International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Learners' Perceptions of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Advanced-Level Curriculum: Gender Insights from Two Masvingo District Schools

Adnos Chikomo[1], Cosmas Maphosa[2], Kudakwashe Mapetere[3]

[1]PhD Student, Robert Mugabe School of Heritage and Education, Great Zimbabwe University
[2]Professor & Director, Institute of Distance Education, University of Eswatini, Eswatini
[3]Senior Lecturer History Curriculum Studies, Robert Mugabe School of Heritage and Education, Great Zimbabwe University

Abstract

This article explores the gendered perceptions of Zimbabwean A-Level learners regarding the country's updated A-Level curriculum – the Heritage-Based 2024-2030 Curriculum. The curriculum review process has undergone three phases to date, namely the Zero Draft Curriculum Framework 2013-2015; the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022; and the Heritage-Based Education 2024- 2030. Informed by James Lull's 2011 Theory of Gendered Hegemony, the aim of this interpretive inquiry was to uncover qualitative insights that inform educational policy and practice for enhanced gender equity in the country's high school system. Using a comparative case of two secondary schools, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 24 learners, that is, 12 from each of the two purposively selected schools of Masvingo District. For triangulation, a semi-structured qualitative interview was administered on each of 10 volunteering A-Level teachers from the participating schools. From the same two schools, the researcher also accessed class registers and records of marks for document analysis. As for the objectives, the study investigated the learners' general perceptions of the curriculum, as well as specific viewpoints of A-Level girls and boys separately. Additionally, it explored the popularity and unpopularity of certain subjects among each gender and analysed potential factors influencing these perceptions. The findings highlight disparities in subject preferences and shed light on societal factors, media prompts and policy influences among other institutional forces shaping the learners' educational experiences. This study recommends revising the curriculum regularly to offer a broader range of subject choices for both girls and boys; using inclusive language that represents both gender identities in the curriculum materials; providing teachers with regular training on gender sensitivity and bias reduction; as well as incorporating gender education into the curriculum to empower young people with the knowledge they need to promote gender justice.

Keywords: A-Level Curriculum, Gendered Perceptions, Subject Selection, Educational Policy, Gender Equality, Heritage-Based Curriculum

1. Introduction

Educational reforms often aim to improve the quality and relevance of education systems, striving to meet the evolving needs of society and the economy. The recent curriculum review processes in

Zimbabwe represent such an effort, introducing new subjects and pedagogical approaches intended to better prepare the learners for future challenges. This study evaluated the impact of these changes by investigating the perceptions and experiences of A-Level learners, with a specific focus on gender differences in their responses to the updated curriculum. The objectives of this research were: to investigate the general perceptions of learners regarding the heritage-based A-Level curriculum; to explore the new curriculum experiences of female learners; to discover the perspectives of male learners towards the updated curriculum; to account for the popularity of heritage-based subjects among male and female learners; and to uncover the factors that contribute to the perception of certain subjects as unpopular among both genders. By exploring these dimensions, the research examined how the updated A-Level curriculum shapes the educational experiences of Zimbabwean learners and it highlights areas that may require further adjustment to better serve the needs of A-Level learners, both girls and boys. Through a combination of learner and teacher perspectives, as well as document analysis, this study examined the heritage-based curriculum's reception and impression among A-Level learners. It sheds light on the complexities of curriculum reform, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, guardians and other stakeholders dedicated to the continuous improvement of educational systems.

2. Literature Review

Zimbabwe's protracted curriculum reform since 2013 introduced a new A-Level curriculum which prompted thoughtful discussions and debates within the country's educational circles and beyond. This was because in any educational system across the globe, "higher secondary education is a pivotal stage in the educational journey as it prepares the learners for higher education and future careers" (Wuta, 2022:26). The current study researched this curriculum to check whether it reflects the values of the Zimbabwean society and promotes the full participation of all learners regardless of gender. Understanding the learners' perceptions is crucial for "informing educational policies and practices, particularly through a gender lens to come up with gender equitable educational outcomes" (Mandaza & Muchengeti, 2024:50). This study explored the perceptions of female and male learners regarding the heritage-based A-Level curriculum, aiming to uncover gender-related insights about subject selection, challenges and opportunities.

Literature surrounding gendered perceptions of educational curricula offers valuable insights into the complex interplay of gender, education and societal expectations. Several studies have examined how gender stereotypes and cultural norms influence learners' subject preferences and academic trajectories; creating what theoretician James Lull (2011), as cited by Dynes (2020), calls gendered hegemonies. A qualitative study conducted in Peru by Suyo-Vega *et al.* (2024) found that societal expectations often shape learners' perceptions of gender-appropriate subjects, leading to disparities in subject choices between male and female students. A quantitative study conducted in Texas found that girls are more likely to gravitate towards humanities and social sciences, while boys tend to prefer STEM subjects (Tang *et al.*, 2024). These findings suggest that traditional gender roles and stereotypes play a significant role in shaping educational preferences and opportunities, which role the current study intended to unravel.

Similarly, a study by Shaikh (2022) in Rwanda highlights the impact of peer pressure and social norms on learners' subject choices. Girls may face discouragement or ridicule from peers when expressing interest in traditionally male-dominated subjects, leading to decreased confidence and participation in these areas. Conversely, male students may feel pressured to conform to masculine ideals, which

discourage them from exploring subjects perceived as feminine according to a Nigerian study by Yohanna and Muhammad (2022). The current study investigated these insights among the actual learners of A-Level subjects.

The influence of teachers and educational institutions on learners' perceptions of gender and education is another critical aspect that has been extensively studied in the literature. Researches by Aryeh-Adje (2021) in Ghana as well as by Bhunu and Green (2023:128) in Zimbabwe emphasise the role of teachers in reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes within the classroom. Teachers' own biases and expectations can inadvertently influence learners' perceptions of their abilities and potentials in certain subjects. For example, studies have shown that teachers may unconsciously provide more attention and encouragement to boys in STEM subjects, perpetuating the notion that these fields are male-oriented (Mpofu, 2021; Moyo & Dube, 2023). The lived experiences of actual A-Level classes following the curriculum reform therefore warranted this research.

Furthermore, educational institutions often contribute to the perpetuation of educational gender stereotypes through institutional practices and policies. For instance, "textbooks and teaching materials may portray gender in stereotypical ways, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting the learners' exposure to diverse role models and perspectives" (Brown, 2021:128). Additionally, the lack of female representation in leadership positions within educational institutions can send implicit messages about which genders are valued and capable in academic settings (UNESCO, 2021; Zimbabwe Institute of Engineering - ZIE, 2022). The likelihood that the schools themselves might be agents of educational gender stereotypes caused the current study to focus on two actual schools as case studies, one a public school and another a private one for comparison.

Past studies have noted that addressing gendered perceptions of educational curricula requires a multifaceted approach. According to Waterman *et al.* (2020:977), such an approach involves "educators, policymakers, parents and society at large." Strategies such as implementing inclusive teaching practices, providing professional development for educators on gender equity, and revising curriculum materials to be more diverse and representative can help challenge stereotypes and create a more inclusive learning environment (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, Brown (2021) suggests fostering supportive peer networks and promoting positive role models across genders. This study was conducted with the same aim of finding ways that can empower learners to pursue their interests and talents regardless of societal expectations about their gender.

As has been seen above, literature underscores the presence of gender stereotypes that limit the learners' academic and career aspirations. This research was necessitated by the need to address these stereotypes and advance gender-sensitive education.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in James Lull's (2011) Theory of Gendered Hegemony, which provides a conceptual lens to explore how societal structures perpetuate gendered ideologies through cultural, educational and institutional practices. Gendered hegemony refers to the ways in which power dynamics and societal norms sustain traditional gender roles, influencing individuals' perceptions and behaviours, including their educational experiences and choices. This framework was considered relevant in understanding how learners' subject preferences and academic participation are shaped within Zimbabwe's heritage-based A-Level curriculum.

Lull's theory emphasises that societal power structures operate subtly – embedding gendered expectations into everyday practices and making them appear natural and unquestionable. In the context of education, this means that learners may internalise societal norms about which subjects are suitable for boys or girls, based on their perceived abilities and future roles. For example, boys may have a preference for STEM subjects, often associated with masculinity (Mukundi, 2021), while girls might opt for Arts and Humanities, which align with traditional notions of femininity (Basaninyezi, 2020). These choices are not always reflective of individual interests or capabilities but are influenced by external factors such as cultural stereotypes, peer pressure and institutional practices.

The heritage-based A-Level curriculum reform in Zimbabwe, while intended to provide a holistic and inclusive educational framework, operates within this larger societal context. Gendered hegemonies can influence how learners and educators perceive the curriculum and how subjects are presented, valued and chosen (Mavima, 2023). The current study, therefore, applies the theory to examine how these power dynamics manifest in learners' experiences of the curriculum, shaping their perceptions of subject popularity and unpopularity, as well as their participation patterns.

By incorporating the Theory of Gendered Hegemony, this study also acknowledges the role of institutions in either perpetuating or challenging these societal norms. Schools, as microcosms of society, can reinforce stereotypes through teaching methods, resource allocation and curriculum content. For instance, the lack of female representation in STEM teaching positions or the portrayal of gender roles in textbooks (Chari, 2023) may send implicit messages about what boys and girls can achieve. Conversely, schools also have the potential to disrupt these patterns by implementing policies and practices that promote gender equity, such as gender-sensitive teaching methods, inclusive curriculum content and mentorship programmes.

Through this theoretical lens, the research sought to reveal the underlying societal and institutional forces that shape learners' gendered perceptions and experiences in the heritage-based curriculum. It explored how these dynamics influence the popularity of certain subjects among female and male learners, the challenges learners face and the role of teachers and schools in either reinforcing or mitigating these disparities. Ultimately, the study used the framework to provide insights into how educational policies and practices can be designed to foster gender equity, ensuring that all learners, regardless of gender, are empowered to pursue their interests and potential within the A-Level curriculum.

4. Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

4.1 To investigate the general perceptions of learners regarding the heritage-based A-Level curriculum;
4.2 To explore the new curriculum experiences of female learners;
4.3 To discover the perspectives of male learners towards the updated curriculum;
4.4 To account for the popularity of heritage-based subjects among male and female learners; and
4.5 To uncover the factors that contribute to the perception of certain subjects as unpopular among both genders

5. Methodology

Springing forth from the interpretivist paradigm, this research adopted a qualitative approach, utilising the above said FGDs with learners, one-on-one interviews with teachers as well as document analyses of

class registers and records of marks. The FGD participants included A-Level girls and boys, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their gendered perceptions as recommended by Carlstrom (2022). There were 12 girls and 12 boys. Likewise, the semi-structured interview took in both male (6) and female (4) teachers to triangulate the views of the learners (Mavodza, 2022). The same applied to document analysis whereby the mentioned documents were scrutinised using the interview guide to channel the analyses and remain focused on the study purpose. The study employed thematic data analysis for all the three instruments involving thematic coding to identify recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses and the document observations.

The study adopted a comparative case study design utilising a combination of learner FGDs, teacher interviews and document analysis administered at two purposively selected schools. This design offered the researcher a comprehensive technique to investigate various aspects of the learners' perceptions of the new A-Level curriculum. According to Aria (2022), FGDs provide a platform for research subjects to express their thoughts, opinions and experiences openly in a group setting. By conducting FGDs with learners, the researcher intended to gather rich qualitative data on their general perceptions of the new A-Level curriculum (Objective 1), as well as specific insights into how female (Objective 2) and male learners (Objective 3) perceive the curriculum. Therefore, the FGDs encouraged active participation and interaction among participants, allowing the researcher to explore diverse perspectives, identify common themes and uncover underlying factors influencing the learners' perceptions.

Interviews with teachers were included to complement the insights gained from learner FGDs by providing perspectives from educators directly involved in the delivery of the new A-Level curriculum. Teachers offered valuable insights into the implementation process, the challenges faced, and their observations of learners' reactions and engagement with the curriculum. By interviewing teachers, researchers can gain deeper insights into the contextual factors influencing the learners' perceptions, validate findings from learner FGDs, and understand the role of educators in shaping the learners' curriculum experiences (Holland, 2021; Zairul, 2021).

The third instrument - document analysis - allowed the researcher to examine written records related to the curriculum, in this case class registers and records of marks. This method enables the identification of implicit messages, representations and ideologies embedded within the curriculum materials (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020; Biddix, 2021;). The researcher wanted to uncover gendered representations, stereotypes and biases that may influence the learners' perceptions and choices by scrutinising these documents. According to Cardano (2020), document analyses also provide insights into broader societal discourses and policy influences shaping the curriculum, enriching the contextual understanding of learners' perceptions.

This research triangulated data from learner FGDs, teacher interviews and document analysis for a rounded understanding of learners' perceptions of the new A-Level curriculum. This comprehensive qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of both individual experiences and broader contextual factors shaping the learners' perceptions, and according to Subedi (2021), facilitating a refined analysis of the complex dynamics at play. Each research instrument provided unique insights and perspectives that, when triangulated, may enhance the legitimacy, trustworthiness and richness of the research findings (Smilde & Hanson, 2023).

6. Results

6.1 Learners' Thoughts about the Heritage-Based A-Level Curriculum in General

In examining the learners' perceptions of the new A-Level curriculum, several themes emerged from the FGDs and teacher interviews, triangulated with document analysis where appropriate. These themes provide an understanding of how learners in both schools perceived the curriculum, highlighting both positive and negative viewpoints. Table 1 provides a summary of the theme and issues on learners' thoughts about the new A-Level curriculum in general.

Table 1: Theme and subthemes on learners' thoughts about the new A-Level curriculum in general

Theme	Subthemes	Related Issues
Learners' thoughts about the new A-Level curriculum in general	A challenging but worthwhile curriculum	Learners found the new A-Level curriculum challenging but valuable. Issues included inadequate resources, fieldwork competing with theory, overloaded content, insufficient time and poor scheduling of assessments, leading to fatigue and misaligned focus despite appreciating new subjects' structures.
	The content versus implementation dichotomy	Learners appreciated the practical, relevant content of the new A-Level curriculum but struggled with insufficient resources, unprepared teachers and the overwhelming integration of fieldwork. They suggested structural adjustments, including extending course duration and dedicating time specifically to projects.
	Learners motivated by curriculum relevance	Learners appreciated the new A-Level curriculum for fostering independence, research skills and preparation for higher education. They valued its focus on addressing economic issues and improving livelihood prospects, though challenges in implementation persisted.
	Teacher-learner consensus on curriculum reception	Teachers viewed the new A-Level curriculum positively for its economic relevance but highlighted concerns about CALA activities being excessive, tiresome and formalistic, detracting from learners' overall enjoyment and focus on other curriculum components.

Documented evidence from class registers and records of marks from School 1 and School 2 indicated mixed experiences across subjects. Table 2 summarises the observations made from the records of marks.

Table 2: Interpreted records of marks for A-Level learners across the two schools

Subject	Largely failed	Average	Largely passed
Mathematics		✓	
Physics	✓		
Biology		✓	

Chemistry	✓		
Animal Science		✓	
Crop Science			✓
Geography			✓
Accounting		✓	
Business Management			✓
Home Management			✓
Shona Literature		✓	
Literature in English		✓	
Shona Grammar	✓		
History		✓	
Sociology			✓
Heritage Studies			✓
Family and Religious Studies			✓

The above findings are analysed in the following paragraphs.

A challenging but worthwhile curriculum

The new A-Level curriculum was seen by learners as both valuable and demanding. Many appreciated the expanded subject choices and relevance to real-world issues. However, the challenges posed by inadequate resources, overloaded content and poorly integrated continuous assessment (CALAs) hindered their ability to fully engage with the curriculum. One learner noted, "It is hard especially because the school does not have adequate equipment to implement new subjects" (Girl 1, FGD1), while another expressed frustration at the misalignment of CALAs with theoretical learning, stating, "CALAs are competing with theory instead of the two being complementary" (Girl 1, FGD2). This sentiment was supported by document analysis from class registers, where a notable gap between subject completion rates and learner performance highlighted that the overload in certain subjects might be contributing to learners' difficulties. Suggestions for improvement included extending the two-year duration of the curriculum to alleviate fatigue and improve focus, with one learner commenting, "Maybe an additional year on top of the current two years would be adequate" (Girl 2, FGD1). These calls for adjustments reflect the increased strain on learners who felt overburdened by the existing structure.

The content versus implementation dichotomy

Learners highlighted the practicality and relevance of the new curriculum's content but felt that its implementation lacked the necessary support. Insufficient material readiness and unprepared teaching strategies created a sense of experimentation. As one learner remarked, "We do not have material readiness for the new ways of learning, and this is why I feel the new curriculum is an experiment" (Girl 3, FGD1). This theme is echoed in the performance data, where subjects like Mathematics, Physics and Shona Grammar showed significant struggles, suggesting that a lack of resources and preparedness

affected learner outcomes. Furthermore, the overwhelming focus on fieldwork led some to call for structural adjustments, such as dedicating an entire year to these activities. Another learner stated, "I feel that fieldwork activities require an entire year dedicated to them alone so that they do not interfere with reading" (Girl 4, FGD1). Documented evidence from class registers in both schools reflected that learners, despite showing high interest in subjects like Chemistry and Geography, struggled with the excessive burden of research, suggesting that implementation was hindering the full potential of the curriculum.

Learners motivated by curriculum relevance

Despite the challenges, learners valued the curriculum's focus on fostering independence, research skills and economic relevance. They appreciated its role in preparing them for higher education and addressing livelihood prospects. One learner noted, "Gathering notes through research instead of being spoon-fed is the best part of the new curriculum for me" (Boy 3, FGD2), while another observed, "To some of us, the new curriculum is addressing pertinent economic issues and expanding our livelihood prospects" (Boy 5, FGD1). This appreciation of the curriculum's economic focus is consistent with document analysis, where subjects with a more direct practical application, such as Animal Science and Crop Science, showed more positive learner engagement, aligning with their desire for curriculum content that addresses real-world issues. These findings suggest that, despite implementation hurdles, the curriculum's relevance to future prospects is a motivating factor for many learners.

Teacher-learner consensus on curriculum reception

Teachers echoed the learners' positive views about the curriculum's relevance but expressed concerns about the excessive workload associated with fieldwork research. A teacher remarked, "My learners are largely positive about the rest of the curriculum components but are also complaining that the CALA activities are too packed" (Male Teacher 1, School 1). Another observed, "Had it not been for the hectic nature of the CALA activities, the new curriculum is highly welcome among my learners" (Female Teacher 1, School 2). Document analysis from both schools showed a mixed reception across subjects, where learners excelled in subjects like Crop Science and Geography but struggled with the overwhelming workload in subjects like Physics and Mathematics. Teachers also highlighted the economic thrust of the curriculum, noting its potential to address unemployment and poverty, albeit with delayed results. However, these positive views were toned down by concerns over how CALA activities disrupted learning, with teachers also calling for a reduction in their volume.

To conclude, the heritage-based A-Level curriculum was seen as a promising framework that aligned with learners' aspirations for higher education and economic empowerment. However, significant implementation challenges, particularly around CALA activities, affected its full potential. Both learners and teachers emphasised the need for refinements, including better resource allocation, extended timelines and streamlined continuous assessments, to enhance the curriculum's impact. Document analysis corroborated these findings, particularly in subjects like Mathematics, Physics and Shona Grammar, where learners struggled due to resource limitations and the overwhelming CALA requirements. Overall, the curriculum was considered worthwhile but in need of refinements to ensure its success.

6.2 How Female Learners Particularly Perceived the Heritage-Based A-Level Curriculum

This subsection conveys the specific perceptions of female learners regarding the new A-Level curriculum, highlighting their particular views as a social group. The data presentation is structured into

the following themes: the new curriculum empowering female learners; some perceived threats to female learner empowerment, school-based projects bearing significant influence on female learner experiences, and female learner performance disparities in STEM and Arts/Humanities. Each theme is supported by verbatim quotations from FGDs, interviews with teachers, and insights derived from document analyses. Table 3 provides a summary of the theme and issues on how female learners particularly perceived the new A-Level curriculum.

Table 3: Theme and subthemes on how female learners particularly perceived the new A-Level curriculum

Theme	Subthemes	Related Issues
Female learners perceptions about the new A-Level curriculum	The new curriculum empowering female learners	Female learners perceived the new A-Level curriculum as empowering, offering broader subject choices, easier tasks in the form of CALA, and more equal performance opportunities with boys. Some felt the curriculum's homework focus was particularly suitable for them.
	Some perceived threats to female learner empowerment	Female learners faced challenges, including overburdening chores, unsafe fieldwork conditions, time constraints on homework, limited patience with the curriculum's expansiveness, and potential exploitation for marks due to adolescent vulnerabilities.
	School-based projects bearing significant influence on female learner experiences	The new curriculum, with field research and restructured subjects, promoted teamwork, reduced theoretical overload, and enabled merit-based entry into Sciences for girls. However, concerns about unsafe research conditions and excessive content remained significant.
	Female learner performance disparities in STEM and Arts/Humanities	Female learners excelled in Arts and Humanities, benefiting from informal engagement and wider subject options, while disparities persisted in STEM due to limited teacher support and the challenging nature of technical concepts for structured learning.

The following paragraphs serve to analyse these findings.

The new curriculum empowering female learners

The introduction of the heritage-based A-Level curriculum was perceived by female learners as empowering due to its broader subject choices, integration of practical tasks and homework-focused approach. Girls expressed satisfaction with the new curriculum's inclusivity of subjects they enjoyed at earlier education levels, such as Home Economics and Physical Education. One boy in FGD1 observed:

The previous A-Level curriculum had a tendency to exclude subjects like Home Economics and Physical Education which the girls would have enjoyed since primary school days. Now the new A-Level curriculum seems to have broadened the academic choices thereby bringing in female learners' favourite disciplines.

Additionally, CALA activities allowed girls to perform at par with boys, as noted by a male teacher from School 1, "Girls are beginning to realise that their performance over the past three years has been at par

with that of boys. As a result, they are increasingly returning to the Sciences after incurring some nightmarish performance following the hectic STEM initiative." The curriculum also appealed to girls by making learning less daunting. Girl 6 in FGD2 remarked saying, "It would appear CALAs in the new curriculum are designed to lure female learners to A-Level because they are easy."

Some perceived threats to female learner empowerment

Despite these benefits, the curriculum posed challenges, particularly for female learners. The dual burden of house chores and fieldwork created time constraints. As Girl 6 from FGD2 had this to say, "We are overburdened by house chores, and the new curriculum adds the new burden of fieldwork." Further, the fieldwork aspect posed safety risks for girls. A male teacher from School 2 pointed out that, "Female learners have sometimes fallen prey to irresponsible informants who molest them during researches, making fieldwork a somewhat unsafe component of the new curriculum for girls." The expansiveness of the curriculum also tested girls' patience, as highlighted by a female teacher from School 2, saying, "The new curriculum contradicted itself by making the new subjects too extensive as well."

School-based projects bearing significant influence on female learner experiences

School-based projects fostered teamwork and reduced theoretical overload, creating a collaborative learning environment. Girl 6 in FGD2 shared that, "Project activities make girls and boys learn to cover up for each other's weaknesses as competition is substituted by teamwork." Merit-based entry into Sciences was another notable shift, as described by a male teacher from School 1, saying, "Nowadays girls are coming into the Sciences class by merit and not by affirmative action as in the days of STEM." However, concerns persisted over the safety of fieldwork. A female teacher from School 1 highlighted thus, "Some of them that are innocent may be sexually preyed upon during fieldwork."

Female learner performance disparities in STEM and Arts/Humanities

Performance disparities between Arts/Humanities and STEM subjects were evident. Girls excelled in Arts due to informal engagement through activities like reading newspapers and exploring the internet, as noted by Girl 1 in FGD2, who said, "Languages and other social subjects tend to be more accessible for us, as we often engage with these subjects informally outside of school." In contrast, STEM subjects required focused in-class attention, which some girls found challenging. Girl 3 in FGD1 observed: "I really think our Science teachers do not worry about our performance in that class as much as they do for boys." Document analysis confirmed these trends, showing female successes in subjects like Geography and Literature, while deficits persisted in Mathematics and Physics.

Therefore, the heritage-based A-Level curriculum offered female learners new opportunities to thrive in previously inaccessible subjects, fostering a sense of empowerment. However, significant challenges—ranging from workload disparities to STEM performance gaps—highlighted the need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable learning outcomes for all learners.

6.3 How Male Learners Perceived the Heritage-Based A-Level Curriculum

This subsection explores how male learners perceive the new A-Level curriculum, with a focus on three thematic areas: the perceived benefits of the curriculum, the challenges it presents and the boys' participation trends across different subjects. Table 4 captures the theme and issues on how male learners perceive the new A-Level curriculum.

Table 4: Theme and subthemes on how male learners perceive the new A-Level curriculum

Theme	Subthemes	Related Issues
How male learners perceive the New A-Level curriculum	Perceived benefits of the new curriculum for male learners	Male learners viewed the new curriculum positively, appreciating its wider subject choices, practical research focus and independent components like Heritage Studies. They found research activities engaging, especially in Sciences and Commercials, offering outdoor opportunities and convenience.
	Challenges faced by male learners with the new curriculum	Male learners faced challenges with the new curriculum, including perceived unfairness, overwhelming workloads, overzealous academic routines and overloaded syllabi. Time constraints, discontent with expanded content and frustration with research requirements further compounded their struggles.
	Trends in male participation across various subjects	Male participation trends showed a strong inclination towards Sciences, driven by personal interest, societal expectations, and parental influence. Boys who excelled in Arts performed well, though some avoided areas with perceived competition from girls.

The above given findings are analysed below.

Perceived benefits of the new curriculum for male learners

Male learners viewed the heritage-based A-Level curriculum as beneficial due to its wider subject choices, practical focus and emphasis on independent components like Heritage Studies. Boys appreciated the democratic nature of the curriculum, as expressed by one learner who noted, “There are many subjects to consider per department thereby making the curriculum democratic” (Boy 4, FGD1). Research activities, particularly within out-of-school projects, were highlighted as engaging and relevant, with another learner sharing, “CALA activities make us researchers as we make our own notes, some of which our teachers find really handy at the end of the day” (Boy 6, FGD2). Teachers affirmed this, noting boys found the coursework easier and more convenient compared to girls.

The introduction of ICT as a mainstream subject, alongside the separation of Heritage Studies from History, was also celebrated. One learner explained, “Heritage used to be a subcomponent of History but now it stands independently. The new curriculum made work easier and less complex” (Boy 1, FGD2). Document analysis showed high male enrolment in STEM and Commercial subjects, reflecting the alignment between the curriculum’s practical components and male learners’ preferences.

Challenges faced by male learners with the heritage-based curriculum

Despite its benefits, male learners encountered significant challenges with this curriculum. Overwhelming workloads and expanded syllabi were central issues, with one learner remarking, “The number of topics to be covered is not in tandem with the limited time allocated” (Boy 3, FGD 1). Some boys perceived the curriculum as “overzealous” with its additional components (Boy 6, FGD2). Time constraints and the mismatch between curriculum content and study schedules led to frustrations, as one teacher observed, “The boys dislike the fact that the new curriculum expanded the curriculum content but did not extend the times of study to match the new volumes of work” (Male Teacher 4, School 1). Additionally, boys expressed dissatisfaction with research requirements, with some seeking shortcuts

that were discouraged during projects. This was highlighted by a teacher who noted, "Boys tend to want shortcuts in academic assignments, which are discouraged when completing research projects" (Male Teacher 2, School 1). These challenges were compounded by resource inequalities. One learner expressed the sentiment of dashed hopes, stating, "The new curriculum is somehow unfair… without the means our dreams die as pipedreams" (Boy 2, FGD1).

Trends in male participation across various subjects

Participation trends revealed a strong male inclination towards STEM and Commercial subjects, influenced by interest, societal expectations and parental pressure. A learner voiced a sense of entitlement towards Sciences, saying, "Being a boy, I feel entitled to learning Sciences and therefore enjoy these subjects even when they seem difficult" (Boy 5, FGD1). However, some boys were steered into STEM fields by parental demands, as a girl participant remarked, "Sometimes it is not about interest but obligation as some parents demand that their boys learn Sciences" (Girl 4, FGD2). Document analysis supported these observations, showing high male enrolment in subjects like Mathematics, Chemistry and Crop Science, and underrepresentation in Arts subjects such as Literature and Family & Religious Studies (FRS). Despite this trend, FGDs revealed that some boys thrived in Arts, especially where competition with girls was minimal. One girl noted, "Boys who stick to Arts subjects are often high performers there… Boys are particularly comfortable in areas where they do not face girl competition" (Girl 1, FGD2).

From the above analytical insights, the heritage-based A-Level curriculum provided male learners with opportunities to engage in practical and research-driven learning, fostering independent thinking and promoting participation in traditionally prestigious fields like Sciences. However, the curriculum's expanded content and workload presented significant challenges, particularly regarding time management and resource availability. Document analysis confirmed these trends, highlighting the concentration of boys in STEM fields and their lower representation in Arts subjects. While the curriculum encouraged boys to explore diverse academic interests, parental expectations and societal norms influenced their choices, occasionally at the expense of personal preference. This dynamic suggests that, while male learners benefitted from the curriculum's innovations, structural and societal challenges persisted in balancing their academic experiences.

6.4 Why Certain Subjects are Considered Popular by Each Gender

This section presents the findings on the factors driving the popularity of specific A-Level subjects among male and female learners. The themes are organised around the perspectives of learners and teachers, supported by document analysis of class registers. Table 5 captures the theme and issues on why certain subjects were considered popular by each gender.

Table 5: Theme and subthemes on why certain subjects were considered popular by each gender

Theme	Subthemes	Related Issues
Why certain subjects are considered popular by each gender	Mathematically-oriented subjects for boys	Boys favoured mathematically-oriented subjects due to their interest in problem-solving, perceived aptitude, and the prestige linked to Sciences. This preference was reinforced by societal expectations, competition avoidance with girls, and gendered notions of masculinity.
	Non-	Girls favoured non-mathematical subjects like History and

	mathematical subjects for girls	Family and Religious Studies (FRS) for their narrative appeal and perceived ease. They avoided Sciences due to career challenges and preferred Arts for their flexibility and opportunities.
	Subject popularity as a gendered phenomenon	Subject popularity was seen as gendered, with girls favouring interactive, discussion-based projects and subjects like Geography, Computer Science, and Biology, while boys preferred hands-on tasks and gravitated towards Sciences and Commercials due to CALA activities.

The following paragraphs make an analysis of these presented findings.

Mathematically-oriented subjects for boys

Boys' preference for mathematically-oriented subjects, such as Mathematics and Sciences, was linked to their enjoyment of problem-solving and the prestige attached to excelling in these areas. Boy 3 in FGD1 said, "We dominate Mathematics and other Science subjects because we enjoy problem-solving through formulae and theorems." This preference was often driven by perceived natural aptitude and societal expectations. According to Boy 2 in FGD2, "Mathematical ability is the singular factor guiding us boys towards selecting Sciences and Commercials." Teachers noted this inclination, with Male Teacher 2, School 1 stating that boys showed great enthusiasm for Mathematics and Agriculture, areas where they often surpassed girls. Additionally, girls' discomfort with mathematical tasks boosted boys' confidence, as they saw excelling in these subjects as a mark of masculinity. Female Teacher 1, School 1 observed, "The tendency for girls to shy away from Sciences boosts boys' confidence, as they see selecting the subjects in this area as a point of male pride." Thus, boys' subject choices were shaped by a combination of personal enjoyment, societal pressures, and the desire for distinction.

Non-mathematical subjects for girls

Girls preferred non-mathematical subjects, such as History and FRS, due to their narrative appeal and perceived ease. In FGD1, Girl 4 explained, "The History subject offered in the new curriculum is our favourite because we go through interesting stories and themes." This preference was supported by the belief that Arts subjects were less demanding than Sciences. As Female Teacher 1, School 1 noted, "Girls appear to favour subjects that are perceived as easier, such as FRS, while finding Sciences too challenging due to their demanding careers." The competitive job market in science-related fields led many girls to shy away from these subjects. Male Teacher 1, School 2 stated, "Girls tend to avoid Sciences due to the challenging job market, where local industries are limited and government positions are highly competitive. Instead, they prefer Arts subjects, as these offer opportunities outside the industrial sector." Girls mostly settled for Arts, seeking subjects that were perceived as more manageable and aligned with their aspirations in less competitive fields.

Subject popularity as a gendered phenomenon

Subject popularity at A-Level was viewed as a gendered phenomenon, with boys preferring hands-on, technical subjects, and girls favouring more interactive, discussion-based projects. According to Female Teacher 1, School 1, "Girls generally favour those that involve interacting with people and engaging in discussions, while boys prefer hands-on tasks that allow them to test and experiment practically." This was reflected in the subject choices of both genders, with girls performing well in subjects like Geography, Computer Science and Biology but often not enjoying them as much as History or Literature. As Female Teacher 3, School 2 observed, "Geography, Computer Science and Biology are

popular among girls based on attendance and performance, but they do not seem to enjoy them as much as History and Literature." In contrast, boys were drawn to the practical aspects of Sciences and Commercials, with many expressing enthusiasm for the hands-on field activities. Male Teacher 1, School 1 explained, "Boys are increasingly choosing hands-on subjects in the Sciences and Commercials, often at the cost of Arts and Humanities, such as ChiShona." This trend underscored how gendered expectations and preferences shaped subject choices, with boys favouring technical challenges and girls opting for more socially engaging, narrative-based subjects.

Document analysis and gendered trends

Document analysis of class registers reinforced the gendered nature of subject popularity. Boys predominantly enrolled in STEM subjects, such as Chemistry, Crop Science and Mathematics, while girls leaned towards Arts subjects like Home Management, FRS and History. This pattern of gendered preferences was also evident in FGDs, where boys expressed a strong preference for subjects with a technical or problem-solving focus, and girls favoured subjects that offered storytelling or interactive elements. This alignment between FGD insights and class register data highlights the significant influence of gender norms on subject selection, suggesting that boys and girls were not only responding to personal interest but also to societal expectations and perceptions of prestige. These findings pointed to the need for a more gender-sensitive approach to curriculum design, which considers the underlying biases shaping subject choices and provides support to break down these gendered barriers.

6.5 Gendered Perceptions of Unpopular Subjects among A-Level Learners

The study also explored the subjects perceived as unpopular by male and female learners, aiming to uncover the reasons behind these negative perceptions. Through FGDs and interviews, various themes emerged that highlight the underlying factors influencing subject unpopularity among learners. The findings are presented below, with verbatim quotations from the participants to support each sub-theme. The theme and issues on gendered perceptions of unpopular subjects among A-Level learners are captured on Table 6.

Table 6: Theme and subthemes on gendered perceptions of unpopular subjects among A-Level learners

Theme	Subthemes	Related Issues
Gendered perceptions of unpopular subjects among A-Level learners	Subjects as gendered domains	Gendered perceptions led to girls avoiding subjects like Mathematics due to its demanding nature and home responsibilities, while boys disliked language-focused subjects like Literature and History, finding them less engaging and too content-heavy.
	Concerns regarding physical and cognitive demands	Girls expressed concerns about the physical demands of subjects like Crop Science, citing outdoor work, risks, and labour, while boys disliked subjects with heavy cognitive and time demands, feeling they hindered their leisure and independence.
	Sociocultural influences on subject selection	Sociocultural influences shaped subject selection, with girls avoiding Mathematics and STEM subjects due to their association with industrial careers, while boys dismissed

		Arts subjects like Literature and History, prioritising prestige over interest or ability.

These findings are analysed below.

Subjects as gendered domains

Gendered perceptions strongly influenced subject choices, with girls avoiding Mathematics and other STEM subjects due to their perceived physical and cognitive demands. A girl in FGD1 explained that Mathematics was "very much unpopular among us girls because we want rest time after school," linking the subject's demanding nature with the need for balance between academic and home responsibilities. Similarly, another girl expressed, "All subjects that are loaded with arithmetic are sickening to girls," suggesting that subjects associated with boys' strengths in mathematics and science were unwelcome due to the fear of failure and social humiliation. On the other hand, boys avoided language-heavy subjects like Literature, associating them with skills that girls typically excelled in. As one boy in FGD1 mentioned, "Rarely do boys enjoy linguistic gymnastics because there we know we are no match against girls," reflecting the belief that subjects requiring strong verbal skills were less appealing to them.

Concerns regarding physical and cognitive demands

Physical and cognitive demands further shaped subject selection. Girls expressed concerns about subjects like Crop Science, which require outdoor work and physical exertion. One girl shared that she disliked Crop Science "because it takes us outdoors where we risk sunburns and other adverse conditions of weather." Another girl mentioned, "We do not enjoy subjects that make us lift heavy objects, hold dangerous machines or substances, or perform menial jobs like weeding." This discomfort with physical tasks highlights how subjects perceived as labour-intensive or physically risky were deemed unsuitable by many girls. On the other hand, boys expressed frustration with subjects that demanded extensive reading and time commitment, such as History and Literature. One boy revealed, "All subjects that demand avid reading of voluminous notes...squander my spare time," while another boy shared, "I do not enjoy any subject whose single homework task takes more than twenty minutes," showcasing how subjects requiring intense cognitive engagement and external help conflicted with their desire for autonomy and leisure.

Sociocultural influences on subject selection

Sociocultural factors, including traditional gender roles and societal expectations, significantly influenced subject preferences. Girls were reluctant to pursue Mathematics and STEM subjects, as these were often associated with careers in industry, which they felt were not suitable for them. A girl in FGD1 noted that "Mathematics belongs to the industry and yet girls are least geared for the industry," indicating the perception that these subjects led to careers outside the domestic sphere, which many girls were uncomfortable with. Teachers also observed that girls tended to favour Arts subjects over Sciences due to traditional roles as home caregivers. As one female teacher commented, "It seems our girls are finding it hard to break the tradition of being home minders," linking this to the preference for subjects perceived as less demanding. Boys, on the other hand, avoided subjects like ChiShona and History, viewing them as lacking prestige. A male teacher explained that boys found ChiShona "too easy" and associated it with low status, while a boy in FGD1 stated that "Literature and History are against my nature as a recreational being," reflecting how these subjects were perceived as unappealing due to their association with lower prestige or less practical value.

The analysis reveals that gendered perceptions and sociocultural influences play a pivotal role in shaping the subject choices of A-Level learners. Girls' avoidance of STEM subjects and preference for Arts

subjects is rooted in both the physical and cognitive demands of subjects like Mathematics and Crop Science, as well as the broader societal expectations that shape their identities. Similarly, boys' reluctance to engage with Arts subjects is driven by perceptions of low prestige and a desire for subjects that align with their masculine identities. These findings suggest a need for interventions to challenge gender stereotypes in subject selection and promote a more inclusive, balanced approach to education.

7. Discussion

7.1 Learners' Thoughts about the Heritage-Based A-Level Curriculum in General

The majority of learners found the new curriculum challenging but worthy. Some found it difficult due to inadequate equipment, in line with Chikoko (2021) and Ndlovu and Chikohomero (2023) who decry the lack of support for new subjects. Others disliked the research component (formerly CALA) for the same reasons documented earlier by Kabweza (2021:141) – "complicating the process of learning" and the fact that it was not allocated timetable slots. Some advocated for a fieldwork-free A-Level curriculum, as the fieldwork under CALA had made learning too long and bothersome, supporting Mavima (2023) who blamed CALAs for causing learner fatigue. Some learners also felt that the new curriculum learning material is fine but timetable allocations are too small as postulated by Kabweza (2021) and Tsimba *et al.* (2022). The analysed documents showed Physics, Chemistry and Shona Grammar to be among the hardest new curriculum subjects followed by Mathematics, Biology, Animal Science, Accounting, Shona Literature, History and literature in English which were average subjects; while the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education - MOPSE (2020) excluded non-Sciences from the list of most difficult subjects. It was revealed from the document analysis that Crop Science, Geography, Business Management and Home Management were largely passed and therefore popular among the learners, and this finding is supported by Mwadada (2020) who describes the curriculum reform process as having replenished a number of curriculum subjects.

Turning to teachers, some found the curriculum to be too packed with field projects, particularly the former CALA activities, while others found it easy and welcome for their learners. The latter perspective tends to be reinforcing Batsirai (2020) who anticipated that the classrooms were going to acclimatise with the changes. Some teachers suggested reducing these activities to allow more time for other curriculum elements, maintaining the reductionist standpoint of Batsirai (2020), reiterated by UNICEF (2023). Others appreciated the heritage-based curriculum's economic thrust, which addresses pertinent economic issues. In the same line, some scholars praise the curriculum reforms for expanding the learners' livelihood prospects (Marufu & Chisango, 2023; Mandaza & Muchengeti, 2024).

Analysed class registers showed that home-grown content, such as subjects like Heritage and FRS, is also popular among many learners. However, some learners held different opinions regarding these newly added subjects. A few learners found these new subjects needlessly overloaded. The majority found them worthy regardless, a position which tends to agree with Mandaza and Muchengeti (2024) who find the benefits of studying heritage-based subjects outweighing the accompanying difficulties. Most learners enjoyed research and student responsibilities in contradiction to Zinyama and Mashava (2023) who maintain that the projects component was too long and complicated. Records of marks depicted this pattern and revealed that the projects were facilitating girls' performance in a number of subjects as opined by Bhunu and Green (2023).

Teachers too had mixed opinions about how their learners received the new A-Level curriculum. Fewer teachers believed that the new curriculum was unpopular to learners. The majority joined Batsirai (2020)

and UNICEF (2023) in admiring the long-term benefits it brought to the learners while accepting the existence of operational challenges. Contrary to Hlaise (2023) who feels that CALAs are too formal and burdensome to the learners, many teachers praised these activities. The majority of teachers, while believing that the new curriculum was visually appealing to learners, bemoaned the existence of a few new challenges for learners as a result of the new curriculum, such as carrying heavy book packs as a sign that the learners were not consulted (Makoni, 2022). The analysed documents also testified to the existence of so many subjects although some of the subjects were optional rather than mandatory.

7.2 How Female Learners Particularly Perceived the Heritage-Based A-Level Curriculum

The new curriculum has been viewed as either empowering or disempowering for the girls. The greater bulk of learners believed that the new curriculum set the girls at an advantage, as it includes subjects they would have enjoyed at O-Level and earlier (Makoni, 2022). A few learners, however, questioned the convenience brought about by CALAs, which consume too much time and burden the girl learner with house chores as earlier concluded by Bhunu and Green (2023). These divided sentiments were also discernible among the teachers, the majority of whom praised the new curriculum for luring girls to Sciences class while others criticised it for having been launched abruptly (Nguyen & Wang, 2021; Mandaza & Muchengeti, 2024).

Findings from the document analysis showed the new curriculum also introduced new subjects; and the records of marks particularly revealed that girls performed well in most of the new subjects such as FRS, Heritage Studies and Shona Literature (Hlaise, 2023). Dominant sentiments from both the learners and the teachers were that these new subjects were more interesting for girls who prefer perusing notes instead of applying formulae (Mwadada, 2020; Nyamanhindi; 2022b). Interestingly, most participants, including boys, criticised the CALA component for overstraining girl learners, as they are often encumbered with household chores (Kabweza, 2021; Tsimba *et al.*, 2022). Few girl learners found the new curriculum to be too expansive, as most hard work is done at home as homework. For the same reason that most of the hard work is done at home as homework, the majority of girls enjoyed the new curriculum because the learner and the guardian are almost equally in school. These ones, however, bewailed molestation during SBP researches, making the CALA component somewhat unsafe for girls (Mavima, 2023).

Most girls said they were beginning to perform at par with boys thanks to the new curriculum. From the document analysis conducted, girls often performed better than boys in at least six subjects, including Geography, which spans all subject areas (Gwatura, 2021). Science teachers testified to a notable influx of girls in the Sciences class. The teachers remembered that previous A-Level girls had experienced nightmarish performance following the hectic STEM initiative prior to the new curriculum (Kabweza, 2022). The new curriculum was found to be generally a blessing to the A-Level girl, but the framework of the CALA component was inconveniencing. Learners and their teachers concurred that the new curriculum would have capably empowered the high school girl, but it is rendered incapable by the hectic CALAs, which according to Mavima (2023) are gradually being replaced with SBPs.

7.3 How Male Learners in Particular Perceive the Heritage-Based A-Level Curriculum

Most boys expressed interest in the new curriculum, particularly in ICT education. ZIE (2022) find these technology-based subjects to be realistically more accessible to boys given the male penchant for technology. Interviews with both the teachers and the learners also uncovered an interestingly wide range of subjects for boys to select. However, the analysed documents did not show some of the said subjects, perhaps because the teachers opted not to submit some of the records as, according to Johnson

and Clarke (2021), institutional records are protected by the ethical code of official secrecy. To many boys, the introduction of CALAs made learning more interactive, a finding which upholds Washe's (2021) observation that male learners prefer practical demonstration to theory memorisation. However, a few boys also expressed concerns about the overloading of content, maintaining as it were the claim by Tsimba *et al.* (2022) that the time allocated for most secondary school syllabi is often limited. Boys also wanted shortcuts in academic assignments while, according to Batsirai (2020), the idea of CALAs/SBPs among other things was to discourage such academic crash programmes. This suggests that while the new curriculum aims to address gender gaps in certain classes, it may also create new inequalities.

Boys said they were more drawn towards Sciences and Commercials, a finding which Ruche and Ndlela (2020) concur with. The class registers showed that the proportion of boys in class varied, with boys dominating STEM subjects like Mathematics, Chemistry, Animal Science and Crop Science. Their teachers said the boys disliked the concept of 'academic greening' in Arts and Humanities, which added new components to most subjects but did not extend study times to match the new volumes of work. Nyamanhindi (2022a) criticises curriculum greening arguing that it often ends up being overdone. This, the teachers concurred, was the reason the boys were gradually showing an aversion to Arts and Humanities subjects, a trend that the researcher noted during document analysis as well. Boys were also found to be underrepresented in subjects where they historically commanded a vast majority, such as Sociology and Literature in English. This finding concurs with ZIE (2022) and UNICEF (2023) who declare a growing influx of female learners in the humanities.

7.4 Why Certain Subjects are Considered Popular by Each Gender

The discrepancy between teachers' perceptions and girls' actual preferences is noteworthy from the findings of this study. In a way that cements the conclusions from some past studies, wherein teachers were often found to misinterpret the interests of female students (Mashininga, 2022; Paechter & Menzies, 2023), the current study revealed that some teachers hardly understand the female academic interests potentially because girls are relatively new entrants in fields traditionally dominated by boys. This misunderstanding is reflected in the teachers' assumption that girls prefer subjects dominated by CALAs. However, the FGDs revealed the girls' preference for non-mathematical disciplines, such as History, Literature and Sociology. These disciplines were previously found to be more engaging and less complex due to the absence of mathematical content (Paechter & Menzies, 2023).

The introduction of the new curriculum has made History more appealing to A-Level girls by emphasising interesting narratives and themes. Previously, A-Level History worldwide was convoluted by the involvement of complex mathematical processing such as dates of manifold events (Mwadada, 2020; Marufu & Chisango, 2023). Despite this, class registers did not show a significant increase in female enrollment in History classes, and performance records indicated that girls performed better in Geography than in History. This tends to reiterate what Kabweza's (2021) earlier suggested, that while Art subjects may appear engaging to girls, it may not translate into higher academic performance or enrollment figures.

Boys, conversely, showed a strong preference for subjects involving calculations in this study, such as Mathematics, Physics and Accounts. This preference may be rooted in their appreciation for algorithmic procedures and problem-solving inherent in these subjects (Nyamandhindi, 2022b). It also came out that the boys' preference for Mathematics might be driven by the perceived prestige associated with excelling in mathematical disciplines. Some boys endure these subjects despite performance challenges,

motivated by the accepted belief that proficiency in Mathematics differentiates them from girls (Mwadada, 2020; Mpofu, 2021; Marufu & Chisango, 2023).

The analysis reveals that gender-based preferences for academic subjects are influenced by perceptions of complexity, engagement and societal expectations. While girls lean towards narrative and non-mathematical subjects due to their perceived simplicity and engaging nature, boys are drawn to mathematical disciplines for the algorithmic challenges and the prestige associated with mathematics. This dynamic is further complicated by teachers' misunderstandings of their learners' preferences, highlighting the need for better communication and understanding between educators and learners.

7.5 Why Male and Female Learners Respectively Consider Certain Subjects Unpopular

Girls and boys had different views on certain subjects, with girls loathing subjects like Mathematics, Biology, Physics and Chemistry, while boys disliked subjects like Literature in English, History and Shona Literature. Girls explained that they dislike subjects that involve heavy lifting and dangerous jobs, in agreement with Kabweza (2021) who establishes that female professional preferences hardly link with blue-collar careers. On the other hand, boys said they dislike subjects that require passionate reading and lengthy homework tasks, contrary to Ndlovu (2022) who opines that boys are more likely than girls to enjoy their homework. These findings were also reiterated by observations from the analysed registers and records of marks where a marked dichotomy existed between girl-dominated subjects and boy-dominated ones. Teachers concurred that girls dreaded hard sciences like Mathematics, Biology, Physics and Chemistry, adding that the history of girls failing STEM subjects during the country's 'STEM experiment' (Chari, 2023) affected later generations of A-Level girls.

Regarding boy preferences, however, some teachers found numerous boys apprehensive of sciences due to the absence of social capital connections in the private sector where those subjects mostly apply. From the perspective of the analysed documents, some girls who attended sciences appeared to have guardians whose professional backgrounds dovetailed with sciences. This finding retells an earlier conclusion by Dube and Mavhunga (2020) who found social capital to be one of the socioeconomic factors influencing subject choices in rural Zimbabwe. Some boys said they do not enjoy walkover assignments and the low self-esteem associated with Arts and Humanities subjects. Other boys explained that they were less inclined to engage in subjects associated with home and family life, such as Home Management and Family and Religious Studies (FRS), again in line with Dube and Mavhunga (2020) who underscore the strength of gender typecast which steers boys towards outdoor professions. On the other hand, some girls described Sciences, Agriculture and Business as the boys' fields, which affected their interest, confidence or encouragement in pursuing such subjects.

A common view among the teachers was that Commercials were considered pseudo-Sciences and pseudo-Arts. This could imply that the learners hardly targeted Commercial subjects as their primary preferences but as a result of secondary considerations such as availability of placement and inability to secure a place somewhere else. In the analysed documents, these subjects appeared to have enjoyed significant in-transfers during the studied period, augmenting a previous study by Muzira and Bondai (2020) who state that Zimbabwean secondary school learners are average performers in the Commercials area and therefore choose it on second thoughts rather than straightaway.

8. Conclusions and Limitations

8.1 Conclusions

The study revealed complex gendered perceptions of Zimbabwe's A-Level learners to the new A-Level curriculum. The majority of learners found the new curriculum challenging but ultimately beneficial, though some struggled due to inadequate resources and support for new subjects. Notably, the CALA component elicited mixed reactions, with many students and teachers finding it overly demanding and time-consuming. Despite this, some learners appreciated the curriculum's emphasis on practical and economic skills, which are seen as beneficial for future livelihood prospects.

Girls generally viewed the new curriculum positively, particularly as it introduced subjects that were more engaging thereby suiting their interests. However, the CALA component was frequently cited as a burden, especially given the additional responsibilities many girls face at home. The curriculum was seen as a double-edged sword for girl learners: while it opened new opportunities and improved their performance in certain subjects, it also imposed significant demands that sometimes hindered their overall academic experience.

Boys, on the other hand, showed a marked preference for STEM and commercial subjects, enjoying the practical and algorithmic nature of these disciplines. However, they also faced challenges related to the volume of content and the time required to complete CALA tasks. Boys expressed a desire for a more streamlined curriculum that would allow them to focus more deeply on fewer subjects.

The gender-based preferences for certain subjects were clear, with girls gravitating towards non-mathematical, narrative-oriented subjects like History, Literature in English and FRS, while boys preferred mathematically intensive subjects such as Mathematics, Physics and Accounts. These preferences were influenced by various factors, including societal expectations, perceived difficulty, and the alignment of subjects with future career aspirations.

The understanding of teachers regarding the learners' perspectives varied, with some seeing the new curriculum's economic focus as beneficial to their learners, while others criticised the CALA activities for being too burdensome. The document analysis corroborated these mixed sentiments, showing a diverse range of subjects being popular among different genders, with performance and engagement levels varying accordingly.

In a nutshell, while Zimbabwe's new A-Level curriculum has brought about significant changes that have the potential to enhance educational outcomes, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed. The CALA component, in particular, requires reconsideration to ensure it supports rather than hinders learners' progress. Tailoring the curriculum to better balance academic demands with available resources and student capacities will be crucial in making it more effective and inclusive.

8.2 Study Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into gendered perceptions of Zimbabwe's A-Level curriculum, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research was limited to two schools in Masvingo District, which may not fully represent learners' experiences in other regions of Zimbabwe. With only 24 learners and 10 teachers participating, the findings may not capture the full diversity of perspectives across the broader educational system. This study exclusively examined A-Level learners, leaving the influence of the heritage-based curriculum at other educational levels unexplored. The document analysis relied on the availability of school records, which may have been incomplete or inconsistent. Also, as a qualitative inquiry, the research may have been influenced by the subjective interpretations of participants during FGDs and interviews.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Policy Recommendations

This study highlights critical areas in Zimbabwe's A-Level curriculum that policymakers should address to ensure gender equity in education:

9.1.1 Policymakers should consider periodic revisions to the heritage-based curriculum to incorporate a broader range of subjects that reflect the diverse interests and career aspirations of both girls and boys. The A-Level curriculum, in particular, should be constantly revised to ensure it is inclusive and reflects diverse interests and abilities that shape the learners professional life ahead. This may involve incorporating interdisciplinary approaches that appeal to a wider range of learners regardless of gender.

9.1.2 Educational authorities must revitalise teacher training programmes by making gender modules compulsory. This should be supported by regular workshops and training sessions on gender sensitivity and bias reduction. These are essential to equip teachers with the skills needed to foster an equitable learning environment.

9.1.3 As part of regular curriculum modification, curriculum designers must redouble efforts to make curriculum materials increasingly gender-sensitive. The use of inclusive language and examples in textbooks and teaching aids can help challenge stereotypes and promote equal representation of gender identities.

9.1.4 The Curriculum Develop Unit must consider incorporating gender education topics across all disciplines beginning as early as primary school. Adding topics on gender equity, stereotypes and justice into the curriculum can empower learners to become advocates for a fairer society as they aspire for gender equitable careers.

9.2. Implications for Practice

The findings also provide actionable insights for educators and school administrators:

9.2.1 Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping learners' perceptions and subject choices. Therefore, teachers must actively and deliberately attend to issues of gender bias in the classroom. This includes strategies for creating inclusive learning environments and challenging stereotypes, such as enhanced access to resources. Schools must improve equal access to ICT and other learning tools to address the existing logistical inequities noted in the study.

9.2.2 Schools should offer guidance and counselling services that provide learners with impartial advice on subject selection. This can help learners make informed decisions based on their interests, abilities and aspirations, rather than succumbing to societal expectations or peer pressure. Diverse subject choices can be encouraged by exploring non-traditional subjects, such as girls pursuing STEM and boys engaging in Arts disciplines. This could involve showcasing the relevance and importance of these subjects in various career pathways and highlighting successful role models who have excelled in these fields.

9.2.3 Schools must create and ensure safe learning spaces for both female and male learners. School environments must be freed from gender-based discrimination through providing equal study hours and resources for both genders. Tasks and activities assigned within schools must not reinforce blinkered gender roles. For example, extracurricular activities must work for empowerment by promoting collaboration and confidence building rather than perpetuating inequality through societal stereotypes.

9.2.4 Engaging parents, community leaders and other stakeholders in discussions about gender and education is essential for challenging ingrained stereotypes and fostering a supportive environment for

learners. Community-based initiatives can complement school-based efforts in promoting gender equality in education. For example, involving parents and guardians in workshops and awareness campaigns can help counteract societal pressures and encourage a more balanced approach to education at home.

9.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Building upon the findings of this study, future research could delve deeper into the underlying factors and broader implications of gender disparities in curriculum perceptions and subject selection. Suggested areas for investigation include:

9.3.1 Investigating the long-term impacts of gender-biased curriculum and teaching practices on educational and career outcomes for male and female students. Longitudinal studies could track learners' subject choices, academic performance and professional trajectories to better understand the downstream effects.

9.3.2 Conducting comparative studies across different school types (such as co-educational, single-gender) to examine how the learning environment and institutional culture influence gender disparities in subject selection and achievement. This could provide insights into effective strategies for creating more inclusive educational spaces.

9.3.3 Exploring the role of parental and community influences in shaping learners' perceptions and choices regarding traditionally "female" or "male" subjects. Qualitative research involving focus groups and interviews with families could uncover the socio-cultural factors at play.

9.3.4 Assessing the effectiveness of teacher training programmes aimed at addressing gender bias in the classroom. Longitudinal evaluations could track changes in educator attitudes, teaching practices and learner outcomes over time to inform the design of more impactful professional development initiatives.

References

10. Aria, J. (2022), *Social Interpretation Skills in Qualitative Research*, Fujairah, UAE: Business Bliss Publishers.
11. Aryeh-Adje A. A., (2021), Community Participation in the Management of Ghanaian Schools, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education 10(SI)*:79-95.
12. Batsirai, L. (2020), *Effects of Continuous Assessment to Students Performance in A-Level Education*, Bindura: Bindura University of Science Education.
13. Bhunu, A. and Green, B., (2023), Challenges in secondary education for girls in Zimbabwe, *Journal of African Education 45(2)*:123-135.
14. Biddix, J. P. (2021), *Uncomplicated Reviews of Educational Research Methods*, St Louis: University of Missouri.
15. Brown, L. (2021), Reshaping education: Addressing gender inequality through curriculum reform, *Journal of Educational Theory 45(2)*:123-140.
16. Busetto, L., Wick, W. and Gumbinger, C. (2020), How to use and assess qualitative research methods, *Neurological Research and Practice 2(14)*:10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z
17. Cardano, M. (2020), On qualitative data analysis, *Defending Qualitative Research*, London: Routledge Publishing.
18. Carlstrom, C. (2022), *Research Paradigms: Explanation and examples*, Adelaide: Proofed Inc.

19. Chari, T. (2023), Challenges in STEM education: The impact on girls in rural Zimbabwe, *Journal of African Educational Research 48(2)*:234-250.
20. Chikoko, V. (2021), Quality-driven university curriculum reform in Zimbabwe: A critical conceptualisation of harmonised minimum bodies of knowledge, *Emerald Insight 14(2)*:203-219.
21. Dube, M. and Mavhunga, P. (2020), Socioeconomic factors influencing student subject choices in rural Zimbabwe, *Journal of African Education Studies 11(2)*:88-105.
22. Dynes, C. C. (2020), *Understanding 21st Century Woman Suffrage in the West*, New York: New York University Press.
23. European Commission (2021), Gender mainstreaming: European Commission strategies and impacts, *https://ec.europa.eu/*, Accessed 6 February 2023.
24. Gwatura, P. (2021), Gender disparities in technical education: The case of A-Level Geography in Zimbabwe, *International Journal of Educational Development 85(102255)*: doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102255
25. Hlaise, A. S., (2023), Formal education and instructional processes in Zimbabwe following the new schools curriculum, *Journal of Educational Research 45(2)*:123-140.
26. Johnson, S. and Clarke, L. (2021), Record-keeping in education: Challenges and practices, *Educational Management Review 39(1)*:85-100.
27. Kabweza, I. M. (2021), Trends in female participation in the Arts and Humanities: A longitudinal study, *Journal of African Education 59(1)*:134-149.
28. Makoni, L. (2022), Gender disparities in Zimbabwean secondary education: A case study of A-Level subject choices, *Journal of Southern African Educational Development 34(1)*:78-91.
29. Mandaza, K. and Muchengeti, N. (2024). Evaluating the impact of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education 2024-30 Curriculum on student engagement, *Journal of African Educational Innovations 9(1)*:45-60.
30. Marufu, P. and Chisango, T. (2023), Student experiences and outcomes under Zimbabwe's revised A-Level curriculum, *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa 6(1)*:34-50.
31. Mashininga, K., Is affirmative action still necessary in Zimbabwean higher education? *University World News 12 May 2022.*
32. Mavima, P. (2023), Competency-based curriculum framework and its impact on Zimbabwe's education system, *Zimbabwe Situation 25(3)*:45-58.
33. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE, 2020), Understanding the new competence-based curriculum, *http://mopse.co.zw/infographic/understanding-new-competence-based-curriculum*, Accessed 2 October 2020.
34. Mpofu, R. (2021), Affirmative action in education and employment, *Journal of Social Equity 8(4)*:210-225.
35. Muzira, D. R. and Bondai, B. M., (2020), Perception of Educators towards the adoption of Education 5.0: A case of a state university in Zimbabwe, *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences 1(2)*:43-53.
36. Mwadada, M., (2020), *Investigating Traditional Influences in Zimbabwean Postcolonial Education*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts.
37. Ndlovu, G., and Chikohomero, R. (2023), Teacher perceptions of the competency-based curriculum in Zimbabwean A-Level education, *Journal of Education and Practice 14(3)*:76-90.

38. Ndlovu, S. (2022), Understanding gender disparities in secondary education: A case study of Zimbabwean schools, *Gender and Education Review 10(1)*:53-67.
39. Nguyen, T. and Wang, L. (2021), Challenges of retaining female students in academic pipelines, *Education Policy Review 29(1)*:45-58.
40. Nyamanhindi, T. (2022a), Short-term success and long-term challenges for girls in STEM, *Zimbabwean Journal of STEM Education 56(3)*:278-292.
41. Nyamanhindi, T. (2022b), Gendered performance patterns in Zimbabwean STEM education, *Journal of Gender Studies 34(4)*:401-416.
42. Paechter, C. and Menzies, V. (2023), Exploring gender differences in educational achievement: A contemporary perspective, *Gender and Education 35(6)*:801-820.
43. Parker, A. (2019), Gender preferences in subject selection at A-Level, *Educational Choices 24(3)*:178-195.
44. Ruche, A. and Ndlela, E., (2020). A comparative review of the constraints in educational gender campaigns in Zimbabwe and South Africa, *Journal of Educational Administration 4(1)*:1-5.
45. Smilde, D. and Hanson, R., (2023), Studying gender and sexualities with qualitative methods, *Qualitative Sociology 41*:333-35.
46. Suyo-Vega, J. A., Meneses-la-Riva, M. E., Fernández-Bedoya, V. H., Alvarado-Suyo, S. A., Polonia, A. D., Miotto, A. I. and Ocupa-Cabrera, G. (2024), Unveiling the professional identity of university educators: A qualitative study, *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies 13(3)*:212-26.
47. Tang, D., Meltzoff, A. N., Cheryan, S., Fan, W. and Master, A. (2024), Longitudinal stability and change across a year in children's gender stereotypes about four different STEM fields, *Developmental Psychology 5(2)*:10.1037/dev0001733.
48. Thompson, R. (2021), Addressing gender gaps in education, *Education Policy Analysis 38(3)*:249-265.
49. Tsimba, G., Mugoniwa, B. and Mutembedza, A. N., (2022), Equitable access to eLearning during covid-19 pandemic and beyond: A comparative analysis between rural and urban schools in Zimbabwe, *17th IST-Africa Conference 16-20 May 2022, South Africa*, www.ist-africa.org/Conference2022, Accessed 18 September 2022.
50. UNESCO (2021), Gender inequality in education: Trends and challenges in Asia and the Pacific, https://www.unesco.org/gender-inequality-in-education/, Accessed 21 June 2023.
51. UNICEF, (2023), Quality learning and skills development, https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/quality-learning-and-skills-development, Accessed 1 July 2023.
52. Washe, M. T., (2021), Equal opportunity laws and their impact on gender equality in Zimbabwe, *African Journal of Gender Studies 27(3)*:5-20.
53. Waterman, E. A., Edwards, K. M., Makoni, E. I., Siller, L. A., Murphy, S. B. and Wagman, J. A., (2020), Zimbabwean stakeholders' perspectives on causes of and solutions to gender-based violence in their community: Findings from a focus group, *Violence Against Women 27(6-7)*:973-84.
54. Wuta, R. K. (2022), Extendibility of the Education 5.0 concept to Zimbabwe's secondary school system as encapsulated in Curriculum Framework 2015-2022, *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 3(5)*:26-33.
55. Yohanna, J. and Muhammad, H. B. (2022), Location and gender as determinants of students' academic performance in Agricultural Science in Zariia Education Zone, Kaduna State, *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology 7(2)*:95-99.

56. Zinyama, T. and Mashava, C. (2023), Curriculum reforms and student performance in Zimbabwean A-Level schools, *Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research 35(1)*:89-105.