

Examination Mafiarisation, and the contradictions of Performativity in Zimbabwe: A Quest for Rebalancing Pedagogy

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Abstract

This theoretical paper taps into Ball's view of the terrors of performativity in order to critique examination mafiarisation in Zimbabwe. Of late, the education system in this country has experienced a number of trajectories, characterised by examination leaks, cheating, and a decline in confidence in Zimbabwean education. I critique examination mafiarisation, using Ball's perspective, and in so doing, I attempt to answer two questions: What are the causes of examination mafiarisation? What can be done to mitigate cheating in examinations? The argument of the paper is that the curriculum faces ambivalence, because of an overemphasis on performativity. Consequently, teachers, learners, and parents have resorted to immoral behaviour to ensure performativity is enacted. I also argue for a need to embrace a rebalancing of pedagogy, which is characterised by social justice education, promotion of morality, comprehensive education, and task-based assessment, to regain credibility for what was once perceived to be a thriving educational system.

Key words: Examination Mafiarisation; Morality; Terrors of performativity; Rebalancing Pedagogy; Task Based Assessment.

Introduction

Over the past decade, various studies have indicated that leaking examination papers is a common phenomenon in Zimbabwe, and other countries, such as Zambia and Nigeria (Chaminuka and Ndudzo 2014; Joktham 2013; Maheka 2015; Mashanyare and Chinamasa 2014; Musarurwa and Chimhenga 2011; Sigauke 2004). According to these research studies, the Zimbabwe Examination Council (ZIMSEC) has been the main culprit in relation to leakage of examination papers – I consider this to be a minimalistic approach to the problem of examination cheating. Given this context, this paper finds space in the ongoing examination cheating by interrogating and expanding Ball's (2003) perspective of the terrors of performativity. In addition, it contributes to the exam

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cheating narratives by going further, and arguing that examination cheating involves not only ZIMSEC, but also teachers, learners, parents, principals and other people, and sometimes in a more sophisticated manner than ZIMSEC. I report that parents, learners, teachers and headmasters overemphasise performativity at the expense of other essential elements of education; thus, the need by educational stakeholders to keep up with performance expectations. I problematise an examination system I term mafiarisation, which has established a blueprint for others to follow (Levin and Fullan 2008, p. 173), in a quest to remain performance relevant, even if it means using unorthodox means to achieve this. Due to demands for performativity, dominant goalposts have emerged in modern schooling, which delimit the role of education in relation to outcomes (Hennessy and McNamara 2013). I should not be misunderstood: I don't negate the importance of performance, but overemphasis on performativity leads to certain trajectories in education. I agree with the observation by Burnard and White (2008, p. 668), that performativity has "transformed negatively the culture of educational institutions, the social relations of learning and teaching, and academic identities". Given this context, I leverage problematisation of the curriculum, particularly examination mafiarisation, which I base on the observation of and exhortation by Reeder (2005, p. 247), that the present examination arrangement "calls on our ability to question critically not only our own educational experiences but also to question current education practices, constraints, and limitations", with the aim of proposing sustainable solutions. The paper, thus, engages in a struggle to find solutions for examination mafiarisation. I highlight the theoretical framing of the study, which is Ball's (2003) notion of the terrors of performativity.

Theoretical Framing: Terrors of Performativity

I chose this theory because it locates teachers and their work in the midst of policy, politics, and passion, in contrast with dominant techno-rational discourses of teaching, which reduces teaching to matters of technical efficiency (Clarke 2013, p. 229), and ignores other important elements of education. Ball (2003, p. 216) explains this theory as follows:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on regards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual

subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgment.”

As a result, regarding the need for performativity, Ball (2003, p. 220) argues that the soul of the teacher becomes “ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent”. In this regard, teachers seek ways in which performance can be achieved, so that parents, headmasters, and others are content with their performance. Ball (2003) explains the terrors of performativity by arguing that the teacher’s soul suffers. I am of the view that Ball was limited in his vision, because the terrors of performativity not only affect teachers, but also educationally significant others, such as parents, headmasters and learners. The quest for performativity by educationally significant others has made education, in particular ZIMSEC, a captured institution, as a result of its quest for performativity.

Examination Mafiarisation

In this section, I define what I mean by examination mafiarisation. This is a new term I introduce in curriculum or examination narratives. It refers to the enacting of processes and structures that enable some learners and teachers to gain access to examinations before its schedule date. The World Bank Group (2001, p. 1) defines it as “a deliberate act of wrongdoing, contrary to official examination rules, and is designed to place a candidate at an unfair advantage or disadvantage”. The process is well oiled and involves teachers, ZIMSEC officials, parents, school principals, item writers who coordinate to ensure that the examination system is cheated. Examination mafiarisation occurs when a few are privy to examination material, and are thought to be best teachers and good spotters of examinations. The culprits are often invited to schools to facilitate workshops on examinations, and schools pay them to offer examination consultation services. These teachers are characterised by their refusal to accept promotion or transfer.

I problematise examination mafiarisation, because education becomes being artificially obsessed with defined performance indicators (Meng 2009), as a result of cheating and capturing the exam

system. It destroys the moral fibre of teachers, captures them, and relegates the role of the teacher to mere performance. In the process, professional standards of educators [are lowed], there is cultivation of unscientific ways of knowing, consequently it diminishes the scientific competence of educational professionals” (Meng 2009). Ball (2003, p. 225) calls it “fabrications – inauthentic facades which are investment[s] in plasticity”. Teachers themselves “become the mechanism for legitimising immorality, marketisation of the skills and codification of their work practices” (Hill 2004, p. 512). In short, examination mafiarisation lowers the professional standards of educators, as they limit their aim to the visible and measurable goals captured by the performance criteria (Bourke and Ryan, 2013), hence, it must be challenged from within the academic space.

Chronicling Examination Mafiarisation in Zimbabwe

In this section, I describe various incidents, which, I believe, represents examination mafiarisation. I do so to expose and unmute the need for an academic engagement, and to eliminate the problem of examination mafiarisation in Zimbabwe. While Ball (2003) noted the terrors of performativity, one thing he did not foresee was that, in quest for performativity, new, specialised systems emerge to capture the examination system. In this regard, I agree with Sigauke (2004), that mafiarisation is a disgrace, not only with regard to the behaviour of the culprits, but because it also reflects similar levels of immorality in wider society. Examination mafiarisation captures the system, and controls the field (Ball, 2003). In an attempt to control the field performativity and relevance, cheating in examinations becomes a common feature.

In 2012, *New Zimbabwe* reported that “ZIMSEC withdraws 13 leaked examination papers”. Sijaukwe school in Bubi district was suspected to be part of the cheating scam. The replacement of examination cost about USD 850 000. Tshuma (2014) reports that headmasters at Jeremoto High School and Ntute Primary School were caught engaging in examination malpractices. In 2017, English, science and mathematics examinations were leaked; ZIMSEC denied being involved and argued that no leaks had occurred (Ngorima, 2017). To prevent leaks of exam papers, attempts have been made to introduce technology; ZIMSEC is cited by *Newsday* (Mbendera 2017):

Our total solution comprises of a tamper-proof Exam Box where examination papers are packaged, a compact sensor enabled GPS tracker, which is placed in the box, an electronic seal, which locks the box, and a smart key, which is used to lock and unlock the electronic seal.”

Despite using technology, English, science and mathematics examination papers leaked in 2017. Technology failed, because the focus was still on examinations in their printed state. The assumption was that ZIMSEC was responsible for the leaks, however, I am of the view that examination mafiarisation extends beyond ZIMSEC, and includes learners and parents. For example, at Regina Mundi, it is alleged that one learner sold examination papers for 3 UDS; and examination questions were circulated through WhatsApp (Chronicle, 2018). In some cases, the papers were hand written. This event means that the availability of social media and the internet has increased the chances of examination mafiarisation taking place.

Drawing my experience as a teacher, I know headmasters, parents and learners have the tendency of hunting down item writers and examiners, who are approached to coach learners for the examination in exchange for money. Coaching may not be a bad idea, but what I discovered is that most of the item writers and examiners have a good idea of what the examination will look like. Consequently, by students and headmasters gaining confidence in such people there is probability of enacting mafia tendencies. Usually, a teacher who is not an examiner, and who is excluded from mafia system, is seen by students, parents and headmasters as useless and irrelevant. Consequently, teachers who are not examiners endeavour to become part of the examiner system, so that their performance could also improve. This desire to participate causes the examination mafia system to grow, and presents serious curriculum trajectories in Zimbabwe. At the end of the day, a narrow focus on performativity only, as measured by outcomes, rewards undeserving teachers and deprives and ridicules hard working teachers.

Causes of Examination Mafiarisation

In this section, I analyse the possible causes of examination mafiarisation in Zimbabwe. In short, the unremitting focus on standards, rubrics and measurement means that, in many cases, the deeper

problems of schooling go unattended (Eisner, 2004). The following section covers some of the causes of examination mafiarisation.

Reward-associated performance

In 2014, incentives were abolished in the education system, because they were thought of as being divisive, evil and unsustainable (Banda, 2011). However, today, some schools still offer incentives to educators, under the pretext of promoting performativity. One way of incentivising teachers is rewarding teachers based on the performance of learners on summative evaluation at the Ordinary and Advanced Levels. The implementation of incentives is seen as an “expression of a new culture of competitive performativity, which involves a combination of devolution, targets and incentives, to bring about new forms of sociality and new institutional forms” (Ball, 2003, p. 219). While rewarding educators is applauded, this gesture has not been problematised in light of examination mafiarisation. In an attempt to gain rewards, some teachers resort to immoral ways of ensuring they receive the rewards at stake. I am not against teachers getting incentives, but when incentives are prioritised and open a route for examination mafiarisation, instead of professionalism and ethics, then there is a need to problematise the reward system. The quest for performativity, informed with the need for incentives, can lead to “corrosion of character” (Sennett 1998). The quest for incentives “through performativity does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are” (Ball, 2003, p. 215). This change may include cheating or joining the examination mafia as a way to remain relevant to receive incentives. Unfortunately, educational stakeholders send congratulatory messages (Meng, 2009) to educators they perceive as performing well, and send stern warnings to non-performing teachers, thereby covertly enhancing examination mafiarisation.

Accommodation and resistance to change

Because of the terrors of performativity, there is always resistance to change, which is often equated with upsetting the performativity status quo. Teachers involved in examination mafiarisation are usually resistant to change, because the envisaged change can affect performance. Often, seemingly well-performing teachers do not seek promotion, despite having the necessary qualifications, or transfer from one school to another. Such resistance should be treated with suspicion. Resistance may be linked to examination mafiarisation, and involves the

“possibility of reworking and unsettling forces that attempt to derail performativity” (Butler, 1997, p. 105), especially if change is perceived to be associated with negative consequences, as was the case with task-based assessment.

Cognisant of the existence of mafias in examination, former minister, Dr Lazarus Dokora in 2016, introduced task-based assessment as a neutralising mechanism to combat cheating and over-reliance on summative examination. However, his innovation, noble as it may have been, was resisted by teachers, learners and other stakeholders, because it was considered to cause a disturbance to the teaching and learning process, to be unattainable and unrealistic in relation to the curriculum. Consequently, despite the dilemmas related to the new curriculum, I am of the view that accommodation resistance, premised with mafiarisation of examinations, could be a factor that contributes to the removal of task-based assessment in schools. Task-based assessment is, arguably, not compatible with the mafia system, since new examiners are brought into picture complicating the well-oiled examination cheating strategies. There is no adequate justification for the suspicions about task-based assessment; the only reason for opposition is that, from the terrors of performativity lens, it makes sense to remove it. Consequently, its removal implies that there will be continued good performance by the teachers, learners, parents and significant others, who have captured the examination system in Zimbabwe.

Ranking schools

Zimbabwe, in recent times, has moved towards ranking performance of schools based on summative evaluation. This ranking system offers major benefit to parents, who are attracted to schools that perform well. The ranking system is used as justification by headmasters why parents should send children to their schools. While, at face value, and using an uncritical approach, it may be a valid argument, I am of the view that ranking schools is part of the cause of mafiarisation of examination. Ranking aids, the school in its “fabrication” of identity – a construction of a particular version of the organisation; its “effective” self (Ball, 2004). Given the influence of parents and other stakeholders in the need for performativity, various challenges have arisen, but not adequately problematised within the academic space. Parents, I argue, have played a role in creating the problem of the examination mafiarisation. I agree with Bernstein (2000) that, under a regime of performativity, identity depends on the facility for projecting discursive organisation or

practices, themselves driven by external contingencies. I problematise ranking of schools, because, as proposed by Clarke (2002), while ranking is a popular method for comparing the relative quality of schools, there is much confusion and debate over which indicators to use and how to present the information in ranked format. In addition, Webster (1986) argues that quality rankings are not an effective device for comparing quality. Ranking does not take cognisance of other factors that affect performativity, such as the unavailability of teachers and resources at some schools. So, in an attempt to be ranked as one of the best schools, there is a tendency to consider cheating, and joining the examination mafia system.

Mitigation of Examination Mafiarisation: Towards Rebalancing Pedagogy

In light of the above trajectories, in this section I focus on suggesting solutions that can save the souls of teachers, parents, learners and the captured examination system from the mafia systems. Zimbabwean education should rebalance pedagogy to redress examination mafiarisation that is infused by a desire for performativity. The idea of “rebalancing pedagogy offers a way for teachers to navigate and be supported through the opposing demands of performativity and creativity” (Burnard and White, 2008, p. 667). In addition, through this pedagogy, there is an attempt to “balance” requirements to meet benchmarks. It is a pedagogy that reasserts ownership of education and develops future learning and teaching practices that embrace, value and foster creativity (Burnard and White 2008). This pedagogy does not imply that teachers must negate performativity, but it argues that performativity should not be the sole role of the teachers. Instead, teachers should pursue a fully democratic vision of self, which includes self-awareness and personal engagement, global engagement, which includes social awareness and social engagement, universal, content awareness and concept engagement, and transformative (Belcastro, 2015; Onyalla, 2018). I argue this way, because the role of the teacher transcends a technicist approach to teaching and learning. It is particularly important to promote critical thinking, autonomy and reflexivity (Hennessy and McNamara 2013). This pedagogy offers a way for teachers to navigate, and be supported through, the opposing demands of performativity and creativity (Burnard and White, 2008; Ortiz, 2018). Rebalancing pedagogy will enable learners to engage critically in the human conversation and to seek out the problems that limit and extend our potential as individuals and a nation (Belcastro, 2015; Calderon Berumen, 2019).

To rebalance pedagogy to succeed in transforming education in Zimbabwe, I propose engaging in a quest for social justice and comprehensive education, promoting morality and re-professionalisation of teachers. Through these activities, I hope it will be possible to recover in some teachers, learners, and parents' vocational values, once cherished, but now displaced by performativity (Meng, 2009).

Comprehensive education approach

Rebalancing pedagogy's quest for a holistic approach to curriculum is opposed to singling out one aspect of schooling, such as performativity. The latter approach contradicts the objectives and aims of the curriculum in Zimbabwe that attempt to produce learners who appreciate the value of Ubuntu, and meet the cognitive, social and spiritual dimensions (Ministry of Primary and Secondary education 2014). The foregoing observation is buttressed by Brown (2004, p. 268), who notes that "effective education is education that create[s] effective classroom management which utilises essential research-based pedagogical processes that respond appropriately to the emotional, social, ethnic, cultural and cognitive needs of students", as opposed to merely focusing on performance. To buttress my observation, Burton (2008) believes that schools are generally seen as mechanisms for developing and reinforcing positive citizens with pro-social attitudes, and as sites where individuals are prepared for the roles they are to play in society at large. These roles include to "promote human good, provide basic human needs, guarantee protection of human rights and promote the integral development of the globe" (Ogbonnaya, 2012, p. 2). In short, in an attempt to mitigate examination mafiarisation, there is need to return to the fundamental element of education, which is teaching the child for life, as opposed teaching for credits only. Engaging rebalancing pedagogy will promote education to produce learners who are able to use education to confront social problems.

Promotion of morality

Given the context of examination mafiarisation, it is important that education in Zimbabwe revisits its morality discourses among learners, parents, teachers and other educational stakeholders. One of the negative effects of performativity that has not received enough academic problematisation yet, is the corrosion of morality. Morality entails the ability to possess self-respect, respecting social standing rules and appreciation of fairness, social justice and equality regarding access to

education, examinations and credits. With an emphasis on performativity, such moral values are negated – hard-working teachers are not rewarded, because they lack a network of connections with examination mafias. Historically, schools were “seen as institutions for preparing children for life, both academically and as moral agents in society” (Kaur, 2015, p. 21). I agree with the observation by Roberts (2013), that when societies are governed by the “imperatives of power and performativity, the needs of the most underprivileged are not met, on principle. The most important assets of a nation are the citizens themselves” (Kaur, 2015, p. 22). Thus, it is imperative for teachers to incorporate this moral sensitivity in the art of their teaching (Veugelers 2008). Such morality will produce citizens who are healthy, patriotic, honest, and sincere, and who contribute to sustainable development. Hence, rebalancing pedagogy will allow the reinvention of the moral fibre of Zimbabwean education, particularly in the examination process.

Reinstatement of task-based assessment

The new curriculum, introduced in 2016, saw the introduction of task-based assessment. This change meant the reworking of task boundaries and confronting new challenges (Bennie and Newstead, 1999, 1; James 2010). However, in Zimbabwe, like many other African countries, there is general disagreement about the best way to implement continuous assessment (Nguyen and Ahmad, 2017; Shilenge, 2004). As a result of various complications in relation to its implementation, task based assessment was removed from the curriculum less than two years after its introduction. However, I am of the view that, in a quest to move towards rebalancing pedagogy, there is need for task-based assessment. Task based assessment will reduce over-reliance on summative evaluation, which involves teachers focusing on examination drill, and depriving learners of the ability to engage in critical learning. Task-based assessment enables learners to be goal-oriented, achieve real purpose, and to participate in competency grading (Bonces and Bonces 2010). It gives the learners the opportunity to solve problems that relate the given task critically, and to gain marks from the prototype they develop. Such an approach will enable learners without mafia connections to improve their performance.

Envisaged Insights from the Article

The strength of the article is the bold step it takes to problematise examination mafiarisation in Zimbabwe. It has broadened the complexity of examination, from being centred on ZIMSEC, to

arguing that significant others, such as parents, have joined in the mafiarisation of examination. The paper gives other schools the opportunity to make an empirically based contribution to the nexus of examination, parents and mafiarisation through an analysis of the impact of limiting education to performance. In the same vein, the paper opens up ways in which academics can contribute to ensuring that there is examination credibility, especially by establishing structures to negate examination mafiarisation. The paper is unique in the sense that it expands on Ball's (2003) notion of the terrors of performativity, by arguing that performativity is no longer a struggle faced by teachers only, but which also involves parents, learners and principals, thereby creating and increasing chances of examination mafiarisation in Zimbabwe. Finally, the paper suggests ways in which examination mafiarisation can be mitigated through rebalancing pedagogy. The weakness of the paper is that it appears that I oppose performativity, which of course, I do not. My argument is that performativity should be premised within morality, social justice, and fairness. The paper appreciates that performance of some teachers is due to hard work and dedication to teaching service. To mitigate the weakness of the paper I take the opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of teachers, parents and learners who have worked hard to ensure that learners perform well. The paper should be understood within the context of bringing credibility to the examination system, hence, the need to unmute examination cheating narratives.

Conclusion

This article highlights various trajectories that result from education being focused solely on performativity. I used Ball's (2003) notion of terrors of performativity as a theoretical lens. I argue that performativity no longer present a terror to teachers only, but that the terror has been extended to significant others involved in education, such as parents, learners and principals. The interests of various players have made the Zimbabwean education system volatile and susceptible to abuse. In this regard, I argue that examination has been captured by mafias, who, through immorality, have characterised examinations by cheating, leaks and corruption. To redress this situation, I argue that Zimbabwe needs a rebalancing pedagogy that focuses on the holistic goal of education, as opposed to performativity only. I conclude that there is need to reintroduce tasked-based assessment to neutralise the quest for performativity which has made Zimbabwe's education lose credibility.

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