

## Professor Primrose Kurasha's Inclusive Open and Distance Learning: Rooted in A Revolutionary Epistemology

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**Abstract:** Social problems are invariably addressed through politics, religion, economics, medicine and education. Education is universally perceived as the universal panacea. Literature, in the history of education, demonstrates that the faith in education as the universal remedy has now shifted to the institution of the 'school' as the answer to social problems. Learning is now viewed only possible in enclosed institutions under the face-to-face pedagogy of the teacher, lecturer and professor. Learners are set apart from the community as they get institutionalized in exclusive communes or group homes called schools. And, in those exclusive institutions, they are further separated according to gender, ability and social class. Learning outside the school system was perceived as second rate education. The focus on schooling created problems such as elitism, segregation and prohibitive costs. The school has become the seedling of snobbish culture, social conflict and disharmony. The problem with the 'Schooling school' is that it is a status driven system rather than being motivated by a sound philosophy of education which ought to be the torch that guides the approach to the business of teaching and learning. Professor Primrose Kurasha, a UNISA certified ODL practitioner, whose training in business administration is influenced by management and epistemological principles and from that perspective, she says, the advent of ODL brought education to communities beyond the margins of society. Therefore, through the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), she reaches out to students in remote places. ZOU delivers education materials on their door steps. In twelve years as the leading ODL practitioner in Zimbabwe she has adopted, as the basis of her educational approach, principles of management and classical philosophical ideas to run Zimbabwe Open University. This presentation makes sense of her philosophy of education.

**Keywords:** Social problems, politics, religion, economics, Professor Primrose Kurasha.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The difficulty with current education institutions is in the "emulation fallacy" which perceives the educational journey of an individual like the trip of a Muslim to Mecca which is required of every adult who is physically and financially able. There is no other way to becoming an Al-Hajj or a *Mustati*. We do not in any way dispute the significance of going to Mecca in the spiritual journeys of believers, but that ought not to be the model for educational practice. Mecca and the Academy have different foundations belonging to different categories such as theology and philosophy. In short, the real problem is that conventional institutions are perceived or claim that real education is only possible through the conventional mode of delivery. ODL systems are now claiming that what they offer is equivalent because knowledge is knowledge and skills are skills.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENTATION:

The point of this presentation is to make sense of the ZOU Vice Chancellor, Professor Primrose Kurasha's revolutionary epistemology and also determine how ODL is more welcoming to education and to integration. This being a philosophical presentation the purpose is not necessarily to create/discover new knowledge, but as Ludwig Wittgenstein would say, "To assemble reminders". Paraphrasing the Swedish philosopher, Allan Janik (2006); We Don't claim to be original thinkers, but ones who passionately seize upon the thoughts of original thinkers with a view of developing a method of conceptual clarification. Our minds are like fertile grounds on which the seeds of truly original thinkers like: Robert G. Mugabe, Stanlake Samkange, Cephas Nziramasanga David Kaulemu and Primrose Kurasha could flourish[1]. "The work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose[2]".

### THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENTATION:

#### The objectives of the presentation are:

1. To identify and to clarify the real issues of contention/controversy between the conventional and the Open and Distance Learning systems.
2. To make an exposition of the cultural foundations of schools centered approach to education.
3. To list the inventory of the barriers and obstacles inherent in that system.
4. To characterize Professor Primrose Kurasha's revolutionary epistemology approach to Open and Distance Learning and its contribution to integration in Zimbabwe.
5. To show how that ODL philosophy and influence could be emulated in other African nations as a prerequisite for continental integration: Integrating Africa by integrating education.

#### BASIC QUESTIONS:

1. What is the nature of exclusivity in institutions of education and on what philosophical or cultural foundations do they stand?
2. What are the limitations?
3. What is Professor Primrose Kurasha's philosophy of inclusive education and inclusive ODL?
4. What are the visible results of inclusive ODL practice in Zimbabwe?

### THE CULTURE AND THE VICES OF EXCLUSIVITY IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

In 1847 the Ford family, including the father and grandfather, aunts and uncles of the famous car manufacturer and dealer, Henry Ford, migrated to America. They settled in an exclusively Protestant neighborhood where religious sectarianism was solid. The notices posted for the public made it clear that there was a barrier for Catholics in that County Cork vicinity. It read:

“A Turkey, a Jew or an Atheist  
May live in this town but no Papist”

Catholics were not afraid to express similar segregationist feelings towards the dominant Protestants. They replied saying that a similar notice was also displayed on the gates of hell!

“He that wrote these lines did write them well  
As the same is written on the gates of hell [3]”

A barrier is a fence erected to stop an undesirable person or animal from entering into a place. The word 'fence' is a mental picture or a metaphor that

is used in language to clarify an ambiguous idea so that the meaning can be grasped without much difficulty. Barriers, obstacles and limitations are inherent in all life's journeys and endeavors including education. Basic barriers in current education systems include; **distance from institutions of learning, financial means, sexism, ethnicity, social class, job demands, religious affiliation, cultural practices, professional culture, power struggles, and female acquiescence to male chauvinism or bigotry.** A fence around one's property is a virtuous instrument because its purpose is to protect. However, social barriers in human affairs are invariably vicious or immoral because their purpose is to exclude other people from the benefits of nature or from the social goods available. Barriers imposed by Apartheid, Color bar regulations in Rhodesia and segregation in America were obviously vicious. It is also important to remember that **exclusive barriers imposed by some educational institutions in the name of standards, quality and competition have similar result with discriminatory laws of Apartheid, whatever the intentions could be.**

### PROFESSOR PRIMROSE KURASHA'S EXPERIENCE IN EXCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS

Professor Primrose Kurasha has led the Zimbabwe Open University, the only ODL institution in the country, for twelve years since 2002. In 2004 she registered with UNISA to study towards a qualification for ODL practitioners. In fact, she is one of a handful Zimbabweans who hold that certification. She was looking for theoretical labels for what she was already doing and experiencing. This was the kind of exposure called *Experience & Education* by John Dewey in 1938 [4]. It made it possible for her to reflect over her work and to see the difference between conventional schools and ODL. As a conventional academic for over twenty years, she worked in the environments:

1. Where **clients had to come from remote parts of the country** to study otherwise they would miss the opportunity. The barrier is in **lack of local educational institutions without higher levels.** Believers go to Mecca because there is no other place like Mecca in their vicinity.
2. Where approximately 6000 candidates applied to study, but only **2000 would qualify** therefore **4000 applicants missed the opportunity**, the barrier is in the **competition for places in secondary schools, colleges, and universities.**
3. Where most **candidates were under 20 years of age**, therefore, most applicants over **20 years of age had lost** the opportunity. The barrier is in the **age difference or 'ageism'.**

4. Where 55 % of the candidates were **males, most females had no chance**. The barrier is in the **gender difference**.
5. Where **80% of the Faculty were males** because women were not just as qualified as men. Hence, **through competition women were excluded**, so, the barrier is in the **historical culture of excluding women from education and job opportunities**.
6. **Where those who were qualified were harassed** by male super-ordinates who could not accept that women could be equal to them if not more competent. The barrier is in **sexism, bigotry, or female acquiescence to male sense of entitlement**. This is what Paulo Freire (1968), calls “the culture of silence of the dispossessed. [5]”.
7. Where up to 1999, **all university principals or vice chancellors had been men** even though many women had qualifications they could not just make it. The barrier is in resistance in the **implementation of just legislations i.e. in male attitudes and the effects of such attitudes**.
8. Where **people with visual, audio and other forms of physical challenges were ‘frankly’ excluded** because it was ‘naturally understandable’ that it was not really practical or anyone’s fault. The barrier is in **lack of moral consciousness on the part of management**.

The first step made by Professor Primrose Kurasha was to realize **the reality of exclusivity** before understanding inclusivity i.e. understanding the disease before appreciating the medicine. Then she realized that **exclusive practices were not from people with evil intentions**, but that it was the **culture of institutions** and the challenge was to **reflect about these cultural practices in institutions of education**. The task of a philosopher of education is to interpret her world according to Hegel and after that interpretation; Professor Primrose Kurasha through Open and Distance Learning decided to change it by going beyond the inventory, listed above, of barriers practiced by exclusivists. The second step was the **exercise of reflecting over each problem** and then dreaming of the philosophical solutions from an ODL perspective.

#### **THE STALLING OF REFLECTION ABOUT SIGNIFICANT MORAL ISSUES**

The unreflective character of education institutions over significant philosophical matters is not unique. Organizations tend to behave like that. In the decade of the 1970s, Ivan Illich made that a major issue of his investigations. Institutions of Higher Learning i.e. **academic homes from which Professor Primrose**

**Kurasha was coming were troubled** morally speaking. Their approach and practices lacked moral distinction. They simply mirrored (and still do so) the cultures in which they operated. University systems are no longer characteristically human in behavior. What distinguishes human beings and human institutions is that **the foundation of their management ought to be deliberation**. If the chief characteristic of a human being is capacity to deliberate about alternatives, then our institutions of education should **take time to deliberate carefully about the problems within their structures**. Such problems would include, but not limited to:

1. **The problem of distance:** Like Mecca where the faithful must come to, from wherever they come or from whatever distance, the distance between the institution and the student does not seem to be a problematic issue enough to be of concern to them.

**But there is an alternative says Professor Primrose Kurasha**. Instead of claiming that the institution has no alternative and the student has no alternative, but to come to a school in Harare or in Bulawayo, Professor Kurasha, as early as 2004, came up with the alternative of opening District Learning Centres at growth points closer to the student than the Provincial Capital. That is now the model that is now being adopted by conventional universities for their block release students, a form of ODL.

2. They are not prepared to deliberate about the **fate of huge numbers of applicants who fail to enter into their schools**. The accepted number of students is simply a **mathematical issue over moral considerations**. “We are full to capacity.” Is the usual excuse.

**But there is an alternative says Professor Primrose Kurasha** Instead of claiming that the institution has no alternative and the student has no alternative because we can only admit so many students due to limitations in facilities such as accommodation, dining rooms, lecture/class rooms, lecturers and even sporting grounds, Professor Kurasha says;... “numbers are not my issue. Come to the ZOU and study because ODL students do not have to be enclosed, the limited number of lecturers does not need to be an obstacle because we can print as many modules as needed, neither do dormitories have to be an obstacle because the home of the student is a natural alternative to the dormitory.

3. They do not seem to want to take into cognizance that **education is a lifelong affair**, so adults are discouraged passively hence excluded from institutional structures.

**But there is an alternative says Professor Primrose Kurasha.** Instead of insisting on age limit Professor Kurasha says learning is a lifelong affair anyway! With ODL you study as you work or you study as you earn and you can apply your theories immediately, resulting in instant value addition on the job. As one grows, roles change and so should the skills to cope with the challenges human beings face in life. We are supposed to learn from the cradle to the grave, or the grave may come sooner because we have not learned how to cope with changing life's problems

4. Legislators have ruled against sex discrimination, but over 30 years after those legislations, men still **dominate in numbers and in authority**. This is the old problem that was identified by Aristotle as, **“moral incontinence”**[6] when a man knows what he ought to do, but he does not do it anyway. So the dominance of men in administration and in student numbers is not a matter that bothers leaders of a modern academy.

**But there is an alternative says Professor Primrose Kurasha.** Organizational leaders behave like programmed machines even in appointing. Hiring a male candidate is not an imperative, therefore for Professor Primrose Kurasha, as early as 2005, 66% of her Faculty Deans were females and were doing their work perfectly well. As a human being she celebrates the fact that **she is condemned to free choice between alternatives so there are as many women in her administration as there are men**. Neither is regionalism an issue to her. The capacity to reason and to deliberate between alternatives, regardless of one's regional background, is what being human is about and that should be mirrored by educational institutions if they are to be inclusive.

5. The fact that to this date, most institutions have **limited faculty members capable of handling students with disabilities** inspite of the laws that forbid discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and physical disability is a sign that moral deliberation is lacking in institutions of education. Institutions are just reluctant to think about this problem. Hence, inclusion is not even part of strategic plan of most educational

institutions. In fact most of these institutions now are more **preoccupied with ICT proficiency than with the fate of physical disability, the problems that Jesus Christ confronted over 2000 years ago.**

**But there is an alternative says Professor Primrose Kurasha.** The fate of people with disability cannot be left as it has been for decades. Institutions of education are not like institutions of insects such as the bee hive whose instinctive program cannot be altered. Educational institutions can alter their focus. They can focus on training professors to acquire skills to deal with disabilities as much as they can focus on the latest developments in ICT. For example, the ZOU offers sign language education at both certificate and degree levels.

6. The pride of the modern education institution in **“quality”** is a code for exclusivism.” They also pride themselves as custodians of **“standards”**-measuring what they do and how they do things using colonial standards where there were no pretensions of inclusion. “Our students,” the modern education institution will claim, “are unique because they come from professional homes.”

**But there is an alternative says Professor Primrose Kurasha.** Quality has an alternative meaning to Rhodesian Standards. American institutions of education came up with qualitative home grown education standards as demonstrated in such universities like Harvard and Yale as well as such excellent Jesuit institutions like Georgetown University. Similarly, African Jesuits came up with a home grown Jesuit School of Philosophy and Humanities called Arrupe College in Zimbabwe. As human beings, we can conceive of alternatives to the definition of quality and standard with a deeper inclusive meaning than the old Rhodesian Colonial definition. In spite of being the largest university in Zimbabwe, in student numbers, the ZOU was the first university in the country to set up a Quality Assurance Directorate and in 2012 won 6 International Quality Awards. The University is, therefore, inclusive yet maintaining large student numbers. Despite opening doors to all people who need education, ZOU, under Professor Primrose Kurasha, who has combined mass education – inclusive education – with high standard of ODL delivery, hence the awards



Our point is that educational institutions, including Higher and Tertiary Education, have cultivated corporate cultures of doing things **without ‘problem consciousness,’ therefore, without sensing the need of exercising powers of deliberating between alternatives which is what human institutions ought to do.** In fact, corporate cultures in most of our institutions are **anti-critical thinking.** Most of the tensions in education are over suppression of critical thinking. Why are the problems listed above still self evident if debate makes people better instead of bitter?

#### **PROFESSOR KURASHA’S RESEARCH CULTURE AND OPEN DISPUTATION**

The culture that Professor Primrose Kurasha has developed and sustained at the Zimbabwe Open University emphasizes research and deliberation. The ZOU has several platforms where matters such as ‘Expectations’ and ‘Quality’ in ODL make 20% of reflections and she is invariably one of the participants frantically taking notes throughout. These platforms include;

(1) the Vice Chancellor’s Research Day; when the Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellors and members of the Higher Degrees Directorate hold seminars in Regional Centres listening to and discussing research presentations of collaborative work by local teams. The Vice Chancellor chairs the proceedings. The reviewed documents are eventually published in *The Journal for ODL Research and Scholarship*.

(2) Presentations in The Higher Degrees Directorate which are open to the public take place in the Regional Centres including Beira in Mozambique regularly and the public also attends these regularly. This is the platform where Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) and Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil) candidates present their thesis research proposals or reports on work in progress. **These are highlights in the ZOU annual calendar when high profile issues are presented by high profile individuals.** The Vice Chancellor is an active participant at these fora chairing as well as participating in group discussions and brainstorming with candidates over proposals.

(3) Professor Primrose Kurasha was President of DEASA for the past 6 years. She was a unifying force of ODL institutions in the SADC Region and she walked the talk. Where ever she went ZOU researchers and presenters followed in large numbers. ZOU academics practically filled the plane to Lilongwe, Malawi for the 2010 DEASA Conference. In 2011, they invaded Dar er Salam, Tanzania and presented in huge number with the feeling of being at home. In 2013, a 76 sitter bus was filled by participants who made remarkable presentations at the DEASA Conference in Gaborone, Botswana.

(4) The Quality Assurance Directorate Report of April 2014 reported that there were 181 publications in 2013 alone from ZOU.

(5) The business of the Centre for ODL Research and Scholarship is to promote consequential research and reflection on social, scientific, business, administration and educational issues. The Professor has developed a culture of research and reflection that is distinct in its inclusivity and now The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) has recognized her as a Goodwill Ambassador and the hostess for this 4<sup>th</sup> Conference and General Assembly because of her leadership, influence and Inclusive philosophy.

She has laid a philosophical culture where questioning, reflection and discussion are a significant part of the ODL culture at ZOU and where research and discussion is anybody’s and everybody’s business because diversity in perspectives inevitably enriches the questions and the answers. Most of the security staff at ZOU is reading for degrees. Many secretaries have earned bachelors, masters and Master of Business Administration degrees. A security officer is working towards a doctorate on the problem of *Revenue Collection from the Informal Sector*. **Research is now a way of life in ZOU and it is not an exclusive business of academics** because manual laborers are included, security guards are included, clerical staff is included, office managers and directors are included and all 10 Regional Centres in Zimbabwe are included. In fact a Regional Director is now a professor and 3 members of his centre are also Professors with an impressive collective and individual record of contributions to international scholarship. In short, inclusion is the name of the game under Professor Primrose Kurasha’s leadership in ZOU. She has integrated the community through research and scholarship. She has challenged and erased the barriers of rank, financial disability, distance, age, physical condition, sex, tribe, and international boundaries because she has doctoral candidates in Mozambique and Angola, undergraduates in Botswana because Botswana College of Distance Open Learning (BOCODOL) is affiliated to ZOU and the Distance Education Institute at The University of Zambia (UNZA) has a partnership with ZOU. Inclusion leads to integration and integration leads to peace on the continent and “a symphony of brotherhood” which in fact is the icing on the cake of all human values.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The philosophy of inclusion and integration is rooted in the inner person of a practitioner Like Professor Primrose Kurasha. It is the unenforceable aspect of the ethical man/woman. The law can, as is the case in Zimbabwe, require all people to be treated equally, but as mentioned above, 2000 years ago Jesus Christ was more concerned about the disabled and with

women than some of our institutional leaders that are more concerned about ICT than the disabled and the place of women. The record of Professor Primrose Kurasha in Open Distance Learning and at the Zimbabwe Open University testifies that by Martin Luther King's saying which she has slightly modified as she is, "possessed by an invisible inner law which etched on her heart the conviction that all human beings are siblings and that love is the mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation. True integration will be achieved by true neighbors who are willingly obedient to unenforceable obligations. [7]"

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