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Revisiting the Debate: Transforming the Secondary School Curriculum into a Blueprint for Sustainable Rural Economic Development

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Abstract. This systematic review explores the potential of transforming the rural secondary school curriculum into a strategic framework for promoting rural economic development in Zimbabwe. The purpose is to synthesize extant literature to identify effective curriculum constructs and strategies that can promote sustainable economic growth in rural spaces. The research adopted the Zimbabwean case and deployed the community-based learning lens to interrogate the transformative potential of the secondary school curriculum as a tool for the resilient and sustainable development of rural economies. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, namely Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus, and Freefullpdf.com. The inclusion criteria focused on studies that explored curriculum reforms, educational interventions focusing on rural contexts, and their impacts on rural economies. Twelve articles met the inclusion criteria. Using content analysis, data were extracted and analyzed thematically, identifying recurring patterns, themes, and best practices. The study found encouraging evidence for a paradigm shift to a context-sensitive community-based learning framework to address the unique developmental particularities of Zimbabwean rural communities, thus contributing to a more sustainable future. The paper reveals that the curriculum cannot be viewed as merely academic content but as a tool to stimulate economic diversification, reduce rural-urban disparities, and promote sustainable rural livelihoods through enhanced student participation in economic development. By exploring how the secondary school curriculum can contribute to the Zimbabwean rural economic development narrative, the study contributes to the broader conversation on rural ecological sustainability, equity, and economic viability.

Keywords: curriculum; rural communities; rural development; sustainable development

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1. Introduction

With the opening of an increasing number of rural secondary schools soon after independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government aimed to address the barriers to sustainable rural development in terms of poverty, educational injustice, access to education, inequality, and unemployment (Vergeès, 2024). This is consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on the importance of education that is relevant, inclusive, and designed to promote environmental stewardship (Wahyuni et al., 2024).

The secondary school level in Zimbabwe is where students begin to realize their potential and make career choices. The overarching aim of investing in rural secondary education was to leverage the secondary school curriculum to equip rural secondary school students with essential knowledge and skills, thus creating a capable workforce poised to drive rural economic transformation and growth (Mapuva, 2015). Another plausible explanation was to address the pressing challenges of rural community development and redress the systemic imbalances of the colonial economy. The government wanted to grow rural economies and lay a robust foundation for rural investment and development while simultaneously curbing rural-urban migration through education.

Strategic moves were taken to have an economic impact in rural spaces by identifying specific rural settlements with prospects for rural industrialization and commercial growth, dubbed growth points. Specifically, this involved the creation of the District Development Fund (DDF) in the early 1980s to develop and maintain rural infrastructure and the establishment of the Rural Electrification Agency (REA) in 2002 (Mapuva, 2015; Wekwete, 1998; World Bank Group, 2010). However, despite the logical framework, 45 years after independence, there is a growing prevalence of questions about why there is very little economic development in Zimbabwean rural areas and why these areas are still chronically under-invested and excluded from the formal economy.

The researchers argue that the rural sector in Zimbabwe grapples with a secondary school curriculum that fails to align with their economic realities. Furthermore, the curriculum as it stands has not been understood as a critical enabler to catalyze meaningful development in rural areas. This disconnect remains a barrier to rural transformation and the realization of a more sustainable and inclusive economic development agenda (Moyo, 2022). The focus of this paper is to rethink opportunities for secondary school curriculum development constructs and practices, which have disempowered Zimbabwean rural students for a long time, resulting in a lack of sustainable economic transformation.

The paper contributes to ongoing debates on the role of the secondary school curriculum and how it can be a blueprint for critical thinking, problem-solving, self-reliance, and sustainable transformation in rural spaces. A relevant secondary school curriculum for rural students implies that rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere, the focus should be on utilizing resources and opportunities already available in their communities. As such, this systematic review responds to the following research questions:

- RQ1. What secondary school curriculum constructs can shape sustainable rural economic development in Zimbabwe?

RQ2. What implementation strategies can be employed to enhance the contribution of the secondary school curriculum to sustainable rural development in Zimbabwe?

2. Community-Based Learning Framework

This review paper is couched within the community-based learning (CBL) framework. CBL is a transformative approach intricately connected to students' academic study and the real-world dynamics of local communities (Shah et al., 2023). CBL is beneficial in that it aligns educational goals with societal needs, making it a compelling framework for a holistic curriculum targeted at sustainable rural economic transformation by accommodating traditions, cultural diversity, and local resources (Adam et al., 2024). The framework empowers rural secondary school students by providing them with essential knowledge and competencies for active participation in sustainable development initiatives of their communities, enhancing their ability to address local challenges.

CBL emphasizes experiential learning, which allows students to develop a deeper connection between the curriculum materials and the developmental needs of rural communities by translating theoretical knowledge into practical solutions (Vare & Burch, 2025). Ultimately, the curriculum should serve as a paradigm for empowering students to engage positively in rural-community economic transformation initiatives (Li & Yan, 2023). The framework cultivates civic responsibility and social awareness, leading to stronger and more resilient communities (Joseph & Said, 2020).

This can be achieved by a rural community-based curriculum that inculcates values that give students the freedom to express themselves, develop and solve the inherent problems faced by rural communities (David, 2025; Joseph & Said, 2020). Students become more informed and connected to local development issues and are motivated to contribute positively to society, ultimately fostering a culture of service to their rural communities (Adam et al., 2024). This practicality not only reinforces academic concepts but also motivates and prepares students for the developmental complexities of real-life situations in their rural contexts.

For CBL initiatives to be successful, critical factors must be considered, including thorough design, planning and development, implementation, effective management, appropriate assessment, robust evaluation strategies of the curriculum, and a clear understanding of the rural community context (Bedri et al., 2017; Vare & Burch, 2025). This framework cultivates mutually beneficial relationships among the curriculum, rural secondary school students, natural environments, and resources, ultimately leading to social and economic change in rural spaces. Therefore, the framework is not just viewed as a method, but it is a catalyst and important building block for rural transformation.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Understanding the Rural Context

The term *rural* broadly encompasses locations situated away from urban centers. Rural contexts are typically characterized by peasant agricultural farming, small-scale mining, and very few economic and industrial activities (Kapur, 2018). These areas have a lower population density and distinct socio-geographical and

cultural identities and are located close to natural resources (Marongedza et al., 2022). Another attribute of rural areas is that they exhibit significant deficiencies in services and necessitate improvement, thus making these areas unattractive, especially for economic development (Hernández & Villadiego, 2022; UNDER 30', 2021). Furthermore, the concept of *rural* is intricately linked to historical and structural factors that have created circumstances and conditions of oppression, inequality, poverty, inequity, and disadvantage (Masinire et al., 2014).

Youth constitute 50% of the world's population and the majority are in these rural areas (Kapur, 2018). With Africa's rapidly growing youth population in rural areas, these youth become critical tangible human resources in development discourses, underscoring the critical need for a curriculum that empowers them to address the challenges and opportunities within their communities. This dovetails with the suggestion by Trahar et al. (2020) that rurality is a problematic variable in low-income countries, especially in the Global South, and can be a useful construct for investigating sustainable economic development patterns and life experiences.

In Zimbabwe, over 70% of the impoverished population reside in rural areas, yet this is where much of the country's natural wealth is concentrated (Mufanechiya et al., 2024). After independence, the focus on growth center policy in rural areas was aimed at attracting potential investors and existing large industries to decentralize. Wekwete (1988) says that the growth points identified in the Zimbabwean rural areas were to receive public resources to improve infrastructure through the District Development Fund (DDF), as well as health services, education facilities, access to electricity through the rural electrification program, and communication networks.

The intention was that as rural infrastructure improved, it would enable trade, increase access to markets, and lead to job creation, income generation, and improved livelihoods for the local population, ultimately stimulating sustainable economic development.

3.2 The Role of the Curriculum in Economic Development

In today's world, the curriculum stands as one of the most powerful tools in terms of its capacity to kickstart economic development (Dzvimbo et al., 2017). Curriculum in its broad sense means the configuration of the relationship among educational institutions, economic structures, and sources of livelihood (Robinson-Pant, 2023). Consequently, as highlighted by Li and Yan (2023), the curriculum functions as a compelling mechanism for transforming rural economies and communities by equipping rural secondary school students with the opportunities they need to succeed irrespective of their circumstances.

The curriculum becomes a foundation of the economy and an empowering means that enables rural secondary school students to actively contribute to the development of their communities, leading to poverty alleviation (Adam et al., 2024). According to Robinson-Pant (2023), if a curriculum is well-designed, focused, and appropriate, it can be a useful force for initiating rural development by producing individuals who are creative, competent, self-sufficient, integrated, responsible, and adaptive in all facets of rural life.

Nevertheless, the limitations in implementing the curriculum development process in Zimbabwean secondary schools, as highlighted by Young (2014), suggest that it can achieve educational goals in most contexts save for rural areas. Rural secondary school graduates often lack essential analytical skills to facilitate problem-solving or critical thinking, which is hindered by a lack of contextual factors needed to transform rural economies (Kapur, 2018). According to Young (2014), for rural secondary students to flourish presupposes access to relevant knowledge and skills and it is the school curriculum that addresses the question of what knowledge is worth the most. The current content knowledge of the Zimbabwean curriculum—which should instill the right orientations, norms, values, and attitudes—has not prepared young people adequately to participate in rural development (Robinson-Pant, 2023).

To this end, the engagement of rural secondary school students in development initiatives using their curriculum content knowledge remains uncertain, necessitating the need for innovative strategies to enhance their participation (White, 2019). Despite numerous calls to include rural students in curriculum discourses, the effectiveness of such initiatives relies largely on the capacity of policymakers and the state to implement. Sadly, rural secondary school students often find themselves forgotten despite facing numerous challenges, such as high unemployment rates, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and pervasive poverty (Muronga, 2021). Thus, the importance of addressing the curriculum question cannot be overstated if rural secondary school students are to meaningfully participate in the economic and social transformation of their communities (UNDER 30', 2021).

As a result, most young people from rural communities in Zimbabwe who are graduates of the secondary school system often experience lengthy delays in their school-to-work transition. This is because their contexts offer very little by way of opportunities and they may also not have the knowledge and skills that are productive and connect them to their contexts (Mutumbwa, 2023). The fundamental reason may be that these students have not been exposed to a curriculum that speaks to their needs, interests, and aspirations in rural contexts.

It is the absence of such a curriculum that has created a tendency among young Zimbabweans to leave the rural communities in search of contexts where their curriculum knowledge and skills apply, leaving the rural contexts impoverished. Muronga (2021) argued that it takes a village to educate a child, and these villages produce scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, innovators, academics, entrepreneurs, and many other professionals, whose knowledge and skills are enjoyed elsewhere. According to Lebeau and Oanda (2020), the sacrifice by rural communities to develop human capital is enormous, yet the return on that investment is extremely low.

The current practice of the Zimbabwean curriculum development process does not align with sustainable rural economic development (Dzvimbo et al., 2017). One critical reason raised about students' failure in bettering their rural communities is that these students face barriers related to access to appropriate education curriculum opportunities (UNDER 30', 2021). The curriculum is not connected to rural people's cultural and natural resources and does not empower

them to work and develop their context. Much of what is taught at Zimbabwean secondary schools hinges on the traditional prescriptive curriculum, which is failing to succeed in changing rural contexts and making these communities better places. It can aptly be described as “curriculum waste”. The researchers argue that the challenges of sustainable rural economic development require solutions that consider a comprehensive understanding of education curriculum policies, opportunities, weaknesses, and the strengths of the Zimbabwean rural context.

3.3 Nexus between the Secondary School Curriculum and Rural Development in Zimbabwe

Literature on rural development and education curricula underscores the pivotal role of the curriculum, implementation, and evaluation in driving economic growth and development across the African continent (Omodan et al., 2024). The curriculum articulates what students need to know and be able to do and supports teachers in understanding how to achieve these goals (Abdelbaki, 2023). Unfortunately, Zimbabwean rural communities, just like many other rural communities around the world, are historically disadvantaged contexts and face unique development challenges as they are often overlooked in education policy, governance, and practice (Mampane, 2019).

Schools exist within social contexts for a purpose and for them to be relevant, the school curricula should speak to the realities of that context (Wahyuni et al., 2024; Yaşar & Aslan, 2021). Kranthi (2017) acknowledged that a curriculum answers critical questions such as what knowledge holds the most value, what content or skills must be included in teaching, and to whom this knowledge should be imparted. Other important questions to ask are what the context is, what objectives should guide the teaching process, and which methods should be considered when making decisions about the curriculum. These questions enable curriculum planners to develop a curriculum that prepares students for participation in their context. Today’s curriculum development, according to Vreuls et al. (2021), appears to be located at the crossroads of the established principles and the present uncertainties stemming from the lack of development in rural spaces.

In Zimbabwe, following the Nziramasanga Commission of 1999, the Primary and Secondary Education Ministry reevaluated its education programs to align them with the goals set in the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimAsset), a key national development initiative (Gondo et al., 2019). However, there was also a recognition of challenges, including resource constraints, the relevance and quality of education, inconsistent educational experiences, and lack of political will (Lynch, 2023).

With these challenges, the wider Zimbabwean rural environments seemed to be neglected by education curriculum systems (Masinire et al., 2014; Wahyuni et al., 2024). The challenges are concerning at a time when Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable education for all and how it can be leveraged for development (Lebeau & Oanda, 2020; Wahyuni et al., 2024).

As a result, the current trajectory in Zimbabwe is that graduates from rural secondary education systems “learn to leave” their rural communities if they want to succeed, and this reality confronts rural communities every day (Masinire et

al., 2014; Trahar et al., 2020). Of late, the number of young Zimbabwean people in rural areas has decreased due to internal and external migration in search of opportunities that rural contexts do not provide (UNDER 30', 2021). The researchers argue that rural students must rather study what is relevant in their environment and make use of the knowledge and skills obtained for the betterment of themselves and the development of their communities than learn that which takes them away from their contexts (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024).

The assets and strengths in rural communities are the abundant land, untapped human and natural resources, and cultural and indigenous knowledge systems and heritages, which are yet to find space in rural educational development discourses (Lynch, 2023; Masinire et al., 2014; Wahyuni et al., 2024). The advantage of rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe, according to Chapman (2020), is that they are located in communities that present a distinctive setting for building the social and cultural capital fundamental for helping sustainable rural economic development. Therefore, the researchers argue that the differences in context in Zimbabwe make it practically difficult and potentially inequitable to provide a similar curriculum.

4. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was a systematic literature review using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol. The study aimed to explore the state of research in Zimbabwe secondary school education curricula and its potential to develop rural communities. To perform the systematic literature review, we defined research questions, comprehensively retrieved literature, established clear criteria, and employed quality assessment methods (Chen et al., 2024).

According to Moher et al. (2009), an initial literature search generally requires three or more databases as sources of literature. The review encompassed a diverse range of sources from Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus, and Freefullpdf.com, covering leading journals in education curricula and sustainable rural economic development. The initial search produced 453 articles retrieved from the selected databases, as shown in the PRISMA flowchart in Figure 1 below.

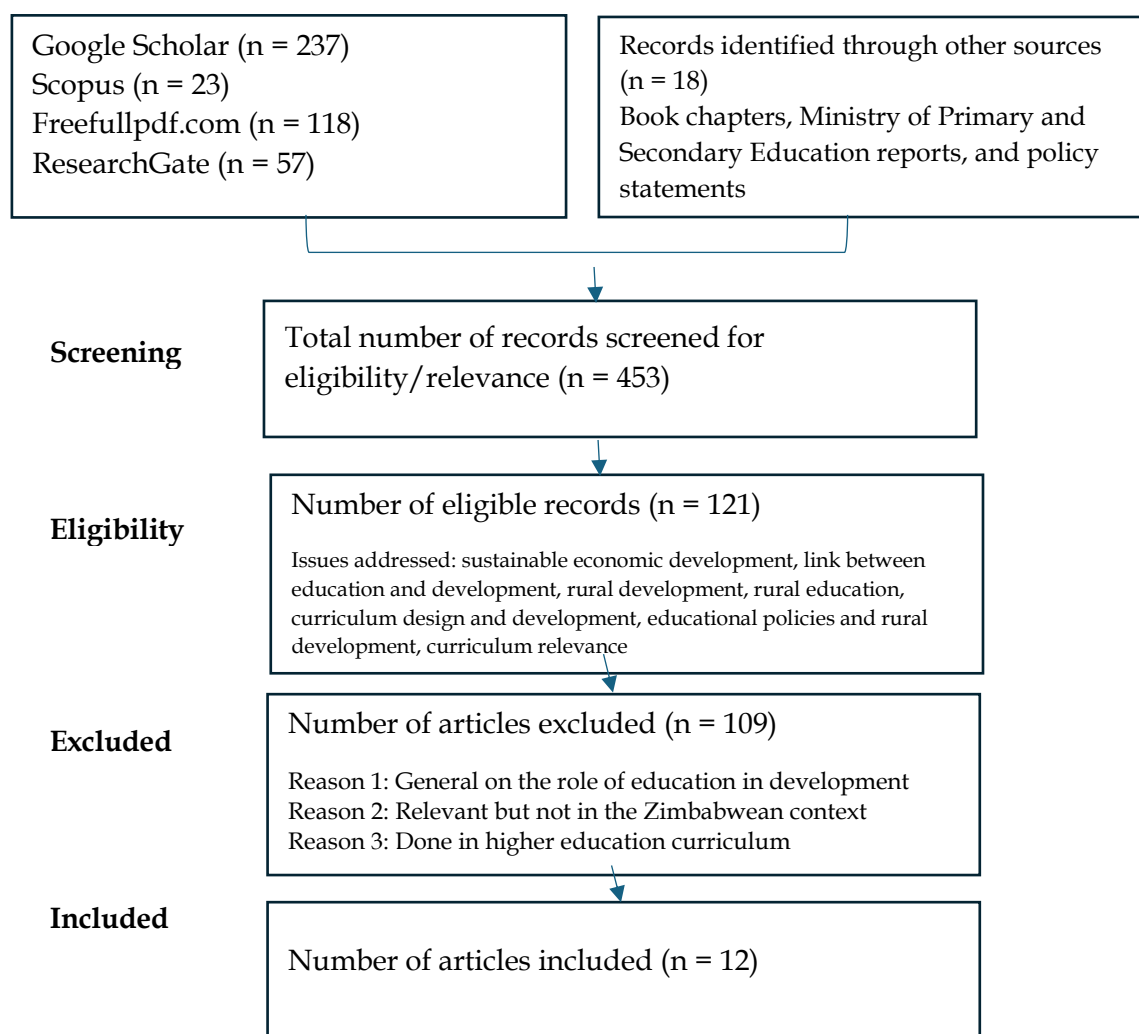


Figure 1: PRISMA for review of literature identification

4.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review was meticulously structured around specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure a rigorous analysis of relevant literature, as shown in Figure 1. Regarding search conditions, the review excluded unpublished dissertations and theses and media content from websites and online blogs. A manual screening process was performed to select articles relevant to the research questions. The first step was to exclude irrelevant literature based on title, abstract, and keywords from the 453 articles, which resulted in 121 articles selected that dealt with development issues and rural secondary school contexts. The second step involved reading the full texts and identifying literature that spoke to the research questions of the study. This resulted in 12 articles that were relevant to the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum and the rural economic development contexts. Table 1 presents a summary of these articles.

Table 1: Data summary of the 12 included studies

Author/s (year)	Paper title	Methodology	Summary of findings
1. Matutu and Magocha (2024)	The nexus between postindependence education and industrialization in Zimbabwe	Literature review – qualitative	- Interconnectedness of curriculum, education, and economy - Innovative pedagogical practices should be contextually relevant to promote industrialization - Decentralizing curricula promotes equitable economic development
2. Mutumbwa (2023)	Vocationalising the school curriculum for Black people in pre-independent Zimbabwe: A weak or firm foundation for current Voc-Tech education	Literature review	- Curriculum development should be aligned to economic conditions - The curriculum should provide practical hands-on skills - The current academic education curriculum is inadequate for the needs of rural communities
3. Muyambo-Goto et al. (2023)	Students' conceptions of 21st century education in Zimbabwe	Quantitative non-experimental correlation design	- Secondary curricula to encompass the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to prepare students for service in their respective communities - Align curricula with students' needs to thrive in their specific contexts - Prepare students to navigate the world of life and work within their socio-economic context - Before addressing global challenges, Zimbabwean secondary school curricula must prioritize local needs and align reforms to reflect students' views and needs
4. Marongedza et al. (2022)	Institutional constraints affecting secondary school student performance: A case study of rural communities in Zimbabwe	Qualitative case study – in-depth interviews, document analysis	- Education policies favor urban areas, leading to disparities - Geographic factors further fuel inequalities - Coordinated intervention needs to address rural economic development challenges
5. Moyo (2022)	The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A literature study of challenges associated with access to	Literature review – research-informed analysis	- Education curriculum not adequately prepared to meet the needs of rural secondary school students and economic realities - Rural students are disadvantaged in career choices – unskilled workers do not make an economic difference

	education in rural schools in Zimbabwe		- Disconnect between curricula and economic realities in rural contexts
6. Gory et al. (2021)	From content knowledge to competencies and exams to exit profiles: Education reform in Zimbabwe	Book chapter	- Education is not adequate in preparing rural students for the labor market - Prepare students for life and work in a largely rural agro-based economy and globalized environment - Research-informed reforms necessary - Consideration of rural economies, norms, values – what society expects and what are priorities - What students should learn; what and how teachers teach is essential - Curriculum objectives not specific to context –misalignment
7. Mukwamb o (2021)	Human development and perceptions of secondary education in rural Africa: A Zimbabwean case study	Qualitative case study	- There is a link between education curriculum, human development, and economic development - The curriculum can be converted into valuable functioning and create economic conditions of possibilities in rural contexts - Research can inform how curricula can be valued intrinsically and instrumentally for development in rural areas - Language is linked to economic development - Learning should be relevant to the socio-economic situation and provide meaningful entry into the rural economic world
8. Bhurekeni (2020)	Decolonial reflections on the Zimbabwean primary and secondary school curriculum reform journey	Literature review – qualitative	- Curricula are theoretically and pedagogically disengaged from the lifeworld of rural students - Curriculum transformation should be responsive to the human condition - Students need to acquire knowledge of what they need to know - Curriculum to consider local heritage knowledge in educational reform
9. Gondo et al. (2019)	Issues surrounding the updated secondary school curriculum in Zimbabwe	Mixed method	- The education curriculum is a tool to reform rural societies and change for the better - The curriculum should be designed for specific workplace readiness - Input of critical stakeholders needed for curricula to be relevant to meet the needs of rural communities and daily life

10. Dzvimbo et al. (2017)	The link between rural institutions and rural development: Reflections on smallholder farmers and donors in Zimbabwe	Literature review – qualitative	- Curricula and textbook content in rural secondary schools not relevant to the needs of rural areas - Investment in rural curricula provides substantial economic power, leading to rural productivity and earning capacity - Instruction in secondary schools not aligned to rural contexts - Conducting research and development would assist in meeting the developmental needs of rural contexts
11. Mapuva (2015)	Skewed rural development policies and economic malaise in Zimbabwe	Literature review – qualitative	- Decentralization enables rural communities to access relevant educational services and opportunities - A decentralized curriculum helps to curtail rural-urban migration by creating employment opportunities for the rural population - Need to unlock the rural potential historically regarded as low-potential contexts by developing industries within local environments through targeted educational enabling policies
12. Dambudzo (2015)	Curriculum issues: Teaching and learning for sustainable development in developing countries: Zimbabwe case study	Literature search – document analysis, questionnaires, interviews	- Significance of problem-solving skills, ecologically relevant curricula, project-based interactive experiences - Highlighting the importance of pedagogical and curriculum issues to promote sustainable teaching and learning - Conducting research on rural curricula and strategies for integrating education and industrial development in rural contexts - Adapting curricula to the times and specific contexts in which students live

The articles in Table 1 offered the researchers a better understanding of the secondary school education curriculum landscape and helped the researchers focus on what should be done for rural students and their communities to benefit from the secondary school curriculum. The selected literature specifically addressed either the role of the education curriculum in promoting sustainable rural development as a core theme, or explored the interconnectedness between sustainable development, the school curriculum, and other education-associated topics.

This focus underscored the centrality of these issues within the context of contemporary discourses in curriculum policies and rural development in Zimbabwe. The temporal scope of the review was delineated to encompass literature published between 2015 and 2024. This timeframe was selected in light of

the heightened focus on Zimbabwean education curriculum reforms aimed at enhancing responsiveness.

4.2 Data Analysis

The research employed a systematic literature review as its primary data collection method. The analysis and synthesis used a qualitative content-based approach focusing on the nexus among the rural contexts, secondary school curriculum, and sustainable rural development. The inductive data analysis was informed by patterns in the data without pre-conceived theories and frameworks for analysis (David, 2025; Popenoe et al., 2021). To conduct a thorough analysis, the researchers reviewed the results of each of the included studies, summarized the findings, and organized the findings into themes that spoke to the research questions. Nonetheless, the study recognizes the inherent subjectivity involved in the interpretive analysis and the potential limitations arising from the selective scope of the literature review.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section examines the findings and implications of the study, focusing on the central questions posed and the insights derived from the systematic review regarding the role of the secondary school curriculum in facilitating sustainable rural economic development in Zimbabwe. Based on the two research questions, the thematic categorization resulted in six sub-themes: content selection and sustainable rural development; curriculum instructional strategies and sustainable rural economic development; decentralizing the curriculum development process; improving the curriculum, assessment, and feedback; environmental context, language and interactive teaching and learning; and strengthening curriculum research (Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 2: Emerging themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-themes
1. Curriculum constructs and sustainable rural economic development	a) Content selection and sustainable rural economic development b) Curriculum instructional strategies and sustainable rural economic development
2. Strategies to enhance the contribution of the secondary school curriculum to sustainable rural development	a) Decentralizing the curriculum development process b) Improving the curriculum, assessment, and feedback c) Environmental context, language, and interactive teaching and learning d) Strengthening curriculum research

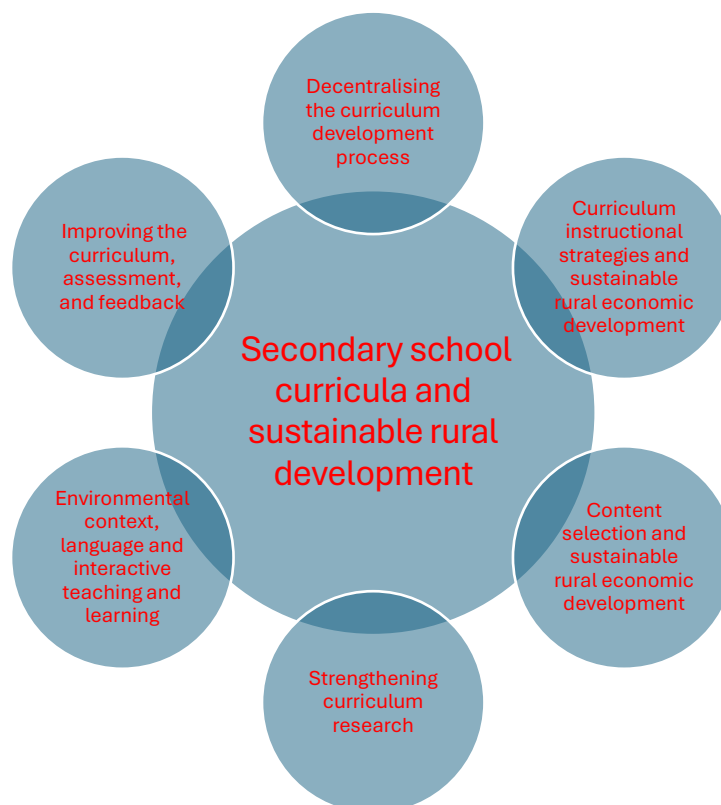


Figure 2: Secondary school curricula and sustainable rural development

5.1 Curriculum Constructs and Rural Economic Development

5.1.1 Content selection and sustainable rural economic development

A major motif in curriculum and sustainable rural development discourse is that curriculum content and the economy are intertwined (Dzvimbo et al., 2017; Matutu & Magocha, 2024; Mutumbwa, 2023; Muyambo-Goto et al., 2023). Neglecting the economic needs of the curriculum content results in many challenges, such as unemployment, economic underdevelopment, and archaism (Duran et al., 2018). The economy is an important aspect of the education curriculum content because it enables individuals to be professionals by providing skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values critical for development (Adeodun, 2024).

As such, the economic aspect of the curriculum content is not only related to the individual but also to the society (Marongedza et al., 2022). The level of societal welfare is influenced by the level of economic and social development (Dzvimbo et al., 2017). Taken together, curriculum content is based on the economic fundamentals of the society and so it is closely related to the needs of the communities. As Mapuva (2015) and Moyo (2022) observed, the curriculum content must be of direct relevance and connected to the learner's social, cultural, environmental, and economic context and speak to promoting the sustainable utilization of local natural resources.

The observation suggests that curriculum planners must desist from the standard discourses by acknowledging inequalities and focusing on the democratic

participation of all stakeholders through the construction of knowledge and skills in local livelihood contexts (Adeodun, 2024; Gondo et al., 2019). As pointed out by Pukkinen et al. (2024), curriculum development calls for a continuous dialogic negotiation between the selection of content worth knowing and public validation of such knowledge. To this end, curricula arising from local contexts and resources provide sustainable employment opportunities in rural contexts and allow rural youth to contribute to their economies and communities (Mapuva, 2015).

In the rural context, the curriculum should focus on the local environment and its networks and models to become contextually relevant (Dambudzo, 2015; Dzvimbo et al., 2017; Gory et al., 2021). Such a curriculum would enable rural secondary school learners to see themselves and their local contexts as critical building blocks in sustainable economic development.

5.1.2 Curriculum instructional strategies and sustainable rural economic development

The implementation of the curriculum is strongly related to the economic conditions of a country, as the curriculum aims to expand learners' capabilities and strengthen communities (Duran et al., 2018; Mutumbwa, 2023). In this respect, teachers need to adopt strategies and a language that develop self-directed activities among learners that are meaningful in rural contexts (Dzvimbo et al., 2017). According to Pukkinen et al. (2024), such an approach would enable rural youth to create and navigate new opportunities by witnessing the potential in their local surroundings, being productive, and subsequently contributing to the sustainable economic development of their community.

The teacher is the mediator between school knowledge and community economic needs and this mediation can be articulated with the pedagogical practices that speak to the realities of the local environment (Hernández & Villadiego, 2022; Manokore & Chiwiye, 2021). The marginalization of rural secondary school students from participation in rural economic spaces could be attributed to a lack of innovative teaching strategies, integrated indigenous knowledge systems, including local languages, and culturally relevant examples tailored for rural settings (David, 2025; Dzvimbo et al., 2017). According to this argument, secondary school teachers need to identify teaching strategies that become tools to drive the impactful development in rural areas (Duran et al., 2018).

Teaching in rural areas should be a special skill that requires teachers to have a clear appreciation of the rural context and devise teaching strategies that give secondary school students knowledge and skills to implement environment-related development and economically viable projects (Omodan et al., 2024). Instructional strategies must evolve beyond the traditional methods to embrace experiential community-based models that include environmental experiments, real rural-context problem-solving activities, and project-based learning. This will allow students to apply theoretical concepts in their local contexts (Dambudzo, 2015; Manokore & Chiwiye, 2021; Mutumbwa, 2023).

5.2 Strategies to Enhance Curriculum Contribution to Sustainable Rural Development

5.2.1 *Decentralizing the curriculum development process*

Studies on the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum reveal that the center-periphery approach to curriculum planning was adopted, where curriculum decisions are made by Curriculum Development and Technical Services (CDTS), an arm of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Chinyani, 2013). Furthermore, the pilot testing of the curriculum occurred within a mere 50-kilometer radius of the capital city, Harare, systematically excluding rural contexts.

This exclusion raises critical concerns about the relevance and effectiveness of the implemented curriculum in providing worthwhile knowledge, skills, and values, especially for rural students and communities (Mapuva, 2015; Marongedza et al., 2022). The challenge has been for curriculum developers to reform the secondary school curriculum practices, to give more curriculum control to provinces and districts for them to adequately prepare rural secondary school students to transform their circumstances and economic contexts (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024).

To maximize the extraction of the potential of rural students, a decentralized curriculum for rural development and CBL can be meaningful as it resonates with learners from different rural backgrounds and allows communities to define their educational objectives (Lynch, 2023; Mapuva, 2015; Wahyuni et al., 2024). A decentralized curriculum would be tailor-made to the unique developmental needs and interests of communities, allowing the incorporation of locally relevant content in the curriculum (Matutu & Magocha, 2024; Mukwambo, 2021; Mthombeni, 2024).

According to du Plessis (2020), decentralization is part of the democratization of the curriculum by allowing greater participation by the broader rural communities. With specific education policy directives in place to consider each context, the potential is there to establish a responsive curriculum that empowers rural students to serve their communities without necessarily sacrificing the quality of education (Marongedza et al., 2022).

Furthermore, findings suggest that a place-based curriculum consistent with rural development has to be flexible and change-ready, open-minded, enquiring, and more about realities than certainty in design, modes of transaction, and outcome (Bhurekeni, 2020; Hays & Reinders, 2020; Wahyuni et al., 2024). The success of this participatory model rests on the invitation of a wide range of participants, such as students, parents, and local communities, to participate in secondary school curriculum decision-making processes (Gondo et al., 2019; Karseth & Wahlström, 2022).

The researchers argue that responsive local curriculum development practices incorporate insights about innovative developments into the design and organization of the curriculum and have the potential to emancipate rural communities from poverty and underdevelopment (Vreuls et al., 2021). The macro-level inflexible one-fits-all model of curriculum development in Zimbabwe

struggles to drive this sustainable rural economic development agenda (Moyo, 2022).

5.2.2 Improving the curriculum, assessment, and feedback

Improving the secondary school curriculum in Zimbabwe has been the government's priority since independence (Gondo et al., 2019). The selected studies reveal that the colonial curriculum in Zimbabwe that served the education system was characterized by a two-year program for junior secondary school and the Education Amendment Act (No 2 of 2006), which limited educational opportunities for Black Zimbabweans (Adeodun, 2024; Bhurekeni, 2020). The rural schools typically provided elementary skills in moral education, hygiene, and religious education, and other subjects offered were determined by local agricultural activities (Mutumbwa, 2023).

Although the colonial curriculum was embedded in racial discrimination and restricted mobility, it attempted to reflect the socio-economic realities of the Black Zimbabweans and was couched on pragmatism and experiential learning in real-life contexts (Dzvimbo et al., 2017; Mutumbwa, 2023). After an assessment of the needs of the population, and motivated by the desire to improve the situation, after independence in 1980, the government dismantled the colonial two-tier education system but largely retained some elements of the colonial curriculum (Matutu & Magocha, 2024). Notwithstanding, while the unitary curriculum addressed some inequalities, it failed to adequately consider the diverse contexts and their needs, particularly of the rural population.

Another post-independence effort to improve the Zimbabwean education system came following the assessment and feedback from the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training in 1999, culminating in the 2015–2022 Curriculum Framework (Gondo et al., 2019). The framework aimed to revamp the education system to align it with the country's evolving national development aspirations enshrined in the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZimAsset) blueprint, prioritizing employment and entrepreneurship skills (Mapuva, 2017).

The Curriculum Framework (2015–2022) was structured to provide a broad-based education system. This system covered core subjects, such as mathematics, ICT, pure sciences, sexuality, heritage studies, HIV and AIDS, entrepreneurship skills, and many others, and integrated these with the general education learning areas and the pathway disciplines.

The researchers noted the efforts to strengthen the curriculum and integrate practical skills and connect it with the needs of the young people who largely face unemployment challenges. However, the researchers also observed the dominance of globalized curricula and question their relatability to sustainable education at the local rural level. In concurrence with Yazdi (2013) and Wahyuni et al. (2024), the researchers argue in favor of a place-based curriculum planning model that has the potential to strengthen local indigenous cultures, local communities, and their economies.

In 2023, Zimbabwe approved the Heritage-Based Education 2024–2030 Curriculum Framework, rooted in local environments and cultures and set to

replace the 2015–2022 framework as part of curricular improvement (Zimsake, 2024). The new curriculum aims to produce skilled citizens critical for national development, starting from local communities (Zimsake, 2024). It incorporates heritage as the foundational element for learning, while integrating technology, spanning from Early Childhood Education (ECD) to upper secondary education (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024). Key learning pathways include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); visual and performing arts; humanities, especially the history of Zimbabwe; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); and commercials. At the secondary school level, students choose at least three electives from the following categories: the sciences, languages, humanities, commercials, vocational subjects, and the arts (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024).

However, curriculum circumstances remain unchanged for rural students, and it is becoming increasingly unsuited to rural communities, despite the Zimbabwean government's efforts for inclusive participation and aspirations for all students. Efforts to improve the curriculum have been ongoing. However, the Zimbabwe curriculum cycle of “teaching everyone the same” approach, embodied in the colonial and Curriculum Framework 2015–2022 has perpetuated inequalities by neglecting the needs of diverse contexts, especially rural contexts (Adeodun, 2024; Bhurekeni, 2020; Mapuva, 2015).

The lack of the curriculum in terms of planned knowledge and skills for rural contexts and feedback from rural stakeholders has led to a disconnect between the secondary school curriculum and real-life applications in these settings (Gondo et al., 2019; Moyo, 2022). The researchers agree with Wahyuni et al. (2024) in that this curriculum does not prepare the majority of rural students for life in the environment in which they live, causing them to miss opportunities for promoting sustainable transformation of their rural spaces. The realization has been that improving access to a relevant curriculum does not only benefit the students but has the potential to transform entire communities.

5.2.3 Environmental context, language, and interactive teaching and learning

In rural communities, people are intricately connected to their environment (Dzvimbo et al., 2017; Mapuva, 2015). However, this connection has rarely been integrated into formal education systems, which often rely on standardized curricula disconnected from the local context (David, 2025; Marongedza et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2024). Doyan (2023) and Adam et al. (2024) agreed that curricula that incorporate local knowledge not only improve students' understanding of sustainability issues but also strengthen their connection to their community and environment.

Within the context of interactive teaching and learning, one area that has been widely discussed in literature is the language used in education. Language politics has seen the marginalization of African languages in secondary schools that are mostly spoken in rural areas (Mthombeni, 2024; Mukwambo, 2021). The lack of recognition of these languages in academic discourses has repercussions for students who speak them (Batisai et al., 2022). Consequently, many rural students who use indigenous African languages encounter difficulties in their learning experiences in secondary school. Zimbabwe has 16 indigenous languages spoken

across the country. Yet, the Education Amendment Act (2006) limits the use of indigenous languages to prior secondary school, with English becoming the medium of instruction from Form 1 upwards.

Using English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools serves as a source of participation exclusion (Mthombeni, 2024; Mukwambo, 2021). This disadvantage transpires as students may experience serious difficulties in understanding and expressing ideas and accessing concepts. They may fail to locate these ideas in their rural context. The researchers argue that most of the rural students may be labeled failures as a result, yet they are largely English language failures.

The imperative is to shift the language of instruction toward multilingualism, and rethinking the integration of students in development discourses informed by their languages may be a service to rural students (Matutu & Magocha, 2024; Mthombeni, 2024). Considering this, the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and local languages into the secondary school curriculum not only enriches students' educational experiences but also helps unlock the rural potential. A curriculum that values local traditions, practices, and languages contributes to a stronger sense of self among students, encouraging them to take pride in their heritage, while fostering respect for diversity, tenets critical to development (Vare & Burch, 2025). The language of instruction is key to opening the doors to access economic and development opportunities (Mukwambo, 2021).

Zimbabwean curriculum developers, therefore, should pay attention to the language used in education as an integral part of sustainable transformation efforts as it is one variable in barriers to rural growth and development. In addition, integrating local resources into curriculum content and teaching-learning strategies makes students apply sustainable practices as these are tied to their daily lives and local culture (David, 2025). As argued by Olsen et al. (2020), incorporating aspects of local resources into curriculum design and pedagogical strategies offers a way to bridge this gap, ensuring that education for sustainability is both forward-looking and grounded in the cultural and environmental realities of rural communities.

5.2.4 Strengthening curriculum research

Curriculum research data are useful for compiling standards used in developing appropriate curricular goals that are related to students learning relevant content (Burrill et al., 2015). It emerged from the literature reviewed that curriculum research is a critical process in providing data on curriculum performance. The reason is explained by Gory et al. (2021), Mukwambo (2021), and Liu (2024), who asserted that research provides real-time data critical in developing sound school curriculum development and management frameworks that respond to rural ecologies. Consequently, strengthening the curriculum research focusing on the purpose of rural education, the curriculum content to be taught, and the expected knowledge and skills outcomes for diverse situations and students may positively impact rural contexts (Mapuva, 2015; Matutu & Magocha, 2024).

Additionally, exploring various research approaches to understand the relationships among rural society, knowledge, pedagogy, learning, and assessment has become critical for comprehensively addressing the curriculum

question for rural contexts (Karseth & Wahlström, 2022). Without appropriate research on the impact of the current curriculum on rural spaces, rural students will continue to struggle for visibility in developing their contexts as curriculum developers consider national interests with regard to content selection and other learning activities (Vreuls et al., 2021). As argued by Lawton (1975), a curriculum is a selection from culture. As such, Manokore and Chiwiye (2021) and Muyambo-Goto et al. (2023) reasoned that research should establish the relevance of the knowledge and skills needed by rural culture for sustainable economic growth and transformation.

6. Implications For Rural Students and Communities

Zimbabwe, just like most countries, has long realized that curricula drive the achievement of meaningful development and socio-economic growth (Abdelbaki, 2023). In addition, the sustainable development of any given nation is strongly tied to developed human capital, which is the driving force of all other resources (Matutu & Magocha, 2024; Robinson, 2013). Zimbabwean rural contexts face a myriad of development challenges and hurdles that they need to overcome which when put together point to the structure of the curriculum and the processes that do not speak to their realities.

Zimbabwe's rural growth and transformation have been affected by various factors, which have had a negative impact on development. These factors include a deficiency of information, lack of investment in all facets, poor infrastructure, poor curriculum, vexing socio-economic barriers, lack of investment, remote geographic locations, and endemic poverty (Bhurekeni, 2020). These realities faced by Zimbabwean secondary school students in rural areas cannot always be addressed by a centralized curriculum planning process and education policies made elsewhere and for everyone. A local, community-based curriculum framework is needed that leverages that curriculum knowledge to speak to realities on the ground (Rautenbach et al., 2023).

Emerging from the literature is a disconnect between curriculum content and the realities of the rural economic context (Dzvimbo et al., 2017; Omodan et al., 2024). There is a growing need to make rural students learn and acquire relevant knowledge and skills needed for life and work in their rural contexts (Masinire et al., 2014). The researchers revisited the debate that curriculum development functions must be decentralized so that planning, design and refinement, and pedagogical practices would facilitate the attainment of knowledge and skills, particularly of a vocational nature, that speak to the local rural contexts of students (Bedri et al., 2017; Mutumbwa, 2023).

Government, through Curriculum Development and Technical Services (CDTS), can establish miniature curriculum development centers in rural communities supported by research to oversee curriculum development with a contextual location bias. By reforming the curriculum development processes, Zimbabwe would present an opportunity for rural secondary schools to radically change their practices and respond to developmental solutions of their unique rural milieu. The contention is that curriculum developers, students, and local communities work toward shared sense-making and redistribution of power in the process of curriculum development with a focus on bridging the potential top-

down and bottom-up divide to create economic transformational solutions for rural communities.

7. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum system remains distant in achieving a truly equitable education for rural contexts. The study highlights the importance of engaging rural students in sustainable economic development through the curriculum, despite challenges posed by a one-size-fits-all secondary school framework. The identified challenges call for curriculum reforms that transform and deepen both curriculum content and teaching strategies by integrating aspects of the local environment, with research thus promoting educational relevance in rural spaces.

By leveraging the curriculum, rural schools can create dynamic classroom environments and learning opportunities. This can be achieved by decentralizing curriculum development to local environments, using local languages, and conducting research on curriculum reforms to deliver sustainable and meaningful economic development to historically disadvantaged Zimbabwean rural areas. These insights deepen our understanding of how the current curriculum development practices in Zimbabwe do not contribute to sustainable rural economic development.

The study underscores the need to thoroughly understand the secondary school curriculum issues, demonstrating new ways of providing education and fresh thinking on how rural communities could benefit from the secondary school curriculum. The secondary school curriculum possesses immense potential to drive development in Zimbabwean rural spaces by providing rural students with meaningful curriculum experiences. The researchers argue for a balanced, context-sensitive peripheral and grassroots approach to curriculum development that supports problematic rural development challenges without necessarily neglecting the broader educational and economic contexts. There is still a lot to do for the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum to speak to the needs of rural students and their economic contexts.

8. Recommendations

- Curriculum developers need to develop curricula focused on agroecology, entrepreneurship, sustainable utilization of local resources, and environmental stewardship to enhance secondary school students' participation in sustainable rural development.
- The curriculum should make provision for cross-curricular projects that bring together various subjects to address real-world problems in the local rural contexts.

9. Declaration of Interest

The authors report no competing interests to declare.

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