

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-45

March 14, 1982

ZIMBABWE STUDENTS BUILD THEIR OWN SCHOOLS

by Bowden Quinn

SHAMVA, ZIMBABWE -- Pupils here at Chindunduma Primary School helped build their classrooms and have harvested enough crops to feed themselves and earn thousands of dollars for their school.

Chindunduma is the most successful example of a new model for Zimbabwe's schools, called "education with production", which the government officially launched earlier this month.

None of the other seven pilot schools in the program is as advanced as Chindunduma. Most are still in the building stage, with funding a major problem, so it is too early to tell whether the program will be a success.

But if education with production lives up to the promise of Chindunduma's start, the program could provide an answer to a problem that has plagued African countries since independence: how to make education fit the needs of the people and the societies of developing countries.

The educational systems that African countries inherited from their colonial rulers emphasize academic subjects, producing graduates trained for white-collar jobs instead of the farmers and artisans needed by poor societies.

These school systems allow less than 10 percent of the students who enter primary school to complete four years of secondary school. Students lucky enough to get a secondary education find the modern job market can't absorb even their small number.

School-leavers are reluctant to return to farming, having imbibed at school the belief that physical work is unrewarding and degrading, so graduates join drop-outs in a swelling group of urban unemployed, a source of political instability and economic drag.

To remedy this situation, African governments have emphasized practical education in their schools, but most have failed to change the conviction of students and parents that success in academic subjects is the key to prosperity.

The seven-year guerrilla war against the white minority government that ruled this country as Rhodesia may have given Zimbabwe the impetus to break out of this colonial-school trap.

The eight pilot schools for education with production began in the Zimbabwean refugee camps in Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia during the war. The approximately 10,000 students and teachers in the schools have lived and worked together since long before independence. The teaching methods and educational philosophy they evolved are the basis for education with production.

Sister Janice McLaughlin, an American missionary, visited some of these camps after she was arrested and deported by the

---

Bowden Quinn is an Overseas Journalism Fellow of the Institute studying socialism in southern Africa.

Rhodesian government in 1977.

"I got very excited by what I saw them doing," she said in an interview this month. "To me, it was a whole new world of education."

Sr. McLaughlin is on the staff of the Zimbabwe Foundation for Education with Production, the government-sponsored agency that runs the schools.

The schools, located in rural areas around the country, combine farms and workshops with classrooms and dormitories. Students learn farming and building skills, the basic requirements for rural life, in addition to studying the normal academic subjects. Ultimately, the schools will provide students with at least one other marketable skill, if all goes according to plan.

Chindunduma has wood- and metal-working shops and a domestic science room equipped with sewing machines. Girls may choose whatever practical courses they like, Sr. McLaughlin said, but they tend to prefer the traditional areas of homemaking.

Students waste no time with theoretical problems, as they begin at once to build their schools and to grow crops. At Chindunduma, construction is complete, down to the metal window frames that the primary-school students welded.

At most other schools, which haven't received as much financial support, work has just started on the permanent buildings. Students live in tents or thatched huts and have classes outdoors.

Money to build the schools has come from international aid organizations, mostly in Scandinavia. The Zimbabwe government pays for teacher salaries, textbooks and food. Planners hope the schools will eventually grow all their own food, and by selling surplus food and cash crops will earn a large part of their operating budgets.

The government has begun a drive for local support for the schools, seeking to raise \$8 million (US \$11 million).

To gain the public's support, Sr. McLaughlin said, the schools must show they can produce as well as the surrounding farms, and they must prove themselves academically.

"We have to convince people to accept education with production," she said. "The only way to convince them is with exams. We have to compete with the old, colonial-elite schools."

Initial exam results last year were promising, with students at two refugee schools scoring high among the schools in their regions, she said.

Government officials backing the project say education with production accords with the government's socialist goals for the country, but the school curricula include no formal political indoctrination. At morning assemblies, students sing revolutionary songs and yell political slogans, a carry-over from the days in the refugee camps, Sr. McLaughlin said.

"Morale is great, even though the students are still living in poor conditions," she said. "If you went to the elite schools in the city, you wouldn't find such enthusiasm. The students are so proud because they're building the schools themselves."

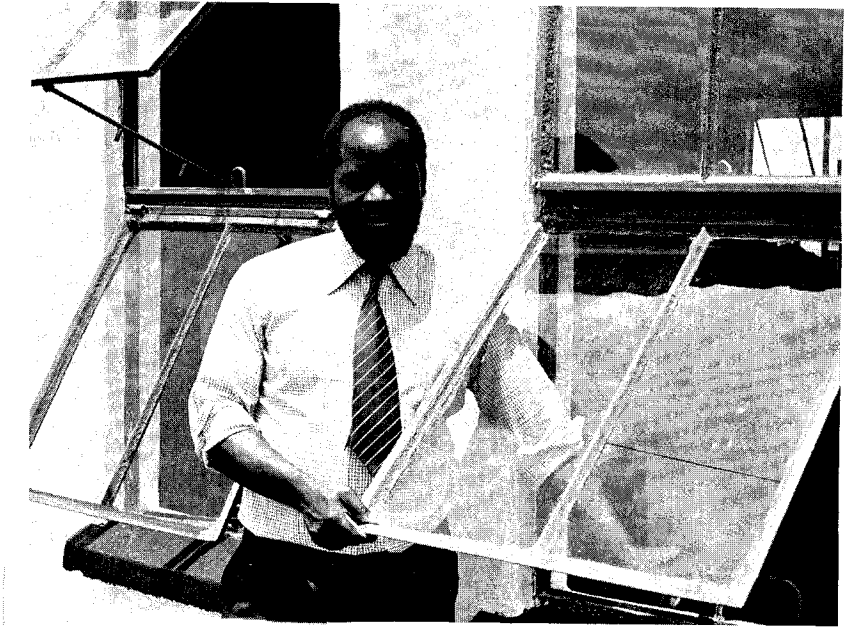
As the former refugees graduate, the schools will become integrated with the local community. The government plans to use them to test new curricula and other innovations that it will eventually use to transform the nation's entire educational system.

Whether education with production will make students want to stay in the rural areas won't be known for several years. In interviews, students said they planned to go to the university and become teachers. Such ambitions show a continuing belief, prevalent in African countries, that a government job is the best career, but, as Sr. McLaughlin remarked, at least the students aren't hoping to live in the cities.

She added that education with production will teach students how to cope with their lives, a lesson Western educators are trying to reinsert in their schools.

"When I think about myself, I really can do nothing except read and write. Typing is about the only practical skill I have," she said. "I'm actually a very ignorant person with a college degree. To me, it would be a crime if the young people in this society grew up with that attitude and were that helpless."

Senior Teacher Eric Nyakauru displays a metal window frame constructed by pupils at Chindunduma Primary School.



A classroom building with a map of the school that pupils helped to build. In background are water tanks.

\*\*\*\*\*

Received in Hanover 3/29/82