collected data through document analysis, reports and interviews with selected learners, teachers and head teachers in selected secondary schools in Zambia. A qualitative approach was used of ten purposively selected institutions and head teachers, while learners and teachers were selected randomly. A descriptive design was used. Data was analysed thematically using emerging themes. Findings revealed that there were several benefits and some challenges in the implementation of a two-tier curriculum. Some of these challenges included inadequate teaching and learning materials, lack of or inadequate equipment, lack of adequate funding, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate quality and quantity of teaching staff, and unfavorable environments. The benefits included the acquisition of transformative competencies and skills among learners, the acquisition of lifelong skills and an appreciation of knowledge, skills and values from theory to practice. The study recommends that the government and school authorities should ensure that challenges identified be addressed to ensure quality education provision and enhancement of identified skills.

Keywords: Two-tier curriculum, Transformative competencies

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The education system in Zambia has faced dynamic and rapid changes that have had overwhelming effects on the learner, learning institutions and society at large. Since independence in 1964, there have been numerous changes in policy formulation and directives, one of these being the introduction of vocational career pathways in the education system, herein referred to as a two tier curriculum. The policies on curriculum have been aimed at preparing young people to face challenges they may encounter in and out of the education system. The function of education is to provide opportunities for each learner to reach his or her full potential in academic, vocational, innovative and problem solving skills, (Kauchak, 2011). In order for learners to realise this function, the learning institutions are expected to offer curriculum to the benefit of learners. This should include “transformative competencies” that learners need in order to contribute to our world and shape a better future: *creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility*. OECD Learning Compass 2030 defines “transformative competencies” as the types of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need to transform society and shape the future for better lives.

These skills can be linked to the 21st century competencies for a globalized world. In the Zambian context, these are implemented through the two tier curriculum using academic and vocational subjects.

2. INTRODUCTION

Zambia’s education system has seen some transformational changes over the last few decades, the latest being the introduction of a two tier curriculum in 2014. This was after a review that saw a two-tier education system being introduced in the education sector. The focus of this paper is not the two-tier education system but the implementation of the *two-tier curriculum*. The major reform in the two-tier approach focuses on the creation of two curriculum pathways (academic and vocational). The rationale for this among many, was a response to **Sustainable Development Goal 4: ‘Ensure**

inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all'. This provides an opportunity for learners with ambitions and interest in technical and hands-on subjects that take the vocational pathway. The curriculum provides practical skills to such learners from Grade 8 up to Grade 12. The reviewed curriculum was labelled '*From theory to practice*'. It was designed to support learners through Transformation and Responsiveness to Life and livelihood skills as well as future/transformational competencies.

The term curriculum is a familiar word that is used in the education system. The word has been defined differently by many people. It is simply a plan for all learning activities, which contains assumptions about the purpose of education in society. The Latin meaning of the term 'curriculum' is a racecourse used by chariots. Hence, it is any path or course of study to be undertaken by learners/students in an educational institution, to be covered in a specified timeframe. Some definitions from authors include: Tanner and Tanner (1980), who state that "Curriculum is the reconstruction of knowledge and experience systematically developed under the auspices of the school (or university), to enable the learner to increase his or her control of knowledge and experience"; according to Kerr, (2003) the curriculum is 'all the learning which is planned and guided by the school; while Marsh (2009) also states that there is an assumption in this definition that what is studied is what is learned.

Curriculum implementation, according to Okello and Kagoire (1996:124) "is a network of varying activities involved in translating curriculum designs into classroom activities and changing people's attitudes to accept and participate in these activities". However, curriculum implementers (teachers and head teachers) are sometimes faced with barriers which hinder the successful implementation of the curriculum. Some teacher's failure to interpret and implement the curriculum results in serious effects such as the failure by learners to acquire transformational competencies.

In order to create new value, learners need to have a sense of purpose, curiosity and an open mindset towards new ideas, perspectives and experiences. Creating new value requires critical thinking and creativity in finding different approaches to solving problems, and collaboration with others to find solutions to complex problems. In evaluating whether their solutions work or not, learners may need agility in trying out new ideas and may need to be able to manage risks associated with these new ideas. Students also need adaptability as they change their approaches based on new and emerging insights and findings. The transformational skills and 21st century skills are thus supposed to be acquired through the teaching and learning process for learners to get these skills. This is not a matter of teaching either academic or 21st century knowledge and skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2010). It is about fusing the two, so that learners meet the demands of a global economy, as well as engage in good citizenship and participate fully in a vivacious and courteous society.

When a curriculum is well implemented, it provides the help needed to prepare learners to assume increasing responsibility for their decisions and grow in their ability to understand and accept the results of their choices (Tuchili, 2019). The ability to make such intelligent choices is not innate but like other abilities, must be developed. However, some students' performance in regard to academic, vocational, transformational and problem-solving skills need to be up scaled. Occasionally learners' performance in vocational subjects is poor for various reasons that include lack of materials, equipment and motivation. Hence, there was need to find out whether students who pursue vocational career pathways in selected schools develop transformational competencies. Effects of vocational career pathways on students' development of transformational competencies, innovation, vocational and problem-solving skills in Zambia's selected schools motivated this study.

2.1. Statement of the Problem

Although a two tier curriculum was introduced in Zambian schools over eight years ago (2014), its performance and impact among learner is not known. The purpose of the study therefore, was to find out the performance and impact of the two tier curriculum on learners in learning institutions.

2.2. Objective of the Study

To establish whether the two tier curriculum has any effect on the learners who take vocational pathway subjects.

2.3. Research Question

Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions: ‘Have learners who take the vocational career pathway subjects developed transformational competencies? How are the learners using the transformational skills?’

2.4. Significance of the Study

At the time when it is not known whether vocational pathway has an effect on learners’ development of transformational skills; a study of this nature was significant to fill this gap.

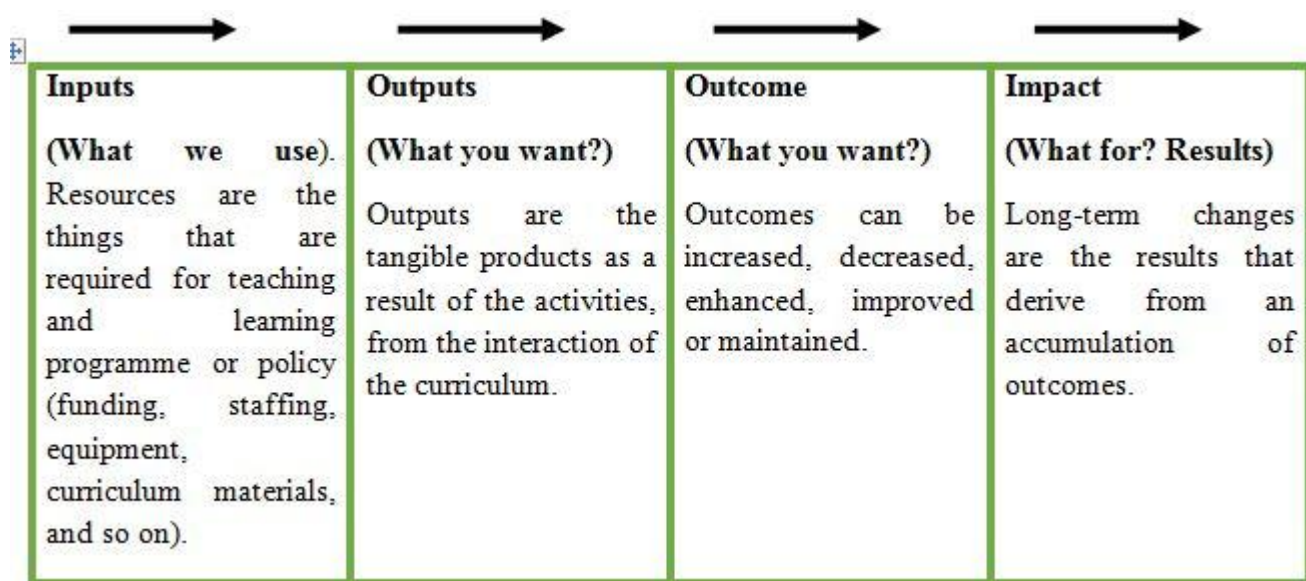
2.5. Study Site

The study sites for this study were selected secondary schools implementing the vocational curriculum.

2.6. Limitations

Cautiousness must be exercised when generalising the results of the study, as the sample for this study was limited to a few schools. Nonetheless, the researcher relied on triangulation to validate data.

2.7. Theory of Change



Adapted from Kurt Lewin’s Change Model

This study was based on the theory of change. A Theory of Change adds external factors (context), assumptions, and risks to a results chain. This theory was aligned to this study in that it provides for the changes that may occur and affect learners. The theory of change states that the systematic development of a scope of competencies and skills, at scale, across the life course of the learner requires:

Effective pedagogical strategies, such as learner centered approaches which depend largely on the enabling role of teachers and facilitators. It also requires the age appropriate learning materials to support the pedagogies.

Enabling environments, where all learners can participate and feel physically, socially and emotionally safe.

A multiple pathways approach, with a focus on academic and vocational curricular which promotes equity and inclusion.

A systems approach, which addresses the inclusion of competencies and skills in national policies and plans, curricula frameworks, coordination and partnership frameworks, budgeting and financing, human resources and capacity development, Monitoring and Evaluation and certification frameworks.

The empowerment of each individual through practical competencies and life skills so they can develop a clear and evolving understanding of themselves in the world, accompanied by increasing agency.

3. LITERATURE

OECD Learning Compass 2030 defines “transformative competencies” as the types of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need to transform society and shape the future for better lives. These have been identified as creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility. These transformative competencies can be used across a wide range of contexts and situations and they are uniquely human. All three transformative competencies can be seen as higher-level competencies that help learners navigate across a range of different situations and experiences (Grayling, 2017). In that sense, they are highly transferable: these competencies can be used throughout a lifetime. The ability to cope with uncertainty, develop new attitudes and values, and act productively and meaningfully, even when goals shift, remains, for the moment, a uniquely human skill (Laukonen, Biddel and Gallagher, 2018). As of this writing, artificial intelligence (AI) cannot compete with humans’ capacity to create new value, reconcile tensions or take responsibility.

The competency required to understand a more complex picture of the world is the “ability to manage diversity and dissonance in a creative and coping way” (Haste, 2001). By holding conflicting ideas in tension, learners can come up with new ideas to test. Through this process they can acquire a deeper understanding of opposing positions, develop arguments to support their own position, and find solutions to dilemmas and conflicts (Eberly Center, 2016).

Vocational Subjects constitute forms of knowledge, skills and values that every person should possess to help him or her deal with the physical world. They also possess a potential relationship to the world of work. Hence, these help to prepare learners for post-school employment or vocational training. (MoE-CDC, 2013).

According to Bentley (2017), creating new value refers to a person’s ability to innovate and act entrepreneurially, in a general sense, by taking informed and responsible actions. The two tier curriculum under implementation in the Zambian schools was designed to bring this to life. It is referred to as ‘theory to practice’ as it was meant to support learners to develop the ability to be critical, innovative and develop interest for entrepreneurship. The OECD Innovation Strategy 2015 articulates the importance of innovation as a driver of economic growth and social development that addresses urgent global challenges, such as demographic shifts, resource scarcity and climate change. Innovation is needed to create new jobs, new businesses, and new products and services, particularly in light of the accelerated pace of change in the 21st century.

The transformative competencies can be taught and learned in schools by incorporating them into existing curricula and pedagogy. (CDC, 2013 and MOE 1996). For example, the two tier curriculum under implementation in Zambia includes the competency of “creating new value” into such subjects as the Art and Design, Musical Education, Physical Education and Sport, Language, technology, Home Economics and Hospitality, Mathematics, Sciences, Civic Education, Social Studies, Geography among others, using an inter-disciplinary approach. Transformative competencies can also be acquired at home, in the family, and in the community, through interactions with others. Striking a balance between competing demands will rarely lead to an either/or choice or even a single solution. To thrive in the future, learners will have to be able to take into account the many interconnections and inter-relations between seemingly contradictory or incompatible ideas, logics and positions, and consider the result of their actions from both short and long-term perspectives. The competency required to understand a more complex picture of the world is the “ability to manage diversity and dissonance in a creative and coping way”. (Haste, 2001)

Sometimes, learners have conflicting ideas on what they learn and how they feel. This can be resolved if they are engaged to clear those experiences. By holding conflicting ideas in tension, learners can come up with new ideas to experiment. Through this practice they can attain a deeper understanding of opposing positions, develop arguments to support their own position, and find solutions to dilemmas and conflicts (Eberly Center, 2016). This also calls for self-discipline and respect for work.

The knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA) approach which could bring about the change envisaged when individuals apply these skills is also emphasized in the two tier curricular under implementation in Zambia. (MOE 1996 and CDC, 2013). Establishing understanding of knowledge (what one knows), competencies and skills (what one can do) and attitudes (what one believes and values) helps teachers be more purposeful not only when reinforcing life skills but also when applying such competencies to help learners navigate unique challenges at pivotal moments across individual lives and in different contexts. Embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a broad consensus on type of skills needed. In the two tier Zambian curricular, these include; FOUNDATIONAL: literacy, numeracy; TRANSFORMATIVE: can be applied in different situations such as effective communication, practical skills, creativity, innovation, collaboration, problem solving, empathy, respect for diversity and critical thinking, technology; and JOB-SPECIFIC: allows performance in a particular jobs in practice. The education policies, MOE 1996; CDC 2013 emphasize that empowerment is the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them, this is what the two tier curriculum provides; multiple pathways approach with a focus on the practical aspect.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive study design. A descriptive study establishes only associations between variables. (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The study population comprised learners, teachers and head teachers in secondary schools in Zambia. This type of population was chosen because it met the unique characteristics of participants with knowledge about vocational subjects offered in the schools. The sample comprised ten (10) Head teachers, thirty (30) Teachers, and one hundred and ten (110) learners. The total number of respondents was one hundred and fifty (150). The benchmark for inclusion of this sample was that these head teachers are responsible for the subjects taught in schools, while the teachers are equally responsible for the learners' needs by providing interaction with the curriculum (teaching) and the learners had lived experiences through the teaching and learning process. Purposive and simple random sampling procedures were used to select the sample from both the learners', teachers and head teachers. Kombo and Tromp (2006) state that the power of purposive sampling procedure lies in selecting information with rich cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issue under study. In view of this, purposive sampling was chosen for the study because the research required a sample that would provide rich information on the study at hand.

A focus group discussion guide and interview guide/schedule were used to collect data. These two sets of tools provided an opportunity for triangulating the findings, an approach which increases credibility in the findings (Patton, 2002). As such, the study findings from these two tools are presented concurrently. Qualitative data collected was analysed using thematic analysis.

In a qualitative study this sample was more than adequate and its data is valid. This is based on the principle of saturation (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003). Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) argued that there is a point of diminishing return to qualitative data in qualitative studies. For instance, as the study goes on more data does not necessarily lead to more information but saturation. Thus, between the twelfth and fifteenth interview, participants start repeating same findings.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings highlight both positive and negative situations in regard to the performance of the two tier curriculum. The unequal situation is based on variations in school conditions. While some schools are performing well, others are not despite even the best efforts of teachers and their learners. One learner describes "... a two-tiered curriculum: one for the more affluent schools, who enjoy the privileges of a relatively healthy educational environment, and the other for the least privileged, who suffer an educational environment that virtually forecloses their chance of learning." This emanated from the fact that even if a school may want to offer the best to learners, the efforts are hampered by the lack of/or inadequate resources.

The evidence cited by the teachers, school by school, proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that children are willing to learn but are at risk, as some schools do not have adequate learning and teaching resources and infrastructure needed to effectively implement the two-tier curriculum. As such learners are not being given an opportunity to learn that is equal to that offered to children from other privileged schools. The obvious cause of this inequality lies in the finding that some

'disadvantaged' schools do not have basic facilities and conditions conducive to providing them with a quality education. Without such facilities and conditions, both the teachers and the learners will be hard-put to achieve any semblance of quality education. Other findings are outlined as follows:

4.1. Developing Transformative Competencies

In response to the question on whether learners have developed transformative competencies, the study found that most learners have acquired the transformative competencies. This is seen in the way learners take responsibility in both academic and other aspects of life. One learner stated: *'I have the capability to create new things from what I learn'*; while another stated: *'I have the ability to deal with different problems that I face'*. This finding is in line with Steinberg, (2017) and Bentley, (2017). Acquiring and developing transformative competencies was observed among Zambian learners as they engaged through experiential learning and hands on activities in vocational curriculum reflecting their interests. A teacher shared the experience with the learners as: *'the methodologies I use to teach motivates each learner to actively participate in class activities'*. Another teacher said: *'I see the skills exhibited, am happy my learners can do many things'*. A head teacher revealed that: *'learners have the ability to pave or wire a house (electrical wiring and this they have learnt from a vocational subject'*.

Through a hands-on, immersive pedagogy, learners have the opportunity to engage in experiential learning that reflects their interests. The vocational curriculum/pathway responds to the statement 'from theory to practice' as it meets curricular expectations in a more meaningful and relevant manner, and allows students to transfer their knowledge and skills to real-world contexts.

4.2. Use of Transformative Skills

In response to the question on how the learners use the transformative skills, learners indicated that they sometimes make items which schools sell. One learner said: 'last year, we planted maize and part of it was sold'; while another said: *'the school arranged for us in my group to bake and sell scones. We can get a small amount each from the same money'*. A teacher shared how they make arrangement for learners to use the skills. She said: *'some of these learners do make up for clients, some are good in art works. From these activities some money is raised in the school, we raised resources from tomato sales and fish'*. This finding is similar to that shared by Bentley (2017) and Canto-Sperber and Dupuy (2001), who share on works that create value for students. The learners in Zambian secondary schools through interface with the vocational curriculum have learnt to create new value for themselves and taking responsibility in the decisions they make. Others have learnt to meet challenges of everyday life through the use of these skills and competencies. In some cases, learners have been in dilemmas that they resolve on their own with their peers as these competencies help shape their lives. In a nutshell, learners need these core transformative competencies to help shape their future.

4.3. Developing Critical Minds

This study discovered that some learners have learnt to be critical by questioning what they learn and why. One learner said: *'these days I always ask the teacher why they teach some topics and insist that we practice'*, while another said: *'I always want to ask and think about how to solve some work even if the teacher has not explained so much'*. Meanwhile, in line with this a teacher said: *'the two-tier curriculum has helped my class to sometimes work hard to discover things on their own and work as a team'*. This was confirmed by a head teacher who stated: *'learners in this school can be independent, sometimes I am amazed by the solutions to situations they encounter'*. This finding relates to the writings of Eberly Center (2016). As a curriculum expert, my interaction with learners revealed that the vocational curriculum is a blessing in disguise. I discovered through my engagement that when a curriculum is well interpreted, learners create new value by questioning what is taught, they ask questions, work as a team and find innovative solutions to tasks presented to them. In an inter-dependent environment, learners need to balance opposing or seemingly irreconcilable rationalities and demands. When this is resolved, they can be comfortable with complexity and vagueness as they attempt to find innovative solutions. This blends a sense of purpose with critical thinking and creativity. Learners who acquire the capacity to take responsibility for their actions have a strong self-respect that allows for considered reflection, working with others. They learn to collaborate with others and try to think 'outside the box'.

4.4. Funding Formulas

Establish funding adequacy formulas based on per-pupil needs in lieu of per-pupil averages. School financing policies should be based on an analysis of what it will cost to raise the bar and close the gaps in learner achievement – bringing teaching and learning conditions in all schools up to a high standard. One teacher said: *‘despite being qualified, resources to support teaching are not available and this affects the work’*. This finding is similar to Bentley, (2017), the need for economic sustainability and resilience. Funding to schools have to be improved, some schools may require ‘seed’ money to kick start activities that may create opportunities to generate income for sustaining the practical activities. The two tier curriculum emphasizes on the need to innovate and act entrepreneurially, this can become a reality if resources are provided.

4.5. Learning Conditions

One teacher stated that: *‘Conditions in these schools deprive learners of their most basic civil right: an equal opportunity to learn’*.

Well prepared teachers in schools organized for success are the most valuable resources a nation can provide for its young people. It was discovered that the selected schools are giving their learners an opportunity and supporting them with top quality teaching conditions in classrooms that meet high standards. Many of their schools deliver an education that ranges from good to world-class, and their students are achieving at high levels. But we cannot be content as long as a significant number of teachers and students are struggling in schools with unacceptable teaching and learning conditions.

4.6. Setting a Standard

One head teacher suggested the need to: *‘Collect, analyse and use better data for better decision making, and publicly report on the relationship between school conditions and learner performance’*. It is vital to set standards for school conditions that are aligned with teaching and learning standards, and use data collection systems to measure and report on the extent to which they are being met. Head Teachers should give teachers an opportunity to educate every child to high standards.

In setting the standards one teacher indicated the need for *‘Appropriate class sizes; Adequate and accessible school buildings – sound facilities with sufficient space to ensure appropriate class size and implementation of a curriculum that meets high standards’*. Another said she wished for: *‘sufficient and current books, supplies, equipment, and other educational materials for use in class and after school’*; while another hopes to see: *‘Up-to-date information technologies of all kinds, including computers with high speed Internet access, in adequate numbers in every classroom’*.

Technology makes it possible to collect better data easily. The power of this data is lost, however, when it is not used well. Under ‘No Child Left Behind’ and its requirements for documenting annual yearly progress, most schools today are “lacking in data” – the real challenge is “turning data into knowledge and knowledge into wise action.”

4.7. Responsibility and Accountability

One learner suggested to: *‘Hold officials publicly accountable for keeping the promise of educational equity’*. A basic determinant of success in realizing the educational goals – are to have strong lines and structures of accountability for quality teaching in schools organized for success. Adequate resources and rewards for performance should be tied to a reciprocal obligation to hold teachers, and school heads who are not performing adequately accountable. The teachers and heads at every level should also be judged by their commitment to correctly implement the two-tier curriculum.

One teacher indicated that: *‘It is unacceptable to hold teachers and head teachers accountable for standards that their schools are not equipped to help them meet’*. It is time to align standards with data collection systems that measure the extent to which schools and districts provide their teachers and learners with adequate opportunities to teach and learn. As funding allocations become more adequate, it also will become essential to closely monitor districts and schools to make sure they deliver results.

4.8. Summary of Implementation of two-tier Curriculum

The study found out that the implementation of the two-tier curriculum gives an opportunity to learners to acquire and develop transformational competencies. The learners stated categorically that the guidance they received from teachers helps to enhance positive behaviour in regard to acquisition of the various long life skills. However, schools need support to attain SGD 4.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

Based on the study findings, it can be concluded that vocational subjects can enhance development of learners' transformational, vocational, innovation and problem-solving skills in schools in Zambia. Learners, teachers and head teachers all acknowledge that vocational subjects can be used to enhance positive values, knowledge, skills in learners and consequently shape their behaviour positively. It can also be concluded that if all students accessed vocational subjects, there would be a general improvement in their performance; and how they would handle the social and academic challenges they may encounter through the choices they make and also the demands of everyday life.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the perceived benefits of transformational skills acquired from the vocational subjects, it is recommended that:

- A mandatory policy should be put in place to support schools to offer vocational subjects to all learners who have interest in the subjects to develop transformational competencies.
- Encourage all learners in institutions of learning to access vocational subjects to holistically enhance their development. This is because there is evidence that this has a positive effect on the development of vocational, innovative and problem solving skills.
- There should be adequate provision of materials and infrastructure in all learning institutions to support teaching of transformational skills.
- Acknowledge inadequate school conditions and marshal the political will to seek solutions. This report paints a grim picture of inequities that deny the civil rights of our most vulnerable citizens. The nation's leaders will not like what they see – but this picture will not change unless we acknowledge these conditions and summon the political will to put things right. Until we take this step, nothing else will matter. The call is upon government and other leading policymakers to convene the business and education leadership to plan ways to act on this.
- Increase number of schools offering vocational career pathways. This is because the study found out that there are less schools to attend to learners' needs such as creativity and innovation, e.g., use a wide range of idea creation techniques to create new and worthwhile ideas.

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