The omission and portrayal of the elderly in instructional materials as agencies of gerontophobia and ageism: The case of English and Shona primary school textbooks in Zimbabwee

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Abstract

The study focuses on the omission and portrayal of the elderly in Ventures Shona and English textbooks at primary school level in Zimbabwe. The spotlight is on prescribed textbooks for Early Child Development [ECD] A and B, and Grades 1 and 2. Through the textual analysis approach and content analysis technique the paper exposes the negative stereotypes associated with the elderly in children's textbooks. The themes were generated after thematic analysis of instructional materials under study. The construction of age framework illuminated the omission of ageing education in Zimbabwe's school curriculum, and it also informed the analysis. The omission is significant in shaping children's views of the elderly, and it also informs their perceptions towards ageing processes. Visual images and language used in textbooks create negative stereotypes in learners' minds towards ageing and the elderly. It was concluded that the lack of education on ageing and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in instructional materials such as school textbooks were the catalyst to ageism and gerontophobia. Therefore, it is recommended that the government should craft policies that persuade curriculum developers and implementers to embrace ageing education. To dispel the negative stereotypes

about ageing among children who are tomorrow's adults; ageing education should be a major focus of curriculum transformation in Zimbabwe.

Key words: *Gerontophobia, ageism, elderly, instructional materials, ageing education*

Introduction

In Zimbabwe, the ageing phenomenon is still ignored in school literature. This has influenced the persistent phobia on ageing and old age by all age groups. The escalating number of the elderly in Sub-Saharan Africa and the lack of education on the ageing processes cannot be ignored as they have implications on how the elderly are viewed in society. In Zimbabwe, the population of elderly persons will grow from 6% to 12.4% (Zimbabwe National Healthy Ageing Strategic Plan 2017-2020). The strategic plan reveals that elderly persons in Zimbabwe increased from 3.6 in 2002 to 4.1 % in 2012. According to the 2012 census, there were 531,704; elderly persons. In addition, it is projected that by 2050 one in six people (16%) would be older than the age of 65, up from one in 11 people (9%) in 2019.

Being 'old' has negative implications on the social relationships between the elderly and the youth. There is a prevalence of ageism and gerontophobia in Zimbabwe. Ageism is a form of bigotry that perpetuates negative stereotypes about old age (Bharti 2022; Ginschel & Schluter 2020). This is because the processes and procedures of ageing are generally associated with problems. In that view McGuire (2016) established that the elderly are linked with what she calls the devastating 6d's; death, dying, dependence, disability, disease and dementia.

The word 'elderly' in this article refers to any person aged 65 years and above (Section 32(2)(b) Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment)[No. 13] Act 2013; Mudzingwa 2020:3). The words 'elderly person' are used as they sound polite instead of the words 'old person' that sound sarcastic. The negative perceptions of the ageing create morbid fear or dislike of elderly persons and this is referred to as gerontophobia (Bhati, 2022). Education as a socialising agent can dispel or perpetuate ageism and gerontophobia through instructional materials in schools. Thus, education is pivotal in the social construction of ageing and old age in society. Without a balanced understanding of ageing and old age, the status of the elderly is compromised. Ageing and old age are not synonymous, they need to be differentiated from the beginning; 'old

age' is the outcome of growing old whereas 'ageing' lies in the processes and procedures that lead to becoming old (Ginschel & Schluter 2020).

Ageing education's thrust is to provide children with a holistic view of ageing and old age. In addition, ageing education would uphold the African norms and values that give young people the responsibility to look after the elderly. This can be inferred from the Shona adage that says, "*Chirere mangwana chigokureravo.*" A practice that is not common in the Western world. The West promotes the idea of caging their elderly parents and relatives in 'old people's homes' where they are institutionalised. This practice is incompatible with the generality of African traditions where, as the adage above explicitly states, the older generation looks after the young, who in turn will look after them in their old age, hence, the purpose of ageing education in the school system is to improve generational relations between the young and the elderly.

Basing on this premise, it has been established that students with more knowledge about ageing tend to show a lower level of gerontophobia whereas children with less knowledge often have a negative attitude towards the elderly persons (Ginschel & Schuluter 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The portrayal and omission of elderly persons in instructional materials have great significance on moulding how the elderly persons are viewed in society. The images and language used in instructional materials at primary school level in Zimbabwe mirror the stereotypes associated with ageing and old age in society. It is the goal of this paper to illuminate how instructional materials are agencies of ageism and gerontophobia in Zimbabwe. Therefore, there is need to change the values and perceptions of ageing within the spaces of the school curriculum as the education system has the potential to challenge the ways people think about ageing.

Research Questions

The major research question was:
1. How are ageing and ageing processes portrayed or omitted in instructional materials in primary schools in Zimbabwe?
This study also addressed the following research sub-questions:

1.1 How are elderly persons portrayed or omitted in instructional materials in Ventures in English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 at primary school level in Zimbabwe?

1.2 Which images in ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 textbooks promote ageism and gerontophobia in Zimbabwe?

1.3 To what extend does language in instructional materials in Ventures ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 promote negative stereotypes towards the elderly persons?

Significance of the study

Studies have unearthed that there is subtle and overt ageism and gerontophobia in instructional materials worldwide; Zimbabwe included. This is evinced by images and terminologies depicted in textbooks in primary schools in Zimbabwe that mirror society's perceptions and attitudes towards ageing and old age (Ginschel & Schluter 2020; Hungwe et. al., 2020). Therefore, the article can influence policy makers to draft policies that embrace ageing education approaches in the school curriculum. The policies can persuade curriculum developers and implementers to unpack the complexities of ageing and old age. The education fraternity can remodel perceptions on ageing (Sweetland 2017) as ageing is a lifelong process that starts at birth and ends at death (ontogeny). Consequently, people of all ages are bound to shame ageism and gerontophobia.

Review of related literature

Extensive studies on ageing education have been done globally resulting in the availability of literature on the importance of ageing education in the school curriculum. The estimated projections of the greying population indicate longevity as the new trend as people survive to the age of 80 years (World Health Organisation 2015). Prolonged existence needs to be celebrated, maximised and enjoyed (World Health Organisation 2015). Instead of celebrating old age, people are scared of it and therefore want to remain youthful.

The elderly are described as a burden, incompetent, useless in society (Hungwe et. al., 2022; Verhage et. al., 2021: 4). These negative stereotypes and perceptions have an adverse effect on the elderly's status in society. This is worsened by the lack of balanced information and understanding of the processes of ageing. It has been established that

ageing education has the potential to dispel the negative perceptions about the elderly, but ironically education reforms in Zimbabwe tend to ignore the importance of ageing education.

For instance, the new curriculum, which is heritage based, emphasises the use of emerging technologies to facilitate teaching and learning and education management (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education: Draft Education Sector Performance Report 2018). Up-to date ageing education is omitted although there is evidence that there are ageist attitudes in society that can be combated by ageing education. Ageist attitudes can be addressed through the education system. The purpose of ageing education is to equip learners for the future by embracing the ageing process in which everyone is already involved (Franziska & Schluter 2020; Hungwe et. al., 2023).

Theoretical framework: The social construction of ageing theory

The article adopted the social construction of age theory. The theory entails a general epistemology framework on how social meaning constructs how social things are understood (Gilleard 2023; Saxena 2016). In other words, ageism and gerontophobia are social constructs that are internalised as reality and appear to be natural (Bengston & Whitting 2014). The theory is most suitable for this article that focuses on the perceptions, norms and attitudes associated with ageing and old age and how they are perpetuated through instructional materials in schools.

Negative stereotypes in textbooks have a negative impact on the elderly in society. The stereotypes are not derived from innate biological processes but are socially determined (Powell & Hendricks 2009: 85). For instance, the stereotypes associated with the elderly such as witchcraft, ugliness, and passiveness are just myths. Images in textbooks, videos, and magazines portray the youth as active, doing productive work while the elderly depict passivity and dependency (Dimkpa 2015: 225; Freixas 2012: 53; Lazar 2017: 17).

Social factors influence how the elderly are perceived and the following are some of them mirrored in the curriculum.

a) Language: Language used in primary school textbooks in Zimbabwe reinforces negative stereotypes about the elderly. For instance, terms such as *chembere* (hag) or *mudhara/harahwa* (curmudgeon/old codger) are commonly used derogatively by people and in textbooks. Such language

is deeply contaminated by the stigma of old age (Freixas et. al., 2012: 45). The negative terminology creates ageism and gerontophobia in learners as they grow up believing in the stereotypes.

b) Instructional media: Besides language, media is another social factor that socialises children to adopt negative stereotypes from the early stages of development. The media allows individual users to effortlessly generate and share individualised experiences of growing and being old (Xu 2021: 18). The youth are portrayed as heroes and beautiful in textbooks while the elderly are invisible (Bengston & Whitting 2014). Their omission ought to send a strong message as Xu (2021: 18) lamented in his theory 'the reflective-representation theory'. The theory suggests that language and visual images function akin to a mirror that reflects the pre-existing meanings of the 'real'. In that case the omission of the elderly sends a strong message that they are not important in society.

However, the social construction of ageing theory postulates that older adults have immense valuable contribution to society (Bengston & Whitting 2014). For example, they are valued for heritage leadership and wisdom. In addition, they are also the repository of indigenous knowledge systems (Dimkpa 2015: 225; Eboiyehi 2015: 340). The social construction has detrimental effects on people's perceptions of the elderly and their own aging if the information on ageing and old age is not balanced (Fredvang & Biggs 2012; Macquire 2017). The stereotypes should be remodelled by depicting the elderly as role models and resource persons in society and should not be omitted in instructional materials.

Therefore, social construction of age theory enhances the understanding of ageing and promotes the all-round development of members of society.

Methodology

To conceptualise ageism and gerontophobia in textbooks used in primary schools in Zimbabwe, the research employed the textual analysis approach and content analysis technique. Textual analysis involves understanding of language and symbols present in text to get the sense or meaning out of it (Arya, 2020; Frey et. al., 1999). Textual analysis brought clarity to implicit meanings within the text as it delved deep into the content and uncovered valuable insights embedded within. This was

made easy by the use of the content analysis technique that transforms raw data into useful insights (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Shannon 2005). It views data as representations of texts, images and expressions that are created to be seen, read, and interpreted and reacted on for their meanings (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Shannon 2005; Kipperndorff 2004).
The methodologies augured well with the social construction of age theory that illuminated the complexities of ageism and gerontophobia rooted in instructional materials. They provided a clearer picture of the school curriculum on ageing and old age. This put the country under the spotlight in so far as the depiction of the elderly is concerned. This is contrary to the educational aims of the new curriculum that seeks to inculcate values of respect, empathy, wisdom and tolerance for diversity when in actual fact the elderly are depicted as vulnerable, dependent and unworthy.

Data collection was done when I was reading through the textbooks under study; a continuous process as noted by Silverman (2013: 233). During my reading I paid particular attention to the images, language and the portrayal and omission of elderly persons' representations in the prescribed materials. During the process I jotted down minute details that pointed to negative stereotypes about the elderly. The process of data gathering and data analysis continued by bringing in new information until research questions were fully answered and no more new data was emerging from the textbooks (Bowen 2008: 139; Guest et. al., 2006: 66; Punch 2009: 33). When reading through the gathered notes I developed concepts and then categorised them according to themes (Neuman 2000: 163; Thomas & Harden 2008: 10). The themes were developed in order to ascertain the common features that depicted ageism and gerontophobia in instructional materials under study. In thematic analysis every attempt was made to employ names for themes in a manner that directly reflected the texts as a whole as suggested by Anderson (2004: 309). The development of new concepts occurred and consequently new knowledge was generated (Neuman 2000: 163).

Data presentation and discussion

The basis of this discussion was informed by the insights from social construction of age theory.
There were three emerging themes; 1) The portrayal and omission of the elderly persons in Ventures English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 textbooks perpetuate negative stereotypes about the elderly

persons. 2) Images in Ventures English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 textbooks promote ageism and gerontophobia in Zimbabwe 3) Language in instructional materials in Ventures English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 textbooks promote negative stereotypes towards the elderly persons in Zimbabwe.

The portrayal and omission of the elderly persons in Ventures English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 text books perpetuate negative stereotypes about the elderly persons

This section focuses on the portrayal and omission of the elderly persons in textbooks at primary schools in Zimbabwe.

Elderly persons are not prominently represented in the textbooks at all levels. They come later as images of children are seen on the first pages of the textbooks. In addition, images in textbooks, videos, portray the youth as active while elderly persons are depicted as passive (Gilleard 2023; Saxena 2016). These images can send wrong messages that elderly persons are not significant and their contribution in society is valueless. For example, elderly persons' images in Ventures English ECD B textbooks are first visible on page 7. In Grade 1 the images of elderly persons are seen on page 4. Similarly, in Grade 2 elderly persons are visible on page 5 while images of children's activities and clothes are awash from page 1 to 6 in Ventures English ECD B. Therefore, the omission of the images of elderly persons on the early pages of the textbooks has negative effects on children's perceptions and attitudes towards the elderly and their perception on ageing. The textbooks lack balanced images of all ages and it is detrimental to how children perceive old age.

Furthermore, the elderly persons are also omitted in work activities such as infrastructure development in their communities. In all the prescribed textbooks under study elderly persons are not involved in activities building, carpentry when the middle-aged adults are involved in infrastructure development. This implies that the elderly do not contribute to development. The images reinforce stereotypes about ageing and old age when the youth and the middle aged are depicted as productive while the elderly are portrayed as dependent and docile (Dimkpa 2015: 225; Freixas 2012: 53; Lazar 2017: 17). The stereotypes and myths are largely accepted today as reality by people of all ages (Saxena 2016; Gilleard 2023).

Furthermore, the elderly are omitted in the stages of human development in ECD B textbooks on page 16 where the illustration of human development starts at;

birth ⟶ infant ⟶ teenager ⟶ middle aged adult. The illustrated sequence of human development implies that human development ends at middle age. The illustration is silent on old age, meaning young children can grow up thinking that old age is not part of human development. This creates ageism and gerontophobia among people especially children in society as people strive to remain youthful. Therefore, the images in textbooks reinforce what the generality of people think about elderly persons and this instils negative perceptions in children from a very young age.

Images in Ventures English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 textbooks at primary school levels promote ageism and gerontophobia in Zimbabwe

It has been established that images in primary school textbooks especially in Zimbabwe are deeply contaminated with ageist stereotypes that create ageist attitudes in learners. The elderly are portrayed as ugly, useless and waiting for death. The sentiments are buttressed by images in school textbooks as evidenced by the portrayal of the elderly in Ventures English ECD B page 7, The old woman on that page is portrayed as having wrinkles on the face while the elderly man on the same page has bald head and is standing with the support of a walking stick and another elderly man is leaning on a tree for support. In school children make fun of those with bald heads meaning this sign of growing old is not embraced by many.

Similarly, wrinkles indicate disfigurement of a face hence people with wrinkles are regarded as ugly. Young children especially girls and young ladies are depicted as beautiful and they participate in beauty contests (see Ventures English Grade 2 textbook page 36). Middle aged men often appear in suits and neckties (see Ventures Shona Grade 1 pg. 6) while elderly men are in patched trousers and old sandals (*manyetera in Shona*). The type of clothing resembles poverty; resultantly young children are not willing to be associated with old age.

On the other hand, the middle aged cohort are portrayed as professionals in all the reviewed textbooks as they are portrayed as teachers, nurses, builders, engineers and carpenters. This is evidenced by

images of middle-aged adults in Ventures English on page 170. This is in line with the disengagement theory that claims that when people grow older, they are expected to relinquish some work roles as they are assumed to be unable to do work activities in a capitalist system (Powell 2001: 2). The perceptions are reinforced by stereotypes depicted in school textbooks where middle aged adults are portrayed as productive in the capitalist society.

From the data collected in this study, the elderly are absent from the professions as if they were not involved in the professions earlier on in their life. The experiences gained during their life course automatically fall away when one reaches a certain age (Bengston & Whittington 2014). These beliefs are socialised into children by instructional materials at an early age. The children can grow up resenting being old as losing a job is stressful as people survive on income in Zimbabwe. Hence, old age is not celebrated in society.

In addition, the youth and middle-aged adults are depicted as beautiful and handsome. For example, in Ventures English ECD B page 7 a young lady is crowned as a beauty pageant indicating beauty. Furthermore, the elderly especially women are depicted as weak and infirm in the textbooks under study. A walking stick is a common feature in all the images that portray the elderly. In some cases, the elderly are found leaning on walls or trees when standing or seated. This is evidenced by images in Ventures English Grade 1 on page 13 and ECD B on page 7. The stereotypes shape the cultural stereotypes and these become a reality to those who accept it (Saxena 2016). Therefore, children cannot be blamed for shunning old age.

Language in instructional materials in Ventures English and Shona ECD A and B, Grades 1 and 2 levels promote negative stereotypes towards the elderly persons in Zimbabwe

Language as a social factor has immensely contributed to negative stereotypes about ageing and old age. The language leaves footprints in children's minds on ageing and old age. For instance, the following paragraph in Shona sounds sarcastic concerning the elderly:

Sekuru vangu VaBakatwa vava harahwa chaiyo. Kazhinji vanokangamwa zvavanenge vambotaura. Pamwe vanoita sepwere, asingazivi anofunga kuti zvimwe sekuru vamwa hwahwa. Marimwezuro sekuru VaBakatwa vakandituma kunotora mamwiwa kumunda. Pandakadzoka sekuru vakandibvunza kuti ipwa

dzandauya nadzo dziri kupi. Izvi hazvina kundikatyamadza. Pwere dzese dzinoziva kuti sekuru VaBakatwa vave nehangamwa sedzengunguwo. **(Extracted from Ventures Shona Grade 2 page 42)**

This can be translated in English as:

My grandfather Mr Bakatwa is very old. He can hardly recollect things just like a toddler. The day before yesterday, he sent me to collect water melons from his field and when I came back he asked me whether I had brought back the sweet reeds he had sent me to collect. He is now behaving like an infant. Sometimes he behaves like an intoxicated person. When he sends you to collect an item he easily forgets what it is that he sent you to collect. Now even little kids know that my grandfather is as demented as the proverbial crow.

Contextually, in some regions of the Shona culture, the above citation is a testimony that language plays a significant role in perpetuating negative stereotypes in young children about the elderly. The language used in the above citation is highly contaminated by the stigma of old age (Freixas 2012; 45) and it can influence how children perceive the elderly in their communities. The elderly man in the citation had become too forgetful to the extent that he is likened to a proverbial crow. The proverbial crow in some Shona cultures is regarded as a scavenger that roams around looking for food and is exceptionally forgetful. This implies that the elderly man is looked down upon. This interpretation is contextual as social construction of age is understood from cultural meanings of a particular society (Gilleard 2023).

In one of the Grade [1] Shona textbooks the granny is portrayed as having gaps in her teeth and the comprehension passage given to learners is based on the gaps in the teeth of the elderly. The subject topic of the passage read *"Mbuya vane mavende." Mavende* [gaps in the teeth caused by teeth falling off due to old age] in the Shona context depict someone who is very old, ugly and frightening. These images create horror scenes in children's minds and learners grow up with negative perceptions of ageing. In addition, the story of *"Mbuya vane mavende"* is a label given to the elderly that perpetuates gerontophobia in learners. By labelling the elderly as such the social construction of age emerges and negative stereotypes are perpetuated.

This is despite the fact that most learners at Grade '1' level lose their teeth and have many gaps in their teeth. However, they are not mentioned as examples in the prescribed reading books at primary level. It was going to be easy to explain or show children who had gaps in their teeth using actual exhibits rather than using the elderly. Not all children

have grandmothers or grandfathers who have gaps in their teeth so they can use their imagination and stories they have heard about the elderly. The situation promotes the usual negative stereotypes in society that depict the elderly especially women as witches. Usually, in local cultural stereotypes, the elderly with gaps in their teeth are regarded as cannibalists; teeth are said to fall off because of excessive consumption of human flesh. Children should understand that ageing is a natural part of life (Dong 2014; Gerontologist 2016; McGuire 2017) and gaps in the teeth are not only a sign of ageing but an experience of life during the lifespan that is age specific.

In addition, the notion that elderly women are witches is buttressed in the Ventures English Grade 2 textbook on page 141 that portrays the elderly woman who has deep wrinkles on her face as a magician. The following excerpt is testimony; "Tino take these magic apples. You will find that you can do more kind and good things with these apples". In the Shona culture magicians are associated with witchcraft, implying that the elderly woman is a witch.

Such representations perpetuate children's biased knowledge and experiences from what they hear about elderly women. In turn, their fears of getting old are reinforced.

Conclusions of the study

This section is based on the findings of the study. It was established that the omission and portrayal of the elderly in instructional materials at primary schools have negative implications on the perceptions and attitudes of children towards ageing and old age. The textbooks at primary school level in Zimbabwe lack proportional representations of the young and the elderly. The elderly are portrayed as backbenchers in textbooks as they appear late in the textbooks. This trivialises their worth in society compared to children and middle aged adults. The reading materials which are the driving force behind ageism and gerontophobia in society continue to perpetuate negative stereotypes about aging and old age. Education is found to have the potential to change people's mindset positively or negatively in the construction of ageing and old age but in Zimbabwe education is silent on the ageing phenomenon.

It is clear that the prescribed textbooks lack adequate information about the ageing processes and procedures in human development. It was established that the internalisation of negative stereotypes begins in children and persists later on in life. The school curriculum lacks ageing

education that equips children with balanced information and understanding on ageing and later life.

Therefore, it was concluded that, the government should enforce policies that embrace ageing education in the school curriculum from ECD to tertiary learning. Education reforms should advocate for ageing education such that ageing is taken as a continuous growth and development. It is irrefutable that ageing education approaches in the education system of Zimbabwe are vital as everyone is ageing and progressing to old age. Instructional materials that promote negative attitudes and perceptions about ageing and old age should be removed. The generality of people in Zimbabwe should desist from ageist terminology and its implied meanings such as *gogaz/chembere* (hag), *mudhara/harahwa* (old codger) and orient young people to the norms and values of society such as respect of the elderly, empathy and compassion.

Recommendations

This section embodies the recommendations emanating from the research findings.

- The education reforms in Zimbabwe should focus on the elimination of ageism and gerontophobia in society through instructional materials such as print and non-print materials used in schools from ECD to all levels.
- To avoid ageism and gerontophobia in society the CDTSD should recommend instructional materials that are not the distributors of negative stereotypes about ageing and old age.
- Educators as agents of change should be reoriented on the importance of embracing ageing education as everyone was a potential victim of discrimination due to the age factor.

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