



Stakeholders' Perceptions on the State of the Education System in Zimbabwe's Institutions of Learning from 2007 to 2010

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ABSTRACT

The paper exposed stakeholders' perceptions on the state of the education system in Zimbabwe's institutions of learning as from 2007 up to 2010. The country experienced a lot of economic hardships. Inflation rose to alarming rates and workers could not be paid adequately. This in turn resulted in the collapse of the education system. The introduction of multiple currencies and foreign currency fees and examination fees created a lot of drop - outs from schools, colleges and universities. There was a high failure rate at Grade Seven, 'O' and 'A' Levels. There was an exodus into the Diaspora of skilled manpower to various countries of the world in search of greener pastures. The remaining workers could not deliver quality services. They have not yet been paid adequate salaries. Educators should be paid adequate salaries and have improved working conditions as well as be provided with adequate resources so as to produce quality results.

Keywords:

inflation, multiple currencies, drop-outs, exodus, Diaspora and greener pastures

BACKGROUND

It is expected that education empowers the student with communication skills, attitudes and knowledge to exercise critical thinking in interpersonal relationships. It is, therefore, paramount that every child receives this crucial asset to become a good citizen. Education is of value right across stages of one's life. Many people all over the world believe that the education system in Zimbabwe ranked high above many countries before the country attained its independence in 1980. Other countries employed skilled manpower from Zimbabwe on that understanding. The University of Zimbabwe was regarded as one of the best in the continent, therefore, graduates from this institution were easily absorbed into other countries to deliver the services required. Gweru Teachers' College and Hillside Teachers' College were also highly esteemed for producing grinded secondary school teachers. The same applies to United College of Education, which produced primary school teachers of high calibre. Quite a number of high schools and primary schools had a reputation for producing excellent results at 'O' and 'A' Level as well as at Grade Seven respectively. As from 2007, the country experienced a decline in the quality of education due to a number of reasons. Workers were disgruntled and demotivated such that quite a number of skilled labour force just abandoned their jobs and went into the Diaspora in search for greener pastures. This research examines the factors that led to this degeneration of the education system in the institutions of learning as from 2007 up to 2010.

Research objectives

The research intends to:

- a) identify the factors that led to the degeneration of the education system in the specified period,
- b) discuss how those factors affected service delivery,
- c) suggest possible ways of resuscitating the education system and
- d) provoke other people into researching in that area.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research mainly employed the qualitative method of enquiry whereby a questionnaire was used with teachers at primary and secondary / high schools as well as lecturers at teachers' colleges, polytechnic colleges and universities in three provinces. It is believed that the results are representative of what was and is happening countrywide. An analysis of the UNICEF- Press Centre article showing Zimbabwe's education system in state of emergency and The Herald newspaper mainly presenting the situation in Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council regarding the registration of students was made. All Instruments present the

qualitative research as pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in the lived experiences of people according to Marshall and Rossman (2006). The questionnaire sought for views of the participants regarding the situation. The results were established through triangulation whereby multiple ways of data collection were used as Hendricks (2006) puts it. A bit of quantitative techniques were included when responses from questionnaires were computed through groupings of similar responses.

Research participants

The research was carried out through random sampling. Twelve primary school teachers were randomly picked in the three provinces. The researchers involved those that she came across first being gender sensitive in the schools that were visited. Same applies to secondary school teachers. Two primary and two secondary schools were visited in each of the three provinces and two teachers in each school visited were involved in the research. The same applies to secondary school teachers. Three polytechnic college lecturers were also randomly picked in each of the two provinces of Midlands and Masvingo. Four lecturers were randomly picked in the same manner in one teachers' college in Midlands and six in two teachers' colleges in Masvingo province. Five university lecturers were randomly picked in the same manner in each of the two provinces of Midlands and Masvingo. The participants were of mixed sexes making a total of fifty. Three provinces of Midlands, Masvingo and Matabeleland South were involved in the research.

Data collection procedures

Questionnaires were employed in this research soliciting for the participants' opinions on a number of issues. It was felt that they would be free to express their opinions silently without any feelings of insecurity or victimisation. Document analysis of UNICEF- Press Centre and The Herald newspapers were also used in data gathering.

Findings

Most of the participants fell in the 35-49 year age group. Their qualifications ranged from Diploma in Education to Master of Education Degree. They belong to the three provinces cited above.

Causes of Workers Quitting their Jobs

Quite a number of reasons were cited as follows:

- Poor remuneration and poor working conditions,
- General frustration,

High inflation of the Zimbabwean dollar as a result of unfriendly monetary policies leading to the erosion of

workers' salaries where teachers were earning as little as 50 Rand per month at conversion.

Political instability causing rural-urban migration whereby teachers in rural areas had to abandon their jobs in order to save their lives, looking for greener pastures in neighbouring countries.

Effects of Quitting on Service Delivery

The respondents gave various views on the issue concerned such as: Some key areas such as Maths and Science suffered because even those who did not leave the country could not deliver quality work. There was a great decline in the standards due to shortage of personnel. Shortage of qualified staff leading to the employment of untrained staff (teachers) resulting in poor results. At universities teaching and learning were adversely affected as most departments were manned by people without relevant skills and qualifications resulting in the production of graduates of low calibre. There were inadequate contact hours, loss of value of education, and no serious learning was taking place. Some Universities closed as well as some schools. Workers were seriously de-motivated and discontented resulting in frequent absenteeism. Workers selling goodies to students showing no commitment to their job resulting in their divided attention. No supervision of staff by authorities. Work stoppage as workers got engaged in money changing (forex dealing) and street vending in order to survive. They lost lessons where parents could not afford the incentives. They lost respect from society and got worried about their future. Teachers engaged in private lessons where parents could afford them incentives. Students were also demoralised to learn as they faced a lot of challenges like going to school only to find no teachers resulting in high deviant behaviour. Hardships in paying school fees and buying food. Most students could not cope with the situation, leading to some drop-outs from primary school right across to university. Some repeated grades/forms they had attended while others did not write 'O' / 'A' Level exams. At colleges and universities students took longer than stipulated periods to complete their courses.

Administration, Marking and Results of Examinations

This aspect was relevant to primary and high school teachers who responded that Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) workers engaged in industrial action failing to administer examinations efficiently. In some schools, examination question papers were inadequate resulting in quarantine of students. Teachers refused to invigilate thereby schools engaging non- professionals in the exercise. Teachers refused to mark examinations. Some results at high schools were either missing or different subjects sat for were entered in the results slip. There was a very high failure rate at Grade Seven, 'O' and 'A' levels. In 2008 results at all levels were delayed and when they did,

some Grade 7 results never came out. Students into form 1 and Lower 6 were enrolled using their mid- year school results.

Assessment of the Period from January 2009 to 2010 with Respect to Workers' Salaries and Working Conditions

Salaries have slightly improved with the introduction of the American dollar as well as allowances from students' fees. The situation however remains far below standard and expectation as civil servants are getting salaries that are below the poverty datum line.

In some private schools teachers are given allowances from students' fees; thereby putting them at a better position than other teachers elsewhere. At least the dollar can now buy some foodstuffs which are now back on the supermarket shelves. A lot more needs to be done in this area. The majority still lives on hand to mouth. Not much has been done in improving working conditions. Teachers still do not get transport allowances nor housing allowances. In schools that provide accommodation they are crowded in a single house. The resources fall far short in terms of furniture and textbooks. Lecture venues are inadequate and inappropriate. There are no car allowances as would be expected at the institution of highest learning. It would also be a good idea to have computers or laptops in lecturers' offices for them to easily conduct their research. The work ethic is still missing and needs to be re-established.

Assessment of Payment of School Fees and Examination Fees

The introduction of foreign currency in fees payment made it very difficult for parents to raise the fees. The fees are far above the wages so parents fail to pay the required fees on time and quite a number of students drop out of school. Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is not catering for all needy students. Some parents end up being handed over to debt collectors after failing to pay accumulated fees and levies arrears. Fees remain a big challenge to most students and they struggle to raise them on time. The high fees have resulted in the low enrolment at teachers' colleges and universities. The government intervened with the cadetship loans to assist very needy students at university. The aspect of examination fees mainly affected secondary schools. At university examination, fees have never been a major challenge since the fees are relatively low as compared to tuition fees. At secondary level parents find it difficult to pay the required fees for all the number of subjects that the students register to write at 'O' Level. Closing dates for registration get extended to allow parents to raise the fees but some still fail to do so. There have been some more drop-outs of students failing to sit for public examinations. A loan facility was created for examination fees and students wrote but others failed to write.

Assessment of the Administration and Marking of Examinations and their Results

For universities and colleges there is no problem, the exercise goes on smoothly. ZIMSEC administration has improved efficiency and markers are now paid on time but the script rate remains far too low considering the amount of work involved in marking. Markers now turn up in large numbers and some are turned away for various reasons.

However, there are poor marking venues with inadequate and inappropriate facilities. In some instances markers were demoralised by late payment of their allowances. Some seasoned markers have left, so the quality of marking is seriously compromised. Results have been released earlier than before. It is sad to note that those students that were loaned examination fees did not get their results. They come out late even if markers mark early. There are errors when some students are given results in subjects they did not register for or do not get results for what they registered for. Pass rate is very low at all levels except for private boarding schools which offer their teachers a high remuneration. Only students that have cleared their balance fees access their results at university. From The Herald of Thursday 8 July 2010, the Minister of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, Senator David Coltart called on the government to allocate more funds to education in the national budget to resuscitate the sector which is 'catastrophic.' Germany Technological Co-operation donated Information Communication Technology of eleven laptops, ten desktop computers, printers and internet accessories to ZIMSEC in a bid to capacitate it to attain high standards enjoyed by other exam boards in the region. He went on to say that government strives to restore the credibility of the country's exam system by channelling more funds towards education. 215 000 'O' and 27 000 'A' Level students had registered after the June 11 deadline, a steady progress compared to last year. Mr Happy Ndanga the ZIMSEC Director said, 'Though we are criticised a lot, we are not going to be shaken in delivering what the nation requires.' Germany's Deputy Ambassador to Zimbabwe Mr Mathias Schumacher said his country would assist Zimbabwe revive education. UNICEF- Press centre – Zimbabwe education system in state of emergency Harare, 9 October 2008 states that results from routine monitoring visit on the situation in Zimbabwe's schools, UNICEF expressed concern over deterioration of the education system. It called on all stake holders to urgently address the current crisis to save the once vibrant sector from collapse. Just a week before Primary, Ordinary and Advanced Level national examinations of 2008, 40% of the country's teachers were attending lessons, a third of pupils reporting for classes and District Education Officers were ill- equipped to run national examinations. 'Between a two- month teachers' strike, limited learning materials, political violence and displacements, Zimbabwe's children have

lost a whole year of schooling' said UNICEF representative Mr. Roeland Monasch. 'The depletion of teachers in school, transport and food problems faced by the remaining teachers and lack of resources have left the sector tottering on the brink of collapse'. Zimbabwe's education system, once the best in Africa, now faces immense challenges. Public financing of the sector continues to dwindle in real terms, school fees is soaring beyond the reach of many, depletion of education and low morale owing to salaries for the remaining teachers, have unravelled past successes in the sector.

The crisis has not spared tertiary education sector, which saw major State Universities failing to open for the first semester of 2008/2009 academic year which was supposed to resume in August. UNICEF provides support to the Ministry of Education, Sport, Art and Culture. The UNICEF Press Centre concluded that, in the last two years it has invested about US\$12 million through construction and furnishing of classrooms in schools across the country, provided textbooks to primary schools to meet 1:1 ratio and also paid school fees for 150 000 orphaned and vulnerable children.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results clearly indicate that the education system has degenerated. Economic collapse of the country was the major long term cause of the collapse of the education system. A lot of skilled manpower has been leaving the country since 2007 up to the present day as cited in the UNICEF Press Centre. Most of them migrated to United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Botswana, and Tanzania in search for greener pastures. Unsustainable salaries, poor working conditions, lack of adequate resources and political instability have been cited as the main factors leading to the exodus into the Diaspora. The remaining skeletal staff failed to cope with the situation and ended up engaging in industrial action through absenteeism and sit ins. UNICEF Press Centre concurs with this. The teachers and lecturers' status has been greatly undermined. There has been a great loss of credibility of professional qualifications. Schools have produced semi-literate school going children. The students were demoralised and a lot of them dropped out of school in favour of seeking for employment in the neighbouring countries of Botswana and South Africa as border jumpers. This gave rise to the mushrooming of private colleges, which provided better remuneration to teachers. Some homes in residential areas have become classrooms whereby private lessons are going on there. A situation would be found where a primary school teacher would attend to classes ranging from grade 3 to 7. Some parents have opted to pay teachers for private extra lessons with their children. ZIMSEC lost credibility when their workers were also involved in industrial action resulting in numerous errors like some results missing and others showing what the candidates did not register for. The Herald of 8 July 2010 attempts

to improve the situation with regards to examination processes. Some students did not write exams since education seemed to have lost its value. Seasoned examiners did not turn up when invited for marking. New examiners were recruited and trained causing delays in the results especially in 2008 and the results themselves were poor at all levels- Grade 7, 'O', and 'A' level which are not a true reflection of the students' competence. Although the wages are insufficient at least they could manage to buy food for the families which had become impossible to do before when using the Zimbabwean dollar. The payment of examiners in US dollar also resulted in their high turn out for the exercise. The payment of school fees and examination fees in US dollars crippled a lot of students. Parents and guardians could not afford the high fees as their salaries are far below the poverty datum line. The Minister of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture stipulated fees for government schools to \$20 at secondary and \$10 at primary schools from January 2009 up to date. This slightly eased the situation but school levies still remained unaffordable for the majority of the guardians. BEAM also assists needy children at primary and secondary with payment of fees but does not cater for all the needy. At university the needy students are assisted by the government through the Cadetship Scheme which also does not cater for all needy students. As a result of high fees charged at universities, many students have accumulated high debts for fees. This in turn produces graduates without results and failure to secure employment. In Midlands urban, some schools engaged debt collectors in a bid to recover school fees arrears which resulted in parents losing their property and one committing suicide. A lot of students at 'O' level ended up selecting a few subjects to register for, due to lack of exam fees while others failed to register completely even after the extension of the deadline. A loan facility was created for examination fees but those who registered and wrote under this scheme did not receive their results as revealed in The Herald of 26 June 2010.

CONCLUSION

The country's education system has degenerated as compared to what it was prior the period in question. The educators could not operate at their best optimum level. Quite a number left the teaching service to get employment in other countries or finding other ways of generating income. The work ethic has been lost although a few workers are still committed to their work. Some private schools have weaned themselves from ZIMSEC opting for Cambridge exams. Most of the students have failed to value education as they prefer finding ways of making money in place of going to school. There have been a lot of drop-outs from school due to lack of school fees and examination fees which is paid in foreign currency. However, there has been an improvement since 2009 at the introduction of US dollar earnings which started as an allowance and developed

into a salary. Food can be seen in shops and payment of school, college and university fees can now be done in instalments. Quite a number of institutions are now giving their workers incentives. In some areas educators are now working to their best ability in service delivery. In 2009, the Minister of Education, Arts, Sport, and Culture called on all teachers who had abandoned their job since 2007 to return to work on amnesty. Quite a number heeded the call and schools were fairly staffed again. ZIMSEC results seem to be improving since November 2009 examinations. Perhaps with the seasoned teachers in the classrooms and seasoned markers marking examinations, the education system can return to normalcy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government should assist all students with difficulties in paying fees in order to reduce drop-outs from school.
- The schools, colleges and universities should compliment government efforts through income generation in order to develop their institutions.
- The institutions of learning should be renovated and resources like books and furniture be bought.
- The education sector should be allocated the lion's share in the country's national budget.
- If all this could be addressed, work ethic can be re-established.
- More donor countries can also chip in to assist the country in resuscitating the education system in Zimbabwe.
- The economy should be resuscitated.
- The government should address the issue of salaries and allowances to be above the poverty datum line.
- More pay should be given to teachers to motivate them into working hard and as committed as before 2007.
- Institutions of learning should improve working conditions to motivate the workers to do their best.
- The government should protect teachers against political violence.
- Enough resources and rewards for teachers and markers should be provided by the government in collaboration with institutions.
- The government should pay teachers and lecturers in line with other teachers and lecturers in the sub-region to curb migration into neighbouring countries.
- The government ought to support the institutions to operate efficiently.
- The exam fees should be lowered and subsidised by the government.
- Leaders should focus on the child and not on their personal gains.

- There is need for complete overhaul of the education sector to make things work.
- The Government should support educators by giving them loans to buy houses, cars and pay school fees.
- All people should take education as serious business since the students are the future leaders who need to be educated.
- The SADC is calling for the resuscitation of the education system in Zimbabwe's universities through its consented efforts to send professors, doctors and call for return of professionals in Diaspora.
- If this could be observed, then the education system in Zimbabwe can be resuscitated to the maximum.

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