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The Power of Politics in the Educational Curriculum in Tanzania: 1961-2024

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Abstract

The nature of politics, political statements, and policies introduced by national politicians has served as an important vehicle for shaping the education curriculum in Tanzania. This study reveals the complex relationship between politics and curriculum modification, demonstrating that the curriculum can be designed to meet specific political demands or the interests of individual politicians. This is a library-based study that examines the influence of politics on curriculum change. It further explores how politics determines what the curriculum should include, what is taught, for how long, to whom, how it is assessed, and for what purpose. The findings indicate that the curriculum can be affected and altered over time under political influence across several dimensions, including the aims of education, subject content, methods of delivery, and assessment modalities. The study concludes that curriculum change and innovation in education are products of political processes and depend largely on political will for successful implementation. Finally, the study highlights the need for further investigation into the relationship between the education curriculum and graduates' employability.

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Introduction

National curricula often reflect the political priorities, historical roots, and sociocultural contexts within which schools operate. For instance, the curricula of many developing countries still exhibit features inherited from

colonial institutions, such as the continued use of English or French as the language of instruction. In Tanzania, the influence of politics on the development of the education curriculum can be traced back to the independence of Tanganyika in 1961. At that time, the newly independent nation inherited an education system and curriculum that were

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accessible only to a privileged minority, differentiated by race, economic status, geographical location, and religious denomination. Curriculum development, teacher education, and the overall provision of education were largely controlled by the Advisory Committee on African Education, which had been established in 1925 following specific recommendations during the colonial period.

However, the political leadership after independence was not willing to allow the education system to remain as it had been under colonial rule. This determination laid the foundation for a new curriculum aimed at addressing the inequities of the past. During this transformative period, the former Prime Minister and President of Tanganyika, Julius K. Nyerere, identified three major enemies of the nation: poverty, ignorance, and disease. Consequently, political and educational policies were strongly directed toward improving individual health, expanding access to education, and reducing poverty.

Curriculum change is defined as the transformation of the entire curriculum scheme, including its design, goals, content, learning activities, and scope (Taba, 1962). It also involves changes in the value assumptions on which all these areas of the curriculum are based. Taba argues that changing the curriculum, in a sense, means changing an institution, as it “involves change in values, people, society and culture, and basic assumptions about what constitutes education and the good life” (Taba, 1962). It is therefore not surprising that curriculum change usually occurs gradually and often in response to political pressures and circumstances. Widespread, significant, and lasting curriculum change is rarely brought about solely through the efforts of professional educators, as attempts to change the curriculum are often resisted. Individuals who engage in curriculum change should therefore expect to assume the risks that accompany any attempt to reorder society and its value structure (Zais, 1976).

There are two important arguments regarding the nature of curriculum change. First, change is inevitable and will occur despite attempts to inhibit it. Second, change itself is neither inherently good nor bad; rather, its value depends on the direction it takes and the judgments made about it. As Zais (1976) notes, it is naturally preferable that curriculum change be directed by intelligent human intervention rather than allowed to occur randomly as a result of accidental political circumstances.

The curriculum is one of the main concerns in the field of education. The word *curriculum* originated from the Latin word *currere*, meaning “to run a course.” Curriculum refers to a course of study or a plan that provides learning opportunities

in the form of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs. Its purpose is to bring about changes in learners and reinforce already acquired behaviour. In the context of the school system, curriculum is considered the totality of what pupils learn at school. However, for the purposes of efficient curriculum management, learning is often categorized into different courses of study, that is, syllabuses.

Thus, both broad and narrow definitions of curriculum exist. Narrowly defined, curriculum may refer to a planned written academic programme or syllabus, co-curricular activities, or the school ethos, often described as the hidden curriculum. Broad definitions usually combine all of these elements. This suggests that curriculum is, in fact, a set of desired learning outcomes and a structured collection of learning experiences aimed at achieving such outcomes. As Marsh and Willis (1995) suggest, it is “an interrelated set of plans and experiences that a student undertakes under the guidance of the school.” It includes the behaviour patterns and attitudes of pupils and staff, as well as the general tone and ethos of the school or college.

Early in the twentieth century, curriculum was seen as a course of study or a list of subjects and subject matter prepared by teachers for students to cover. According to this view, and to some extent even today, especially in centralized systems of education, the curriculum is “written” by a team or panel of people comprising school teachers, Ministry of Education officials, school inspectors, and staff from curriculum development centres, among others (Osaki and Penda Eli, 1991). The resulting document, popularly referred to as the syllabus, is approved by the relevant educational authority, printed, and distributed as the official document to be used in all schools within the system, state, or nation. In Tanzania, for example, the body responsible for approving the syllabus is the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Vocational Training (MESTVT), while the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) is responsible for its development. These courses of study or curricula contain the content to be covered within a stipulated period of time.

According to this view, the process of curriculum revision or improvement involves rewriting the course of study by removing, adding, or altering topics, or by adding or removing an entire subject area. For example, in Tanzania, the primary school curriculum was changed by replacing Civics with Political Education and by adding cultural and self-reliance activities. These changes reflected the need to make education more relevant to the social, political, and economic realities of the nation, as well as the need to relate what happens in school to what happens in everyday life outside the school.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the influence of politics on curriculum development in Tanzania from 1961 to the present. A document analysis method was employed as the primary research strategy, allowing for a systematic review of historical and contemporary sources related to education and policy reforms. The data for this study were collected from a range of secondary sources, including government policy documents, curriculum frameworks, academic articles, books, and historical records.

The selection of documents was guided by their relevance to curriculum change and political influence in Tanzania. Key materials included official education policies, curriculum reform reports, and scholarly literature addressing post-independence educational developments. These sources were critically analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and shifts in curriculum design over time.

The analysis focused on four major components of the curriculum: the aims of education, content, methods of delivery, and modes of assessment. Thematic analysis was used to categorize and interpret the data, enabling the identification of recurring patterns related to political influence. Particular attention was given to how political ideologies, leadership priorities, and national development goals shaped curriculum reforms across different historical phases.

This qualitative approach is appropriate for the study as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex relationship between politics and education. However, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may reflect the interpretations and biases of original authors. Despite this limitation, the use of multiple credible sources enhances the reliability and validity of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that, since the independence of Tanganyika in 1961 to the present, politics has significantly shaped and influenced curriculum changes in Tanzania. The role of politics in shaping the education curriculum can be observed across several dimensions: political systems and national needs, individual politicians' interests, political statements, and educational policies. This study examined the influence of politics on the evolution of the education curriculum in Tanzania by focusing on key components such as the aims of education, curriculum content, methods of delivery, and assessment modalities.

Furthermore, the findings identified five major phases of curriculum change influenced by political dynamics in Tanzania: the 1967, 1979, 1997, 2005, and the ongoing 2023 curriculum reforms. Each phase of change was largely triggered by the addition, removal, or replacement of subject content to align with prevailing political and socio-economic priorities.

The 1967 Curriculum Reform and Political Influence

The year 1967 marks a significant turning point in the history of Tanzania's education system. During this period, Tanzania experienced a major political shift influenced by socialist ideologies originating from Russia, particularly the ideas of V. I. Lenin. These ideas were adapted into the Tanzanian context as *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea* (African socialism and self-reliance) under the leadership of President Julius K. Nyerere.

This ideological transformation was formalized through the Arusha Declaration, which laid the foundation for a new education policy known as *Education for Self-Reliance (ESR)*. This phase represented a shift towards a socialist-oriented education system, where the guiding philosophy emphasized self-reliance, community development, and social equality.

According to Ishumi and Nyirenda (2002), Education for Self-Reliance was a direct translation of Tanzania's national socio-economic and political philosophy into educational practice. Nyerere (1967), in his seminal work *Education for Self-Reliance*, strongly criticized the colonial education system for being irrelevant to the needs of Tanzanian society, particularly in terms of its content and methods of delivery.

During the ESR phase, several educational programmes, policies, and development plans were introduced to support the implementation of this philosophy. Notably, the Second Five-Year National Development Plan (1969–1974) was launched to align education with national development goals (Bogonko, 1992). These reforms reflected growing dissatisfaction among national leaders with the colonial education system, which was perceived as elitist and disconnected from local realities.

The introduction of ESR, following the Arusha Declaration (Nzima, 2016), emphasized key principles such as human dignity, cooperation, and the obligation to work. Consequently, the education system and curriculum were restructured to dismantle colonial legacies and make education more relevant to Tanzanian society.

One major outcome of this reform was the expansion of access to education, including the introduction of compulsory primary education for children aged seven years. The objectives of ESR included:

1. Equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to solve societal problems.
2. Preparing youth for work, particularly in agriculture, which was considered the backbone of Tanzania's economy.
3. Promoting cultural awareness and fostering values such as national identity, responsibility, tolerance, and respect.

Nyerere also outlined key principles of education, emphasizing that:

- Education should be relevant to society.
- Educated individuals must serve society.
- Education should be problem-solving in nature.
- Education must be work-oriented.
- Educated individuals should remain integrated within society.

These principles aimed to promote communal living and social cohesion, popularly reflected in local concepts such as “*Ujamaa*” (familyhood or collective living).

To support these goals, Kiswahili was prioritized as the national language and adopted as the medium of instruction in primary schools, replacing the colonial dominance of English (Msabila, 2013). This shift further reinforced national identity and made education more accessible to the majority of Tanzanians.

Education Programmed during ESR phase

There were a number of educational programmes, policies, and plans introduced during the *Education for Self-Reliance (ESR)* phase to ensure that political objectives were effectively implemented. Under the ESR policy, which guided overall curriculum improvement efforts, the Second Five-Year National Development Plan (1969–1974) was introduced in 1969. This plan was further reinforced by the announcement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1974 and the Education Act No. 13 of 1969.

The Musoma Declaration represented a political effort to implement the 1967 Arusha Declaration, aiming to ensure that basic social services, including education, were equitably accessible to all members of society. These programmes led to the formulation of new syllabuses across all levels of education, significantly transforming curriculum objectives to reflect national needs (Sefu & Siwale, 1977).

Other important curriculum-related initiatives during this phase, aimed at ensuring the effective implementation of self-reliance, included the establishment of key institutions such as the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) under Act No. 13 of 1975 and the National Examination Council of Tanzania (NECTA) under Act No. 21 of 1973. During this period, curriculum goals were explicitly aligned with the Arusha Declaration, socialist ideology, and the principles of self-reliance (Komba, 1996). As a central component of the socialist development strategy, the curriculum was designed to inculcate self-reliance and socialize learners into the ruling party's socialist ideology (Komba, 1996). According to Njabili (1999), the general aim of education during this period was to equip learners with the values of freedom, unity, and socialism. Similarly, Nyerere (1967) proposed a comprehensive vision for an education system grounded in these principles.

Moreover, ESR policies and programmes led to significant transformations in curriculum content, aimed at producing a socialist and self-reliant society. For instance, the Civics subject was abolished in 1968, as it was perceived to promote capitalist thinking among students (Komba, 1996). It was replaced by *Elimu ya Siasa*, which emphasized the understanding of party ideology, nationalism, and the constitution (Komba, 1996). Nyerere strongly advocated for practical, work-oriented education, particularly in agriculture. As he stated in his 1967 work, “every school had to have a workshop or a farm” (p. 5).

In 1973, education policymakers introduced a revised curriculum to replace that of 1969. This revision was prompted by the realization that agricultural and political education had not been effectively integrated into the broader curriculum and were instead being taught in a fragmented manner. The new curriculum aimed to challenge the prevailing notion that self-reliance activities, such as farming and workshop projects, were separate from mainstream academic learning (Bogonko, 1992).

Further reforms included making Biology a core subject in all secondary schools from 1975. Education for Self-Reliance also emphasized subjects such as Kiswahili, History, Political Education, and knowledge of Tanzania's governance systems. These changes were intended to foster cooperative values, national identity, appreciation of African culture, and commitment to socialist ideals (Bogonko, 1992).

In addition, secondary school curricula were restructured to emphasize vocational and life skills. Schools were categorized into four vocational streams: Agriculture, Technical, Commerce, and Home Economics (Ishumi & Nyirenda, 2004). Overall, ESR programmes focused heavily on curriculum

content, with the ultimate goal of producing self-reliant individuals and a self-sustaining nation.

Curriculum Change of 1979 in Tanzania and the Role of Politics

The 1979 curriculum reform in Tanzania continued to be strongly influenced by the principles of *Education for Self-Reliance (ESR)*. During this period, the curriculum was deeply shaped by the political ideology that emphasized the close relationship between education and national development, often captured in the phrase “*politics is agriculture.*” This reflected the government’s priority of promoting agriculture as the backbone of the national economy.

Under this reform, the school curriculum was reorganized along vocational lines, leading to four major streams or biases: Agriculture, Home Economics (Domestic Science), Commerce, and Technical Education. As a result, subjects such as agriculture, business studies, engineering, technical skills, and domestic sciences were emphasized in schools. This restructuring was intended to align education with the socio-economic needs of the country, particularly rural development.

The diversification of the curriculum created opportunities for both teachers and students to actively engage in productive and practical activities, especially those related to rural life. It encouraged the application of knowledge in real-life contexts and reinforced the principles of self-reliance and productivity.

In addition, the system of student assessment was also modified to reflect these changes. Evaluation was no longer limited to academic performance alone but extended to include behavioural and character-based attributes. This included diligence, appreciation of work, responsibility, and care for property. Such changes highlight how political ideology influenced not only curriculum content and structure but also the broader goals of education, including the formation of character and work-oriented attitudes among learners.

Curriculum Change of 1997 in Tanzania and Political Influence

Another significant political shift occurred around 1997, leading to a new phase of curriculum reform in Tanzania. This change was largely driven by the transformation of the country’s political economy from socialism to liberalism during the 1980s, as well as the introduction of a multiparty political system in 1992. These developments created the need for an education system that aligned with new economic and political realities.

The recommendations from key policy reviews culminated in the formulation of the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 1995, which brought substantial changes across all levels of

education, including pre-primary, primary, secondary, and teacher education.

Major curriculum changes, as reported by Nzima (2016), included:

- The reduction of subjects at the primary school level from 13 to 7,
- The introduction of new subjects such as *Social Studies* and *Life Skills* at the primary level,
- The introduction of *Information Technology*, *Computer Science*, and *Civics* at Forms I–IV,
- The introduction of *General Studies* at the advanced secondary level, and
- The integration of cross-cutting issues such as HIV/AIDS, environmental education, health practices, and gender awareness.

These changes reflect how political and economic liberalization influenced curriculum design, shifting the focus toward a more flexible, relevant, and socially responsive education system.

Curriculum Change of 2005 in Tanzania and Political Influence

By 2005, under the leadership of President Jakaya M. Kikwete, another curriculum reform was introduced in response to emerging global and national demands. The political environment at the time emphasized the need for Tanzanians to compete effectively in the global labour market. However, it was observed that many graduates lacked the necessary competencies and practical skills, highlighting limitations in the existing content-based curriculum.

As a result, Tanzania adopted the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC), which marked a significant shift from a traditional content-focused approach to a learner-centred model. This reform was spearheaded by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) through the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE).

The primary aim of the CBC was to improve the quality of education by equipping learners with relevant knowledge, practical skills, and appropriate attitudes necessary to function effectively in a dynamic and globalized world (MoEVT, 2005). The reform emphasized the development of competencies aligned with labour market needs.

Recent evidence suggests that while competence-based curriculum reforms aim to address skills gaps, their effectiveness in improving employability is often constrained by challenges such as limited implementation capacity,

inadequate teacher preparedness, and weak alignment with labour market demands (World Bank, 2024).

Pedagogical and Assessment Changes under CBC

The introduction of CBC brought significant changes in both teaching methods and assessment practices. It redefined the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom:

Learner-Centred Approach:

- Learners became more active participants in the learning process, engaging in activities such as problem-solving, discussions, role-playing, drawing, and group work (Osaki, 2001; Kasuga, 2012).

Teacher's Role:

- Teachers shifted from being knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. Their role involved designing meaningful learning tasks, preparing instructional materials, and guiding students in their learning processes rather than dominating classroom interactions.

Active Learning and Discovery:

- Learning was promoted through discovery-based approaches, including reading, experimentation, observation, interviews, and collaborative work (Weimer, 2002).

Task Design and Implementation:

- Teachers were responsible for preparing diverse learning activities such as quizzes, assignments, experiments, debates, projects, and creative tasks (Khursheed, 2002), while learners were expected to actively complete these tasks.

Assessment Reforms:

- Assessment shifted towards evaluating competencies and practical skills rather than rote memorization, focusing on learners' ability to apply knowledge in real-life situations.

The adoption of CBC reflects a political and educational decision to prioritize life skills and functional competencies, enabling individuals to operate effectively within society (Komba & Mwandanji, 2015). According to Paulo and Tilya (2014), successful implementation of CBC requires the use of interactive and participatory teaching strategies supported by a conducive learning environment.

The Curriculum Change of 2023 (to be implemented in 2027) and how politics has shaped the new education curriculum in Tanzania

The curriculum change of 2023 is planned to be implemented in 2027. On 20th September 2023, the Minister of Education and Vocational Training, Professor Mkenda, invited journalists to an official announcement. He addressed the citizens of mainland Tanzania, especially all education stakeholders. Below is his announcement to Tanzanian citizens.

“Dear journalists, on behalf of the Tanzanian government, today I would like to officially announce that, as the Ministry of Education, we have reached the conclusion that this is the right time to change our education curriculum to suit the current situation of massive unemployment across the country. We will now have compulsory education of 10 years instead of 11 years. There will be no Class Seven national examination; instead, there will be a Class Six national assessment, hence there will be no need for pupils to reach Class Seven. Furthermore, and this may be a surprise to you, there will be two history subjects: one entitled ‘Historia ya Tanzania na Maadili’, which will replace Civics as a subject, and another History subject as an independent subject. The language of teaching and learning will be Kiswahili, while English will be taught as a subject in Kiswahili-medium schools, and vice versa. Each school should also have a technical college.”

All the changes mentioned above were celebrated by the majority of Tanzanians without questioning the hidden agenda, as they believed that these dramatic curriculum changes would liberate young men and women who attain university education without being employed by the government. It is well known that recently people in Tanzania have claimed that the government is responsible for unemployment and has failed to employ many professionals from different careers. In fact, the government's response to this situation is closely linked to the political arena. It should be noted that in about two years' time, there will be a general election in which Samia Suluhu will contest the presidential position under the ruling party, CCM. To address the claims of unemployment, the government, as a political instrument, has attempted to modify the education curriculum so that people do not depend solely on employment but instead acquire skills to employ themselves. Therefore, this reflects the position of politics as a foundation of curriculum development in Tanzania.

Summary of the Study

Recent continental analyses reaffirm that curriculum reform in Africa remains deeply embedded in political governance structures, where state ideology, electoral pressures, and

policy agendas strongly shape curriculum priorities and implementation pathways (UNESCO, 2025). In Tanzania, as elsewhere, politics occupies a central place in the daily affairs of the nation. The political class seeks to control and influence policy, either explicitly or implicitly. Education is often used as an implicit tool by the political class (Freire, 1972). The influence of politics in curriculum development in Tanzania is best observed through the formation of various education commissions, committees, and working parties. Since independence, there have been several major commissions on the school curriculum. Due to the centralized system of education in Tanzania and the powerful nature of politics, most decisions on education, especially those resulting in innovations and changes, are made through a top-down approach.

It is widely accepted that policy decisions are made through political processes. As noted, “politics is the process used by any society to determine how power, wealth, opportunity, status, and other social goods are distributed among members of that society” (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2007). Curriculum politics is considered part of the overall process of governance and involves decisions about content, such as what body of knowledge should be included in or excluded from the curriculum (Joseph, 2015). Education is one of the key areas addressed by public policy. Connelly et al. (2008) argue that “politics governs almost every aspect of education in relation to what schooling is provided, how, to whom, in what form, by whom, and with what resources.” The politics of curriculum determines what is considered legitimate and valued, and what is not (Lo, 2017). Education is therefore inherently politicized in policy decision-making. However, this does not mean that every educational issue becomes the subject of intense public debate or political lobbying (Connelly et al., 2008).

The Tanzanian curriculum is strongly influenced by political forces at both local and national levels. Examples of political decisions that have led to curriculum innovation and change include:

- i) The nationalization of education and the adoption of the Education for Self-Reliance policy in 1967.
- ii) The establishment of the National Examinations Council in 1971.
- iii) The policy on Universal Primary Education in 1978.
- iv) The Presidential Commission on Education in 1980.
- v) The Education Act of 1978.
- vi) The Education and Training Policy of 1995.
- vii) The education for self-employment-oriented reforms introduced in 2023.

Politics influences curriculum from the national level to the lowest decision-making level, that is, the district level. Some

scholars describe these as macro- and micro-levels of political influence in curriculum design, development, and evaluation (Nkyabonaki, 2013). The influence of politics in these areas directly affects curriculum change and innovation. Politics plays a cornerstone role in determining what is taught, how it is taught, how students are assessed, and how the entire curriculum development and implementation process is financed (Marsh & Willis, 1995). Political influence is particularly evident in centralized curriculum systems, where most decisions are made by the central government through various institutional bodies. In contrast, in decentralized systems, influence over what students learn emerges at multiple levels, from national to local authorities.

Conclusion

Tanzania operates a highly centralized education system, with a single national curriculum implemented across the country. Decisions regarding what is taught, how it is taught, the materials used, and the methods of assessment are largely determined by the government through its institutional structures. This centralized control highlights the strong influence of political authority on curriculum development. Understanding curriculum change as a political activity requires recognizing that educational reforms and innovations are shaped by political processes and priorities. Consequently, the success of curriculum change depends significantly on political will, commitment, and the broader socio-political context within which such reforms are introduced and implemented.

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