



Looking back to look forward - education in Zimbabwe: a WOZA perspective – January 2010

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Preamble

The education of their children has been a major driving force for Zimbabweans and WOZA members in particular, and the motivation behind much activism. In the first decade after Independence, the education system in Zimbabwe reached its peak and was heralded as the best in Africa. In the last decade however, it has been pushed to its decline by power and politics - our children's future sacrificed. This paper will reflect on how this decay took place in order to expose this injustice and to demand its immediate remedy. Our children deserve excellence. They deserve teachers trained to deliver it and we will not rest until we get it.

Introduction

In 2009 education is in a crisis situation with neither the state nor parents able to afford to pay the costs of quality schooling. Ten years ago the President asked for a report to be prepared on the education system. The report showed a severe decline in standards, an ineffective curriculum, the poor attitude of both teachers and pupils and the corruption and ineptitude of the people running the education system. That report recommended major changes in all aspects of education. It was never released and was hidden away by the Minister. Since that time the economy was destroyed by misgovernance. Bad policies did further damage to schools and the lives of children became affected, making them the ones to suffer the consequences, their education sacrificed for political power.

The deterioration has seen buildings falling into disrepair and teaching materials disappearing. Huge numbers of teachers left the service and the country due to a meaningless salary. By 2008 those remaining spent more time on strike than actually teaching. Government could not make enough budget allocations for schools and the examination system was expected to run on its own without the ability to charge cost-covering fees. Specialised departments such as the Curriculum Development Unit lost most of their staff, and staff that remain at national, provincial and district headquarters have no vehicles or other equipment with which to carry out their duties. Tens of thousand of children dropped out of school because it was not worth the effort of staying to learn very little and then to fail exams after paying high fees. Even those who could perhaps have passed could find no employment, so it was more worthwhile to drop out and spend time earning an income in black market dealing, gold panning or cross-border trading. Most schools no longer had the capacity to provide a meaningful education or prepare children for a decent life.

In February 2009 a respected member of the Movement for Democratic Change was appointed Minister of Education. He inherited a complete disaster. And he had to face a nation of parents who still wanted their children to be educated and expected him to perform the miracle of providing a meaningful and affordable education. Although he managed to reopen the schools and keep them open, thousands of children have dropped out because they cannot afford the fees, high levies and top-ups teachers continue to demand. Despite good intentions, he was unable to provide the quality of education they wanted, with few textbooks, demotivated teachers and inadequate supervision by ministry officials. The low standards criticised in the commissioned report and recommended changes were forgotten as standards dropped even further. Now the education system not only needs massive amounts of investment, it also needs a complete rethink of many aspects, especially the curriculum, if it is to give children of Zimbabwe hope for a better future.

A Brief History

a) *Pre-Independence – quality education for 'whites only' with minor exceptions to build up a black ruling elite class*

Education in the pre-Independence period was strictly divided on racial grounds. White children went to government-provided schools for whites, Asian and mixed race "coloured" children were lumped together in different schools, and black Africans attended schools for Africans. It was only in the 1950's, when

agriculture, mining economy and industrialisation began that Africans began to be educated. Government began to build schools for Africans and encouraged missions to develop teacher-training colleges. Emphasis remained on primary schooling, although some missions were now permitted to develop secondary schools to provide the basis for trained teachers, nurses and clerical staff for offices. They only really trained the African elite however. President Robert Mugabe was a product of a mission school system.

Up until Independence in 1980, the number of secondary schools for Africans was limited. An examination at the end of primary school graded children and only about 20% were permitted to proceed to secondary school. By the late 60's a dual system of secondary schools had been introduced, with the better achievers being streamed to academic schools leading to Ordinary Level (O' Level) exams operated from Cambridge, and the less able being channelled to schools which provided vocational training. The numbers proceeding to secondary schools increased as more schools were built, but the progression rate never even reached 30%.

Meanwhile, schooling for white children was compulsory and free. Boarding schools catered for children growing up on farms and mines. Secondary schools were also streamed by ability into academic and commercial and special technical schools were established for those technically inclined. As government schools were racially integrated by legislation in 1978, "community schools" were allowed to establish fee levels, unfortunately too highly priced for the marginalised majority to afford.

b) Post-Independence policies - an injustice conceptualised by colonialism and consolidated by the new black ruling elite

One of the promises of the liberation war was free primary education and affordable secondary education for all Zimbabweans. And so the immediate goal of the new government after Independence was to open up education opportunities equally for all races. Government also insisted that all must have equal schooling. The vocational secondary schools for Africans all were changed into academic schools and the slower, five-year stream in the white schools for the less able, as well as the commercial and technical programmes, were phased out. Opening secondary schooling for everyone implied an enormous expansion, as well as expansion in teacher training facilities. A new curriculum also had to be developed which reflected a focus on Zimbabwe and Africa and an appreciation of things African.

c) Post-Independence Curriculum – intellect at the sacrifice of empowerment

According to ZANU's interpretation of the promise of the liberation war, everyone was to be educated equally. Unfortunately the post-Independence curriculum did not cater for different levels of intelligence, for different talents or for the different ways people can take advantage of opportunities. These differences were ignored - all children were to follow the same curriculum – seven years of primary school (Grades 1 – 7) and four years of secondary (Forms 1 - 4), all of it academic. Those who performed very well on their O' Level exams would proceed to Sixth Form (A' Level). Vocational and commercial skills training streams were closed in almost all schools.

In the early years primary schools taught only English and Maths. Later tribal languages were introduced, but it wasn't until the late 1980's that children had to take an exam in their tribal language and social studies at the end of primary school in Grade 7. Meanwhile new syllabi and textbooks were being produced at a rapid rate. The biggest changes in the curriculum took place in secondary level History and Geography. There was nothing in the curriculum however that covered civic education or any emphasis on practical, vocational or technical subjects, which would have allowed the children to grow into employable citizens, knowing and exercising all their rights.

Initially students were examined at Grade 7 and at O' Level, using Cambridge exams for the latter as well as for A' Level. A junior secondary certificate was also examined at Form 2 or junior secondary level, the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC). A Zimbabwean examinations board was created so that examinations could be localised and the large amounts of foreign currency required to pay Cambridge for exams could be saved.

d) *Post-Independence expansion – conveyor belt for quantity whilst sacrificing quality education*

Expansion of education during the 1980's was great, with numbers in secondary schools multiplying four times in six years. Previously the vast majority of rural children had only enjoyed primary schooling. During 1980 it was announced that the following January, with the beginning of the new school year, all Grade 7 children would proceed to Form 1 in secondary school, regardless of their results in the national Grade 7 exam. Obviously school places were not available, neither were teachers. Government "solved" this problem in rural areas by adding classes to the primary schools, which were then known as "Upper Tops". Sometimes these added classes simply used the same primary school classrooms in the afternoon, or younger pupils were squeezed together. In urban schools there was 'hot seating' – some pupils and teachers attended in the morning while another group used the school in the afternoons. At the same time the numbers of primary school children more than doubled, as many schools had been closed during the war and they now reopened, and had to accommodate more children of different ages.

Of course teachers were not available, neither were textbooks. Unemployed secondary school leavers were recruited to teach Form 1 classes. This situation continued for several years, with more classes being added each year and more Form 4 failures being brought in as apprentice schoolteachers. In some cases they were assigned to primary classes while the qualified Grade 6 and 7 teachers were moved up to the secondary classes.

Meanwhile, a massive building programme was taking place, which saw building materials provided and the parents in rural communities asked to offer their labour. In towns government undertook construction. A new approach to primary teacher training was introduced which allowed the trainees to spend most of their three student years teaching while following a distance learning programme. Expatriate teachers were relied on only for Advanced Level (A' Level) teaching, but many primary trained and untrained teachers taught in secondary classes. By 1989 less than half of the teachers were fully trained and another eight per cent were still in training.

Such an expansion in such a short period of time, using untrained teachers, resulted in a lower quality education. Instead of opening up high quality education to all Zimbabweans, there was mass education at a very low standard. Many rural secondary schools, falling under the administrative control of councils rather than the Ministry of Education, never achieved any acceptable standard of teaching or pupil performance. Thus, up to the present, the highest attainment of children on O' Level exams was 24% pass rate in 1995. After that it has gone down again.

e) *Finance*

Education was financed from government income supplemented by large amounts of assistance from donor governments. Donors funded everything from school and classroom construction to teacher training to curriculum development to administration. Most of this assistance was channelled through government. School fees, where they existed, were minimal and affordable for most, especially for primary school. By the late 80's, however, the amounts that government was channelling to schools for operating costs was decreasing or being diverted to other budgets such as the defence budget. Someone had to begin to pay the bills. Parents committees were told to charge parents levies to cater for the purchase and repair of textbooks, furniture, cleaning equipment as well as capital development and major repairs. Government then stopped supporting urban schools and left most rural schools to the mercy of very inexperienced local councils.

f) *Practical/vocational education*

Because there was no training in practical or vocational subjects, Zimbabwe produced large numbers of poorly and inappropriately educated youth who considered themselves too educated for manual labour but were not prepared for any specific employment. The rural youth drifted to towns in droves where they joined the ranks of the unemployed.

Government had to do something so in the middle of the 80's they came up with '**Education with Production**'. They were not very serious in implementing it however and once again had no teachers prepared to teach it. After that there was a shift to promoting practical subjects and every pupil would have

to study at least two practical subjects. But there wasn't sufficient equipment and not enough teachers trained for these subjects to effectively implement this policy. Furthermore, because of the ideology that education must be the same for all, everyone was required to study pure maths and science in spite of the fact that the majority of children found these subjects difficult and unnecessary.

g) Peak and decline

By the end of the 1980's it was clear that the existing curriculum was not preparing school leavers for employment. Practical subjects were promoted half-heartedly, partly because they were more expensive to provide, requiring equipment and consumables. Parents also did not act to demand a more suitable education for their children because they accepted government propaganda that it was better to pursue an academic education than admit to one's children being less able academically.

The expansion continued, and by the year 2000 most teachers were trained and children were being taught throughout their schooling by qualified staff. Despite this the deterioration of the education system continued without anyone caring to fix it, or provide sufficient money for teaching materials. Science labs, the entire buzz in the 90's, now had no equipment and no chemicals. Textbooks began to fall apart without being replaced, classroom furniture was in a terrible state, and plumbing broke down. The education system began to collapse completely.

h) Nziramasanga Report

In 1998 President Mugabe appointed a commission to report on the state of education and to make recommendations for its future development. A year later the report was presented; it was however, never released to the public, its contents did not become widely known and were never debated.

The Report condemned the state of education even before Zimbabwe's economic collapse set in after 2000. It made bold statements that for the majority of students schooling was irrelevant. Standards of teaching and behaviour in schools had declined drastically and failure rates were very high. Administration was characterised by incompetence and nepotism, and the entire system was dictatorial, promoting blind obedience and rote learning rather than developing critical and imaginative thinking.

The main recommendation of the Nziramasanga report was a vocationalization of education starting at secondary school. Primary and junior secondary school would be replaced by nine years of compulsory basic education. After Grade 9, all students would be allocated to academic, commercial or vocational/technical streams. In the last two streams more than half the timetable would consist of commercial or technical training. Furthermore, attachments to appropriate companies or other productive units would be included to give pupils a chance to do practical work within the normal curriculum. The curriculum would not be the same for the whole country, but would be changed to fit the particular economic activities of each region. Rural schools would concentrate on those productive sectors in their area – whether agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining etc. The curriculum from pre-school level was to be practical to make pupils productive citizens. Teaching methods would have to change to focus on skills, including scientific and critical thinking. The emphasis on examinations would be reduced, with the first national exams being introduced only at Grade 11. There would be no Grade 7 or ZJC exams – until the end of Grade 11 (old Form 4) exams would be within the school. Grade 11 exams would replace O' Level exams.

By now providing 'education for all' was proving too difficult and by publicising the report, government would be publicly admitting guilt and failure. The Minister found it easier to hide the report and forget about it. Only one recommendation was implemented – the opening of pre-school classes to all primary schools. But again this was done without attention to the need for teachers or qualified staff, classroom space and teaching materials.

i) The final collapse 2000-2009

By 2000 government had begun to destroy every productive sector of Zimbabwe's economy. In the process they also destroyed their sources of income and also chased away the foreign donors and potential investors who helped expand education in the early 80's. Meaningless amounts of money that got eaten up by inflation were allocated to the Ministry of Education for their administrative functions as well as for

onward transmission to schools. Teachers' salaries also became meaningless and the once respected profession became a target of political abuse. So along with other qualified Zimbabweans, they began to abandon their positions and leave the country or engage in something more lucrative such as cross-border trading. Those who remained were by 2008 not earning enough to buy food. They expressed their displeasure by repeatedly striking or going to their schools and refusing to teach. Throughout 2008 very little teaching took place but the demands for parents to pay continued.

Those teachers that remained also became direct targets of militia and war veterans associated with ZANU PF. They were now directly accused of supporting the opposition during the elections of 2008, and many were assaulted, tortured, even killed, or were chased away from their schools. By the time the power-sharing government came into being in February 2009, most teachers had been on strike for almost six months. Children whose parents had sacrificed to pay to write their November exams did not know that they could not be marked. Parents were becoming despondent about their children ever acquiring an education.

j) Current developments – the paying to fail year

In February 2009 most schools were still closed when the new Minister took over. His first job was to get schools reopened. This required payment of a living wage to teachers. Negotiations with the teachers unions brought the teachers back to work for an "allowance" of US \$100 a month, and this was increased to US \$150. In order to provide cash for operating expenses within the schools, the government announced fixed tuition fees to be paid by parents directly to the schools. The amounts of fees produced an outcry from parents, causing Cabinet to reduce the fees to a bare minimum – nothing for rural primary schools, US \$5 for urban primary schools in high-density areas, a little more for secondary schools and primary schools in low-density areas. Because this fee was completely inadequate to operate any school, and government had no money to put in, parents' committees were told to increase levy amounts to cover expenses. Teachers then demanded part of this levy to supplement their salaries. Despite the fact that schools were open, with all these demands many parents could not afford to keep their children in school. The brutal facts of the matter were that government and parents had no money for education. Government was only managing to pay teachers a small wage. Zimbabweans had become too poor to educate their children.

Since February 2009, the Ministry of Education has struggled to keep the schools open and the teachers in place. Desperate parents paid high top-ups direct to teachers so that their children could learn. This time the international community did not open their wallets because they did not trust the ZANU PF-controlled part of government not to direct the money into party coffers or private pockets. The Minister is hard-pressed to find ways to receive aid without it going through Zanu PF hands. Funding came for the printing of textbooks but there are delays in getting this done. The new budget for 2010 has allocated 14% of expenditure to education for textbooks and repair and maintenance of infrastructure and provision of vehicles and other equipment to administrators. But it is not certain this money will reach the education system because it is only money on paper, not in cash. The fund for the provision of fees for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) could only help if the administration was free of corruption so many children will probably drop out of school

Looking ahead in 2010 – putting our children first and demanding excellence

The colonial system also educated some Africans – with a higher standard than is provided for Zimbabweans now 'born free'. The reality of our current situation is that the Minister and government do not have the means to keep children learning, school gates open and teachers in class. Beyond that is the required repair and maintenance of infrastructure and the capacitating of administrators, then the provision of learning materials. The burden will continue to fall on the shoulders of parents and children will not learn well enough to pass. Should parents continue to pay fees, levies and top-ups for an education that will not make their children full citizens who can earn a living? Should parents continue to pay for a standard of education lower than the colonial education system when they were promised free primary and affordable secondary education?

In 1999 the Nziramasanga Report condemned almost every aspect of that system. Parents condemn it in 2010 and demand a more relevant education curriculum, system and administration that allows our children to develop into adults with pride. If we are not able to move forward with our education, Zimbabwe will not

be able to produce qualified young people who do not shun hard work, and the future of our nation will once again be threatened.

Parents have tried to vote for leaders who will put our children's education first. But these leaders spend too much time discussing about teachers and their salary and do not spend enough time thinking how to fulfil the promise of equality in education. Teachers do not bother themselves with teaching children in their official morning sessions but in the afternoon transform into private tutors motivated by direct cash payments by children whose parents can pay them. Many teachers are now earning more than the vast majority of Zimbabweans - most of them working only half a day.

Recommendations

What is needed to deliver a better education system that can make our children employable adults is the following:

- A revamping of the curriculum to ensure its relevance to the children who learn, producing a school-leaver who has skills with which to enter the formal economy or provide adequate self-employment.
- This means introducing more vocational subjects – both commercial and technical – what Nziramasanga called 'vocationalisation of the curriculum', and providing opportunities for children to be attached in work places during their senior years.
- It also means allowing children to be placed according to their abilities and their interests instead of providing the same curriculum for all.
- The teaching methods need to stress skills development rather than rote learning of knowledge in preparation for exams.
- The administration of schools needs to be less autocratic and more tended to participatory decision-making; physical abuse, which is common, must stop.
- A subject which teaches human rights, good governance, and democratic practice will need to be introduced to the curriculum in order to re-orient both teachers and pupils to a society which values individuals, imagination and creativity rather than conformity and obedience.
- Teachers and administrators will need to be re-trained to accommodate new approaches to teaching and learning.
- Examination systems will have to be revamped.

In January 2010, ahead of the new school year, WOZA has the following demands:

- ☞ Teachers must produce quality teaching and show that they are committed to the learning of all their pupils equally.
- ☞ Education authorities must utilise the vehicles that are being purchased to supervise teachers and demand more discipline in schools.
- ☞ Teachers must stop demanding top-ups from parents and the Ministry must prohibit this practice.
- ☞ The Ministry must work to produce a new and relevant curriculum as recommended above.
- ☞ Parents will do their best to pay reasonable fees set by Ministry and levies set by properly constituted and democratic parents meetings at the beginning of each year – we will not accept any fee or levy changes in 2010.