



Research Article

The trajectory of educational justice in Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies and reforms (1980-2026): Implications for future educational reforms

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies through the lens of educational justice. Drawing on Rawls' theories of distributive justice and equality of opportunity and Fraser's theories of recognition and participatory parity, it examines how conceptions of educational justice and corresponding policy priorities evolved over time. The study introduces the Developmental Trajectory of Educational Justice as a conceptual framework for understanding how educational justice evolves across successive policy reforms. The framework highlights educational justice as dynamic and provides a lens for designing future reforms responsive to emerging inequities, including those associated with curriculum change, digital inequality, and artificial intelligence. Situated within interpretive and transformative paradigms, the study uses historical research and interpretive policy analysis to examine major national education policies enacted from 1980 to 2026. Policies were purposively selected for their significance to educational justice and analyzed deductively across four domains: redistribution, equality of opportunity, recognition, and participation. The Capability Approach subsequently informed interpretation of the developmental trajectory by assessing whether successive reforms expanded learners' capabilities to achieve valued educational outcomes. Zimbabwe's education policies demonstrate a progressive broadening of educational justice. Early reforms primarily addressed colonial inequalities through redistributive expansion of access. Subsequent policies increasingly addressed socioeconomic disadvantages, equality of opportunity, learner diversity, and meaningful participation. Collectively, these reforms reveal a cumulative trajectory from a predominantly distributive conception of justice toward a multidimensional policy discourse. However, persistent structural and contextual constraints continue to limit learners' ability to convert educational opportunities into valued outcomes.

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Introduction

Global education policy increasingly positions education as a fundamental human right. This orientation is reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls on countries to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all. Beyond expanding access, the global education agenda increasingly emphasizes equity, disability inclusion, gender equality, early childhood development, and the participation of historically marginalized populations (UNESCO, 2015). Consequently, educational access, opportunity, inclusion, and participation are increasingly recognized as central dimensions of educational justice (Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

Since attaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has implemented a series of education reforms aimed at addressing historical educational inequalities among its population. Initial reforms focused primarily on improving educational access, while subsequent policies responded to changing social and economic priorities. Over more than four decades, education policy has evolved alongside broader national development goals and international discourses on equity, inclusion, and human rights. This progression suggests that Zimbabwe's education policies reflect an evolving conception of educational justice rather than a fixed normative understanding.

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This study examines the evolution of educational justice across Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies and reforms (1980-2026). It introduces the *Developmental Trajectory of Educational Justice* as a conceptual framework for understanding how educational justice evolves through successive policy reforms. Drawing on Rawls' theory of distributive justice and fair equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1971) and Fraser's theory of recognition and participatory parity (Fraser, 2008), the study traces how education policies progressively broaden the conceptualization of educational justice across four interrelated dimensions: redistribution, recognition, equality of opportunity, and participation. Rather than treating these perspectives as competing theories, the study conceptualizes them as cumulative policy discourses through which educational justice evolves over time. The Capability Approach, developed by Sen (1999) and further advanced by Nussbaum (2011), is subsequently employed as an evaluative framework to examine the extent to which these evolving policy commitments expand learners' substantive opportunities to achieve valued educational and life outcomes.

Analytical Framework

Education policies enacted in post-independence Zimbabwe have addressed multiple dimensions of educational justice. These diverse policy priorities suggest that educational justice has been conceptualized in different ways across successive reforms. Understanding this evolution requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining how conceptions of educational injustice have changed over time and the broader purposes these reforms sought to achieve. No single theory of justice adequately captures this evolution. Accordingly, this study draws on John Rawls' theory of justice, Nancy Fraser's multidimensional theory of justice, and the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Rather than treating these perspectives as competing theories, the study employs Rawls' and Fraser's theories to explain the evolving conception of educational justice and the Capability Approach as an evaluative lens to assess the extent to which this policy trajectory create the conditions necessary achieve valued educational and life outcomes.

Rawls' theory of justice provides the normative foundation for examining the distributive dimensions of educational justice. His principles of distributive justice and fair equality of opportunity distinguish between ensuring equitable access to educational resources and creating conditions under which individuals have genuine opportunities to benefit from those resources (Rawls, 1971). These principles provide an analytical basis for interpreting policies aimed at expanding educational access while reducing structural barriers that constrain learners' educational opportunities.

Fraser's multidimensional theory extends this perspective by arguing that justice cannot be achieved through redistribution alone. Educational injustice also arises through institutional misrecognition of learners' identities, cultures, languages, and abilities, as well as through social arrangements that limit meaningful participation in educational life (Fraser, 2008). Her concepts of recognition and participatory parity, therefore, provide a framework for examining policies that seek to create inclusive educational environments and enable all learners to participate as full members of the educational community.

The Capability Approach complements these perspectives by shifting attention from policy intentions to learners' lived educational opportunities. Rather than explaining how educational justice evolves within policy, it provides an evaluative framework for considering whether educational policies expand learners' substantive freedoms to achieve valued educational and life outcomes (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

Guided by these complementary perspectives, this study interprets Zimbabwe's post-independence education reforms as reflecting an evolving conception of educational justice. The analysis examines how successive education policies progressively reconstruct educational justice through four interrelated dimensions: *redistribution, recognition, equality of opportunity, and participation*. Rather than representing discrete conceptions of justice, these dimensions are understood as cumulative policy discourses through which the responsibilities of the education system progressively expand; from ensuring equitable access, to affirming learner diversity, addressing structural inequalities, and enabling meaningful participation.

These four dimensions, therefore, serve as the primary analytical categories for interpreting the policy documents. The Capability Approach is subsequently employed in the discussion as an evaluative lens to assess the extent to which

this developmental trajectory expands learners' substantive opportunities to achieve valued educational and life outcomes.

Undergirding Philosophical Paradigm

This study is situated within interpretive and transformative philosophical paradigms. Together, these worldviews support an analysis that seeks not only to interpret how educational justice is represented within policy texts but also to critically examine how those representations address questions of social transformation (Mertens, 2015).

Interpretivism provides the primary philosophical orientation for this study, viewing policy documents not as neutral administrative texts but as socially constructed artifacts that reflect the meanings, values, and assumptions of their historical and political contexts. From this perspective, education policies are interpreted as expressions of evolving conceptions of educational justice. This orientation aligns with interpretive policy analysis, which examines how policy discourse defines educational problems, frames solutions, and reshapes the role of the education system over time.

The transformative paradigm complements this perspective by foregrounding issues of power, inequality, and social justice. It recognizes that education policies both reflect and influence social relations and, therefore, play an important role in addressing historical disadvantages and promoting more equitable educational opportunities (Mertens, 2015). Within the context of post-independence Zimbabwe, this perspective enables critical examination of how successive reforms sought to redress colonial educational inequalities while progressively expanding commitments to inclusion, recognition, and meaningful participation for historically marginalized learners.

Problem of Study

Zimbabwe's post-independence education reforms have been the subject of wide scholarship, with studies documenting substantial progress in expanding educational access and addressing historical inequalities inherited from the colonial education system (Zvobgo, 1996). Research has examined a wide range of Zimbabwe's education policy initiatives independently, including universal education (Shizha & Kariwo, 2011), inclusive education (Mpofu et al., 2007), language policy (Ngwaru, 2024; Makoni & Mashiri, 2006), and early childhood development (Mangwaya, et al. 2016), highlighting both the achievements and implementation challenges associated with these initiatives. While prior research has significantly advanced understanding of Zimbabwe's education policy landscape, they have generally examined reforms as discrete policy initiatives. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how successive reforms collectively reshape the underlying conception of educational justice across different historical periods. This fragmented perspective limits understanding of how policy priorities evolved in response to changing political, economic, and social contexts.

This study addresses these gaps through a historical and interpretive analysis of Zimbabwe's education policies enacted between 1980 and 2026. In doing so, the study makes three contributions to educational policy scholarship. First, it provides a longitudinal analysis of how educational justice has evolved across four decades of education reform in Zimbabwe. Second, it introduces the *Developmental Trajectory of Educational Justice* as a conceptual framework for understanding how successive reforms progressively broaden the meaning of educational justice. Third, it integrates the Capability Approach as an evaluative lens to examine whether these evolving policy commitments create the conditions necessary for learners to achieve valued educational and life outcomes

Research Questions

This study investigates how educational justice has been conceptualized, reconstructed, and evaluated across Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies. The following research questions guide the study:

- How have Zimbabwe's post-independence primary and secondary education policies conceptualized and addressed educational injustice?
- How has the conception of educational justice evolved across successive post-independence education policy reforms?
- To what extent do Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies and reforms create the conditions necessary for learners to achieve educational and life outcomes?

- What implications does the developmental trajectory of educational justice have for future educational reforms in Zimbabwe?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design integrating historical analysis and interpretive policy analysis to examine the evolution of educational justice in Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies. Historical analysis enabled examination of policy development across time, while interpretive policy analysis facilitated exploration of how educational justice was progressively redefined within policy discourse.

Historical Analysis

Historical analysis provided the temporal framework for examining the development of Zimbabwe's education policies from 1980 to 2026. Rather than treating policy documents as isolated texts, this approach situated each reform within its broader political, social and historical context, allowing examination of continuities, shifts, and changing priorities over time (Mudavanhu et al., 2025). This historical perspective was particularly appropriate because educational justice was conceptualized as an evolving policy discourse rather than a fixed normative construct. The historical analysis followed a systematic process adapted from Lundy (2008), which involved: (1) defining the focus of the inquiry around educational justice; (2) aligning the analysis with the study's analytical framework; (3) identifying and selecting relevant education policy documents; (4) assessing the credibility and relevance of the selected sources; and (5) interpreting policy developments within their historical contexts.

Interpretive Policy Analysis

Interpretive policy analysis complemented the historical perspective by examining how policy documents construct meanings related to educational justice. Consistent with the interpretivism philosophical paradigm, policy documents were treated as social texts that both reflect and shape societal understandings of equity, inclusion, and educational responsibility (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). Rather than evaluating policy effectiveness, the analysis explored how successive reforms framed educational problems, identified priority groups, and articulated policy responses to educational inequality. Following Browne et al. (2019), the analysis focused on understanding the assumptions, values, and conceptions of justice embedded within policy discourse. Particular attention was given to how educational injustice was defined, which dimensions of justice were prioritized, and how these conceptions evolved across successive reforms.

Data Sources

The primary data comprised national education policies and reforms enacted between 1980 and 2026. Documents were purposively selected based on their relevance to educational justice and their significance in shaping the country's post-independence education system. The analysis was delimited to policies governing primary and secondary education, excluding higher education. Although tertiary education reforms, such as affirmative action policies, are also pertinent to questions of educational justice, they fell outside the scope of this study. The selected documents encompassed major policy initiatives related to universal access, educational financing, inclusive education, language policy, early childhood development, and the participation of historically marginalized learners. Policy documents were obtained from official government publications and other publicly accessible sources. Secondary literature was consulted to contextualize the historical development of these policies and to inform the interpretation of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis. Coding was guided by the study's analytical framework, which identified four interrelated dimensions of educational justice: *redistribution*, *recognition*, *equality of opportunity*, and *participation*. Following the thematic analysis, the **Capability Approach** was applied as an evaluative lens to examine the extent to which these evolving policy commitments create the substantive conditions necessary for learners to achieve valued educational and life outcomes. This two-stage analytical process distinguished between explaining how educational justice evolved within policy discourse and evaluating the implications of that evolution for learners' educational and life outcomes.

Findings

The analysis of Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies revealed a discernible evolution in how educational justice was conceptualized across successive reforms. While policies consistently sought to address educational inequality, they reflected changing understandings of the nature of educational injustice and the policy responses required to address it. Interpreted through the integrated theoretical framework, these shifts illustrate the progressive expansion of educational justice beyond a singular concern with access to encompass multiple, interrelated dimensions. The following sections examine each of these dimensions in detail.

Redistribution: Redressing Unequal Access

In the immediate post-independence period, educational injustice was primarily understood as the unequal distribution of educational opportunities inherited from the racially stratified colonial education system. Under the colonial regime, education was deliberately organized into racially segregated systems for Europeans and Africans, with stark disparities in funding, infrastructure, curriculum, teacher qualifications, and opportunities for educational advancement, systematically privileging White schools (Dorsey, 1989). Rather than functioning as a universal public good, education served as a mechanism for political, social, and economic hierarchies (Chung, 2008; Kanyongo, 2005). Consequently, policy discourse identifies educational injustice not simply as unequal schooling, but as the systematic denial of educational opportunities and public resources to the African majority through institutionalized racial discrimination (Maravanyika, 1990). Within this framing, the primary educational injustice, therefore, is the unequal distribution of educational opportunities.

This diagnosis created an imperative for comprehensive educational transformation following independence. In response, the education agenda was centered on it being a fundamental human right, the elimination of racial discrimination, and the pursuit of universal access to schooling. These priorities established the foundation for Zimbabwe's early post-independence education reforms. These commitments were subsequently institutionalized through the Education Act of 1987, which prohibited discrimination in school admissions on the grounds of "*race, tribe, place of origin, national or ethnic origin, political opinion, colour, creed, or gender*" (Education Act, 1987). The redistributive agenda was further reinforced through Zimbabwe's adoption of the Education for All (EFA) framework following the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien. This consolidated the commitment of Zimbabwe to universal educational access.

These reforms reflect a distinctly *redistributive* conception of educational justice. Consistent with Rawls' theory of distributive justice, education is treated as a primary social good whose equitable distribution is essential to achieving social justice. The state's responsibility is, therefore, understood as redistributing educational opportunities by removing institutional barriers. Thus, by expanding access to schooling for historically excluded populations, Zimbabwe promoted educational justice by ensuring equitable access.

The implementation of this redistributive vision is evidenced by rapid expansion of educational provision throughout post-independence Africa. Between 1979 and 1990, the number of primary schools increased from 2,401 to 4,530, while secondary schools expanded from 177 to 1,512 (Maravanyika, 1990). These investments, together with adaptive strategies such as double-session schooling, enabled primary gross enrolment to approach universal levels by the mid-1980s (World Bank, 2023). These reforms translated redistributive commitments into substantial gains in educational access, laying the foundation for Zimbabwe's high literacy rates and its longstanding recognition as one of Africa's most literate nations (World Bank, 2023).

Overall, the earliest post-independence reforms conceptualized educational justice primarily as the equitable redistribution of educational opportunities through expanded access and the removal of formal racial barriers. While these reforms fundamentally transformed educational access, their focus remained on redistribution, with less attention to other issues such as learner diversity, structural inequalities beyond access, or meaningful educational participation.

Recognition: Addressing Cultural and Structural Misrecognition

Although earlier reforms substantially expanded educational access, they did not fully address the ways in which educational institutions privileged certain identities, languages, and abilities while marginalizing others. With

education access readily available, policy attention in Zimbabwe shifted toward whether all learners were equally recognized, valued, and accommodated within the education system. Educational injustice was, therefore, understood not only as unequal access but also as the institutional exclusion of learners whose cultural identities, linguistic backgrounds, and diverse learning needs were insufficiently reflected in educational policies and practices.

Within this evolving policy discourse, educational injustice was conceptualized as a problem of institutional misrecognition. Reforms acknowledged that schools themselves could reproduce inequality by failing to recognize and accommodate learner diversity. Consequently, educational justice expanded beyond equitable access to encompass the affirmation and inclusion of diverse identities, languages, and learning needs within the education system.

This reconceptualization informed a new generation of reforms aimed at transforming institutional cultures and practices. The Secretary's Circular Minute No. P36 of 1990 marked one of Zimbabwe's earliest policy efforts to institutionalize inclusive education by establishing procedures for the placement and educational support of learners with disabilities within mainstream schools. This commitment was subsequently reinforced through the National Disability Policy (2021), which explicitly promotes equitable and inclusive education by requiring accessible learning environments, inclusive pedagogies, and reasonable accommodation for learners with disabilities. Collectively, these reforms shifted attention from learners' impairments to the institutional, pedagogical, and physical barriers that constrain equitable educational participation.

A comparable shift occurred in language-in-education policy. Following independence, Zimbabwe faced the challenge of developing a language policy appropriate for its multilingual society (Magwa, 2010). Although the recognition of Shona and Ndebele as official languages marked an important departure from colonial linguistic dominance, the 1981 language policy, later reinforced by the Education Act of 1987, continued to privilege English, Shona, and Ndebele as the principal languages of instruction. As a result, other languages spoken by minority ethnic groups such as Tonga, Venda, Kalanga, Shangani, and Nambya remained largely excluded from classroom instruction, teaching materials, and formal pedagogy (Dube & Wozniak, 2021).

Subsequent reforms challenged the established linguistic hierarchies, recognized and promoted the use of all indigenous languages in schools. The Zimbabwe Education Amendment Act of 2006 strengthened the use of learners' mother tongues during the early years of schooling, while the Education Amendment Act of 2019 further expanded opportunities for instruction in officially recognized indigenous languages. Together, these reforms reframed language not merely as a medium of instruction but as an expression of identity, cultural heritage, and educational inclusion (Ngwaru, 2014).

These developments closely reflect Fraser's conception of recognition, which locates injustice in institutionalized patterns of misrecognition that deny individuals equal social standing by devaluing their identities and ways of participating in society. From this perspective, educational justice requires more than equitable access; it also requires education systems to recognize, value, and accommodate the diverse identities, cultural differences, languages, and needs of all learners.

Together, the language policy reforms and disability inclusion policies reframed educational injustice as a problem of institutional misrecognition. Educational justice was consequently expanded beyond redistribution to require the recognition and accommodation of learners' diverse identities, languages, and learning needs.

Equality of Opportunity: Reducing Structural Inequalities

Despite substantial gains in access and inclusion, many learners remained disadvantaged by poverty, geographic isolation, and other structural conditions that constrained their ability to benefit from educational opportunities (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru, 2015). These persistent disparities demonstrated that equitable access and institutional recognition alone were insufficient to ensure equitable educational opportunity.

Against this backdrop, policy discourse increasingly reconceptualized educational injustice as arising from the unequal social, economic, and historical conditions that shape learners' educational trajectories. Educational justice, consequently, expanded to include interventions aimed at reducing structural disadvantage and enabling learners to benefit from education on more equitable terms (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2013). Rather than treating poverty and

socioeconomic vulnerability as conditions external to education, policy increasingly recognized them as barriers requiring deliberate educational intervention.

This reconceptualization informed a new generation of policies designed to promote fair equality of opportunity. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), introduced in 2001, sought to reduce financial barriers by covering tuition and examination fees for orphans and other vulnerable children. Similarly, in response to limited preschool access among children in rural and low-income communities, the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy was enacted in 2004. By requiring all primary schools to establish two years of ECD, the policy sought to reduce disparities in developmental opportunities before formal schooling.

These developments closely reflect Rawls' principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity, which holds that individuals with similar abilities and aspirations should have comparable opportunities for success regardless of circumstances beyond their control. From this perspective, Zimbabwe through targeted interventions such as BEAM and the ECD Policy, promoted justice and equality in education by compensating for structural inequalities that limited learners' ability to benefit from educational opportunities. Although comprehensive national outcome data for BEAM remain limited, available evidence demonstrates its substantial reach. According to the World Bank (2017), the program had supported 411,408 primary and secondary learners by 2014. Similarly, participation in early childhood education has continued to expand, with 71% of Zimbabwean children aged 3-4 set to meet developmental milestones, reflecting sustained progress in extending early learning opportunities beyond the urban populations that historically had the greatest access (UNESCO, 2021).

Overall, BEAM and the ECD Policy extended Zimbabwe's conception of educational justice beyond access and recognition by addressing the structural conditions that shape educational opportunity. Educational justice was increasingly understood as requiring targeted support to mitigate socioeconomic disadvantage and enable learners to benefit more equitably from educational opportunities.

Participation: Removing Barriers to Participation

While the preceding reforms expanded access, recognized learner diversity, and promoted fair equality of opportunity, they did not fully address the conditions necessary for learners to remain engaged throughout their educational journeys. As education policy continued to evolve, educational inequality increasingly came to be understood as arising from institutional responses to life-course circumstances that interrupted learners' educational pathways.

This evolving understanding informed policies designed to support learners through significant life transitions rather than excluding them from education. Historically, pregnant learners were commonly required to withdraw from school upon becoming pregnant and were often prohibited from continuing their education until after childbirth, if they were permitted to return at all. These practices were largely justified as disciplinary measures intended to deter adolescent pregnancy and uphold school discipline. However, the practices also interrupted girls' education, limited future opportunities, and reinforced gender-based educational disadvantage. The Policy on the Re-entry of Pregnant Learners represents a departure from this approach by recognizing pregnancy as a temporary life circumstance rather than grounds for educational exclusion. Instead of treating pregnancy as a reason for removal from school, the policy requires schools to facilitate learners' return following childbirth, shifting the emphasis from punishment to educational continuity. In this way, educational injustice is located in institutional practices that prevent learners from continuing and completing their education. This approach reflects a growing international consensus that excluding pregnant learners from school undermines girls' educational attainment, reinforces gender inequality, and violates the right to education (UNICEF, 2020). UNICEF emphasizes that institutional support and guaranteed re-entry, rather than exclusion, are essential to preventing pregnancy from permanently disrupting girls' educational trajectories.

This reconceptualization closely reflects Fraser's concept of participatory parity, which argues that justice requires institutional arrangements that enable individuals to participate as full and equal members of society. From this perspective, educational justice depends on ensuring that education systems are sufficiently flexible and responsive to sustain learners' participation despite changing life circumstances.

Conclusion of Findings

Collectively, the findings reveal a developmental trajectory in Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies, in which successive reforms progressively broadened the meaning of educational justice. Injustice evolved from being understood primarily as unequal access to education to encompassing institutional misrecognition, structural disadvantage, and barriers to sustained participation. Rather than replacing earlier conceptualizations, each generation of reforms built upon and extended the previous one, resulting in an increasingly multidimensional conception of educational justice encompassing redistribution, recognition, equality of opportunity, and participation. Figure 1 summarizes this developmental trajectory and illustrates how successive reforms progressively expanded Zimbabwe's conception of educational justice.

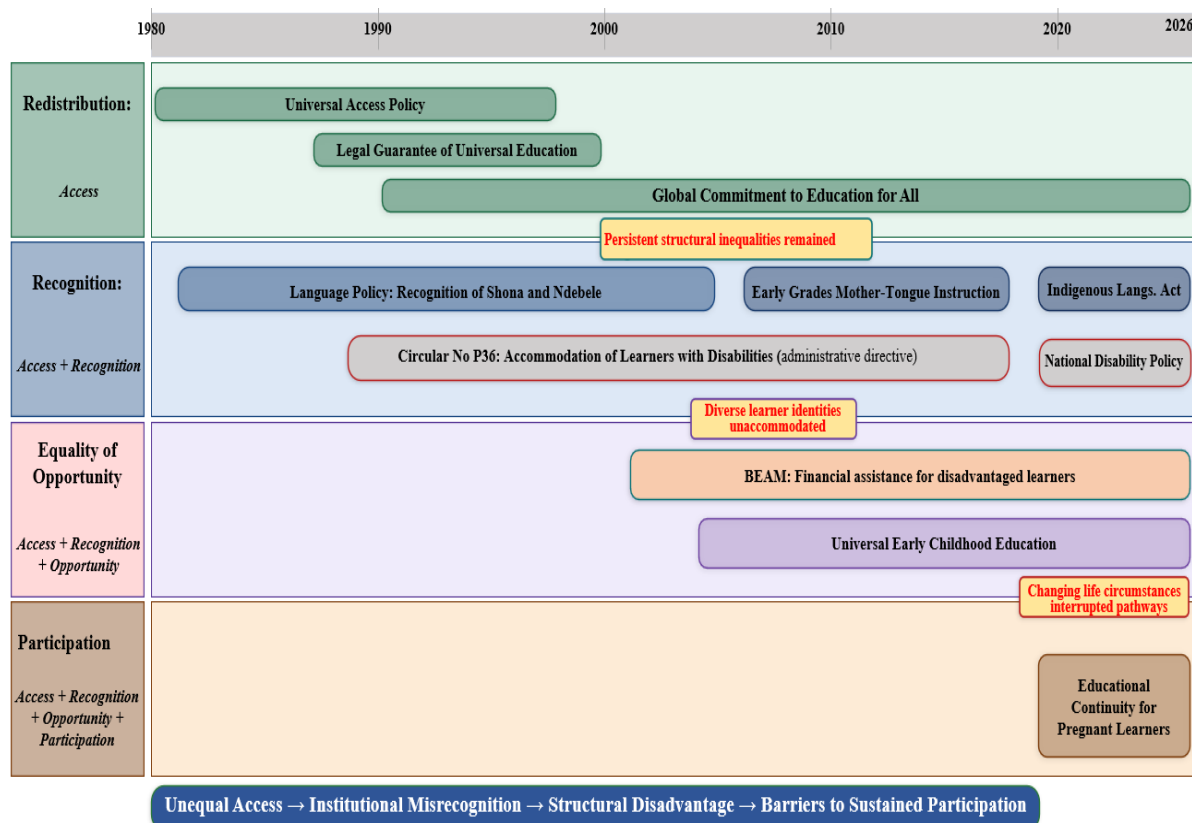


Figure 1. Developmental trajectory of educational justice: redistribution, recognition, equality of opportunity, and participation.

Discussion

From Educational Justice to Capability Realization

Findings of this study demonstrate that Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies reflect a progressive expansion in the conceptualization of educational justice. Rather than representing isolated policy initiatives, successive reforms responded to changing understandings of educational injustice, moving from concerns with equitable access to education toward recognition of learner diversity, fair equality of opportunity, and sustained educational participation. Viewed collectively, this trajectory suggests that educational justice evolved from a predominantly redistributive concern into a multidimensional policy framework encompassing distributive, cultural, structural, and participatory dimensions.

This progression broadly aligns with contemporary theories of social justice. The early emphasis on universal access reflects Rawls' concern with the equitable distribution of primary goods, while subsequent reforms increasingly resonate with Fraser's argument that justice requires not only redistribution but also recognition and participatory parity. Rather than replacing earlier priorities, successive reforms extended the scope of educational justice by acknowledging new sources of educational disadvantage and broadening the responsibilities of the education system. In this sense,

Zimbabwe's policy trajectory illustrates how educational justice can evolve through the cumulative incorporation of multiple normative concerns rather than through a sequence of competing paradigms.

These findings also contribute to broader debates within comparative education by demonstrating that educational justice is neither static nor reducible to a single policy objective. Much of the literature has examined Zimbabwe's education reforms individually, focusing on universal education, inclusive education, language policy, early childhood development, or gender equity. Examining these reforms collectively reveals a coherent developmental trajectory in which changing understandings of educational injustice gave rise to progressively broader conceptions of educational justice. This suggests that policy development is driven not only by changing educational priorities but also by evolving normative understandings of what constitutes justice within education.

Although this trajectory represents a substantial expansion in the conceptualization of educational justice, the Capability Approach invites a broader question. Rather than asking whether educational resources are distributed fairly, learner diversity is recognized, or opportunities are equalized, capability theory asks whether these policy commitments ultimately expand learners' substantive freedoms to achieve valued educational and life outcomes. This shifts the analytical focus from educational provision to educational realization.

Viewed through this broader lens, the progression identified in this study represents an important, but incomplete, movement toward educational justice. Redistribution, recognition, equality of opportunity, and participation each address distinct dimensions of educational disadvantage, yet they remain principally concerned with what education systems provide or guarantee. The Capability Approach complements these perspectives by emphasizing what learners are ultimately able to become. Educational justice, therefore, depends not only on expanding access, recognizing diversity, reducing structural disadvantage, or sustaining participation, but also on whether learners possess the personal, institutional, and social conditions necessary to convert these policy commitments into meaningful educational achievements and valued life trajectories (Robeyns, 2005). From this perspective, Zimbabwe's post-independence reforms represent not the culmination of educational justice but an important progression toward a more capability-oriented vision of what a just education system should ultimately achieve.

Conclusion

This study examined how conceptions of educational justice evolved across Zimbabwe's post-independence education policies through an interpretive policy analysis informed by Rawls' theory of justice, Fraser's theory of recognition and participatory parity, and the Capability Approach. Rather than treating individual reforms as discrete policy initiatives, the analysis demonstrates that they form a coherent developmental trajectory in which educational justice progressively expanded from concerns with equitable access to encompass recognition of learner diversity, equality of opportunity, and sustained participation.

The principal contribution of this study is the *Developmental Trajectory of Educational Justice*, which provides a framework for understanding how educational justice evolves as changing social conditions give rise to new understandings of educational disadvantage and corresponding policy responses. Examining Zimbabwe's reforms as an interconnected policy trajectory offers a broader perspective on educational justice than analyses of individual policies in isolation and contributes to comparative debates on the evolution of education policy.

Implications for Policy and Research

The developmental trajectory identified in this study suggests that educational justice should be understood as a dynamic and continually evolving normative concept rather than a fixed policy objective. As societies confront changing demographic, social, economic, and technological realities, new forms of educational disadvantage are likely to emerge, requiring corresponding adaptations in education policy. Zimbabwe's implementation of the Continuous Assessment Learning Activities (CALA) curriculum illustrates this challenge. Introduced as part of the competence-based curriculum to promote learner-centered and continuous assessment in 2015, CALA has also exposed persistent inequalities in schools' capacity to implement curriculum reforms effectively. Studies have shown that many rural and low-income schools face significant resource constraints, including limited access to computers, tablets, reliable internet

connectivity, electricity, and other learning materials required to support continuous assessment activities (Dhliwayo & Jita 2023; Masiwa & Last, 2024). These disparities suggest that curriculum reforms, however well intentioned, can inadvertently generate new forms of educational injustice when the resources necessary for equitable participation are unevenly distributed. Future policy should, therefore, complement curriculum reforms with targeted investments in digital infrastructure, learning technologies, and internet connectivity particularly in underserved rural communities, to ensure that all learners have equitable opportunities to participate and succeed.

More broadly, the rapid expansion of digital learning and the growing integration of artificial intelligence into education are reshaping how learners access, engage with, and benefit from educational opportunities. As Manguvo and Mafuvadze (2026) argue, these developments require policymakers to continually reassess emerging forms of educational injustice and develop responsive policies that promote equitable access, meaningful participation, and educational outcomes. The Capability Approach reinforces this perspective by shifting attention beyond educational provision to the conditions that enable learners to translate educational opportunities into meaningful achievements. Future reforms should, therefore, complement commitments to access, recognition, equality of opportunity, and participation with sustained attention to the broader institutional and technological conditions that shape learners' capabilities and educational outcomes.

Limitations of Study

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, this study employed an interpretive policy analysis and, therefore, examined how educational justice is conceptualized within national policy documents rather than how these policies are implemented or experienced in practice. Consequently, the analysis does not assess the extent to which policy intentions translated into educational practice.

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