February 2013 has come and gone, bringing with it yet another set of abysmal O level examination results and another round of national gnashing of teeth, finger-pointing and acrimonious name-calling. Some attempted to score cheap political points at the expense of rational debate, while the Minister was at pains to point out the difficulties faced by children trying to learn over the past chaotic few years. Indeed, the schools have suffered drastically through the decade of economic collapse and political violence, starved of funding, abandoned by teachers, who left children to fend for themselves without much opportunity for learning. The Minister was not wrong in pinpointing the problems of recent years. However, if we step back to take a longer view of the evolution of our education system, we will find that the present dysfunction originates much further back, and is in fact the logical outcome of policies introduced in the immediate post-independence years – those very policies which have been hailed as bringing Zimbabwe the “best education system in Africa”. It is time for us to revisit the developments of those years.

Much glowing rhetoric has been mouthed and printed lauding the miraculous achievements of Zimbabwean education in the post-independence period. But how much has been myth and how much hard fact? Public and private figures talk about restoring our education to “excellence”. Certainly there were excellent aspects and segments, but is it correct to characterise the system as excellent? In comparison to many other African nations, Zimbabwe could certainly boast of both quantity and quality, but is the low standard achieved by others the measuring stick we should be using, or should we be looking at what was done in comparison to what might have been done? Or at least should we not be telling the truth about what was done and the legacy it left?
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**POST-INDEPENDENCE EXPANSION POLICY – DEMOCRATISATION MEANS QUANTITY**

A major component of both liberation movements’ promises to the Zimbabwean people when independence was achieved in 1980 was to bring expansion and equality in the education system. Education was considered to be a necessary ingredient of economic development, but it would also fulfil the demands and aspirations of the general populace to have their children educated so that they could emerge from poverty into a more comfortable life with modern amenities. Thus everyone expected that the new government would address the racial disparities in educational provision and meet the people’s demands. Few, however, were really expecting the massive expansion which took place in the early 80’s, with the aim of fulfilling the election promise to provide both primary and secondary education to all children.

During the final war years, many schools had been closed, so enrolment numbers had declined from their peak in 1977. But when the schools opened in January 1980 after the signing of the ceasefire, the numbers skyrocketed. The expansion which took place in the ensuing years has been the hallmark of Zimbabwean education, and it was a truly remarkable achievement. The figures tell the story.

During 1980, 1,310,315 children registered for school. Of these, the vast majority were in primary school – 1,235,994 – with only 74,321 being registered for secondary schools. The total was an increase of 424,514 or 47.9% over the previous year, and of 38.5% over the higher enrolments of 1977 before the war took such a toll. The huge 1980 increase took place primarily because the war had ended and schools which had been closed reopened. Parents rushed to enrol their children in school, now that they could move freely without fear, and the Grade 1 intake more than doubled from 1979 or any earlier year. Returning refugee children also swelled the school population.

But after independence in April of 1980, a much bigger expansion was introduced, to begin taking effect in 1981. The abolition of any primary school tuition fee from Term 3 in 1980 encouraged many to enrol their children the following January. In that next year, the Grade 1 intake increased again by 25% and the numbers in every grade from 2 to 7 were substantially higher than in 1980, indicating that most children had by this time returned to school, and many who had been unable to enter school during the war registered even though they were now overage. The total primary enrollment for 1981 was nearly half a million more than in 1980. By 1982 the number was over 1.9 million and by 1983, as the huge grade 1 intakes from 80-82 began to make their way through the system, the figure reached over 2 million, never to drop below this again. The essence of this growth was to move from a 70% participation rate of children in primary schools in 1976 to 97% in 1984.

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However remarkable that may have been, the far greater expansion took place in secondary schooling. Prior to independence, one of the major grievances of African Rhodesians had been that secondary schooling was harshly restricted by a selection process at grade 7. Thus, in 1976 when 70% of children were able to attend primary school, only 23% of Grade 7 pupils could proceed to secondary. The new government made an early decision and in mid-year announced that from January 1981 every child who finished Grade 7 could automatically proceed to Form 1, regardless of examination results. Places would be made available for all. From 22,201 in 1980 the Form 1 intake nearly quadrupled in 1981 to 83,491. With this policy being continued from year to year, by 1986 the secondary school population surged to over half a million. The combined school enrollments reached just over 3 million for the first time in 1991 – representing 28% of the total Zimbabwean population at the time.⁹

Of course the consequences of such an explosion in numbers were manifold and would have been debilitating for any school system. As the Permanent Secretary wrote in his report “1981 might be described as the year of shortages; shortages, that is of everything but children”⁶. There were not enough buildings, not enough teachers, not enough teaching materials, not enough ministry staff to conduct supervision, and certainly not enough experienced administrators. Everything became make-do.

**PROVIDING MATERIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

The logical consequence of such rapid expansion was the urgent need to provide physical and human resources. Classrooms were of course required, but this issue was more easily solved that the demand for teaching staff. Existing classrooms could be double-sessioned – on occasion triple-sessioned, so that one group used the rooms in the morning and another group used them in the afternoon. Frequently classes were simply held in the open, under trees with pupils sitting on the ground or on stones or logs; other communities in resettlement areas created schools in former farm houses. In rural areas “upper tops” became the norm; these were secondary classes held in primary schools, using the primary classrooms. They were intended to be a stop-gap emergency solution to accommodate numbers while new schools were built. And new schools were indeed built – with the total number of primary schools increasing from 2,401⁷ in 1979 to 4,530 in 1990. Secondary schools increased from 177 to 1,512 in 1990⁸. But somehow they never managed to keep up with the growing enrolments, especially in urban areas, where hot-seating continues in some schools up to today.

Obviously, these were not ideal learning environments, but probably more critical from the point of view of teaching and learning were the provision of text books and other materials such as science equipment, maps and atlases for Geography, and implements and consumables
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for practical subjects. Even after classrooms were built it was still common in the 1980’s to find eight to ten pupils jockeying for position around a single text book.

But most critical of all were the human resources – the teachers. Having set out on such an expansionist programme, the Ministry then strained to provide teachers – and not just trained teachers, but anyone who might fill the role. There was bound to be a time lag, because teachers have to be trained; but what if there are not sufficient recruits with the necessary qualifications to be trained, what is to be done then? In 1980, for example, only 12,926 pupils completed Form 4, and of course not all of them were successful in obtaining a certificate which would qualify them for teacher training. Furthermore, with all the opportunities opening up after independence, few might be interested. A 1986 projection showed that with a teacher/pupil ratio of 1:28 and a 70% transition rate to secondary school, a total of 18,750 secondary school teachers would be required as early as 1985ix. A teacher generally needed to have completed O Level and then spend three years being trained. To solve the problem of teachers while the additional ones were being trained, there were only two alternatives – either bring teachers from elsewhere or utilise untrained teachers. Zambia, which expanded its education at a far more measured rate and from a much smaller base, chose the former and made extensive use of expatriate teachers, especially at secondary level. ZANU PF, on the other hand, displayed a can-do approach, sharply reducing the requirements to become a teacher. They relied to an astonishing extent on “temporary teachers”. Throughout the 1980’s many of these were Form 4 leavers who had failed most of their subjects. They replaced primary school teachers who were moved up to teach in secondary schools. Many of these, trained before 1980, had not completed secondary school themselves, having been trained after leaving at Form 2 or even at Standard 6 (the former name for Grade 7). They did however, have the benefit of classroom teaching experience. But even they could not fill all the vacancies in the secondary schools, so many who ended up teaching Form 1 and 2 were in fact recent O Level failures.

Meanwhile a massive exercise in teacher training was begun. Programmes were devised which placed student teachers in schools as full-time classroom teachers for most of their training. In the ZINTECx programme, a crash course which trained primary school teachers, students spent one term in lectures, followed by three years in a classroom with minimal supervision, and finished off with another term in college. In the conventional programme, for both primary and secondary school teaching, a whole year out of a three year course was spent full-time in the classroom, where there was often no better qualified person to supervise or mentor them, and college lecturers visited once or twice a term.

In the early years, the situation was drastic. Figures from 1984 show that in rural secondary day schools run by district councils – representing the vast majority of new secondary schools – the
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The number of teachers increased from 2,682 to 6067 between 1982 and 1984\textsuperscript{xii}. In 1982 only 128 were trained for secondary teaching, a figure which rose to 281 by 1984; in that year, of the teachers in secondary school classrooms, 24.5\% were primary trained, 13.8\% were students and 54\% were completely untrained. The urban secondary schools fared far better, with 29\% in 1984 being trained for secondary school teaching. These figures demonstrate the deep inequalities which rapidly developed between rural and urban schools, especially at secondary level. The Permanent Secretary described the situation in his 1991 report.(see quotation on page 7, below)

The rapid expansion of teacher training colleges and the development of the ZINTEC programme did make a rapid impact, especially on primary school staffing. By 1989 the following had been achieved: out of 58,362\textsuperscript{xii} primary school teachers, 5,409 were ZINTEC graduates, 10,060 had O level plus 2, 3 or 4 years of teacher training, 6,027 had junior secondary school plus teacher training, 7,385 had standard 6 (end of primary school) plus teacher training. 4,325 were student teachers, and a full 24,297 were completely untrained. The academic attainments of the untrained teachers are not indicated in the statistics. Thus only 17\% had completed secondary school and followed a conventional 3 or 4 year training programme. Another 9\% had completed O level and then the ZINTEC programme. 22.9\% had never finished secondary school, having been trained before Independence, 7.3\% were students taking full teaching responsibilities and 41.6\% were untrained.

In secondary schools the percentage untrained was considerably lower by 1989, standing at 34\%, however a significant number of those with training were primary school trained (13.7\%) and a further 14.3\% were students\textsuperscript{xiii}. This left only 27.5\% trained to teach at secondary level, plus 1,270 or 5\% who were untrained university graduates.

The position was to change fairly rapidly in the ensuing years, as by 1995 the balance had shifted towards trained staff. In that year untrained teachers constituted only 25\% of the primary school staff, while 75\% had some form of training. In secondary schools 25\% of the 27,458 teachers were untrained, but nearly half of that 25\% were university graduates without certificates. So progress was being made to train teachers, but through more than a decade children were taught primarily by untrained teachers, many of those with very weak academic attainment. Furthermore, the rush to fill the classrooms with bodies placed pressure on teachers’ colleges where the majority were trained, to mass produce. Lecturers were not permitted to fail more than a tiny few, even though others might not have reached a satisfactory standard. Innovative approaches which would have encouraged a shift from the colonial rote-learning methodology towards a stress on analytical and creative thinking could hardly find a place. Very few of the college lecturers had any preparation to become teacher.
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educators, having been selected primarily for their experience in the classroom and occasionally their possession of a higher degree.

Even more rare than a trained and experienced teacher was a trained, experienced and mature individual who could effectively administer a school. Too often a student teacher in a rural school was the most qualified staff member, and was appointed acting head the day he or she arrived for teaching practice. Knowing as we do how important leadership is for the effective running of an institution, we should not be surprised to find there was poor administration and a high degree of absenteeism among teachers and even heads\textsuperscript{xiv}, and discipline problems, especially in the rural schools.

**CURRICULUM**

Having looked at the figures – the quantities of both pupils and teachers – we next need to examine other issues which impinge on both quality and equality – the curriculum content, as well as the learning materials available. One of the reasons for rapidly expanding the school system was to provide equal opportunity for all children, but government was still not satisfied that equality was adequately catered for by mere school attendance. They felt it necessary to ensure further that all children followed the same curriculum. This was a sensitive issue due to the situation which had prevailed pre-independence. While secondary education for white children was free and compulsory, for black children it was not only fee paying, it was selective. But beyond that, it had been decreed that only half of the black children proceeding to secondary education could pursue an academic curriculum; the other half would have to attend specially designed vocational schools where they would learn practical skills such as bricklaying, building, dress making, carpentry, metal working. Aside from the discrimination in regard to numbers, the perception gained traction that African children were being given an inferior secondary education, by being denied the academic. Of course there were non-academic programmes for white children as well, but since these were by and large accommodated in the same schools as the academic streams, they were not as visible. The F2 schools, as the vocational schools for Africans were labelled, thus became hated as a symbol of inequality between the races. The government had taken equality as a guiding principle, so they had to go. The policy of phasing out these schools was implemented and by the end of 1982 they had disappeared and been converted into academic schools. All children in all schools would thus follow the same, academic curriculum, and enter for the Cambridge O Level examinations at the end of four years.

This policy ignored several facts. First, O Level was an English examination designed for the top 20-25% of secondary school pupils in England; the others would follow a less academic curriculum. Second, in Rhodesia, those white children who did academic courses were divided
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into A and B streams, with the B streams being allowed five years to complete O Level. Third, because only the high achieving African children had gone to academic schools, they were all able to complete in four years. Now, everyone would be given only four years to complete. This was meant to implement the idea that everyone would be given equal opportunity, and since five years would stretch the treasury too far, four years was what could be offered.

It was immediately obvious that the majority of pupils would be severely stressed simply in pursuing academic courses, including pure mathematics which was a compulsory subject. But to expect that all children learn and achieve at the same pace contradicted all knowledge accumulated over years of study of educational practice around the world. It was clear that many children – perhaps the majority – were being set up to fail in secondary schools.

In designing the uniform curriculum for secondary schools, an exception was made only for Science, but this was determined by necessity as the new schools, especially in rural areas, were not provided with laboratories, and the majority did not even have electricity. An extremely interesting “Zimscience” curriculum was developed, along with a kit which could be despatched to the schools so that experiments could still be done in the absence of laboratories. But for the former white schools and the better resourced, missionary and government (as opposed to council) secondary schools, separate sciences – Biology, Physics and Chemistry – were offered, subjects which could form the foundations for A Level sciences, which Zimscience could not. Of course History and Geography needed to have new syllabuses which could reflect the Zimbabwean experience, and these were duly introduced. Practical subjects did form a part of the curriculum, with pupils generally being offered one from a selection, depending on what the school could afford. By and large the rural schools were poorly equipped and offered little choice, where in fact they offered any practical subject at all. A half-hearted attempt to introduce a socialist and Cuban inspired “Education with Production” in the mid 80’s fizzled out after facing resistance from teachers, pupils and parents, as well as problems of conceptualisation and resources. Similarly Political Economy faded out as a subject after barely seeing the drawing board. Government seemed to be unable to develop a truly revolutionary curriculum to suit their proclaimed socialism so rather stuck to a one-size-fits-all academic curriculum sadly inappropriate for the majority of children as well as being out of tune with for the Zimbabwean economy.

Another characteristic of the new curricular arrangements should not be overlooked as it has had far-reaching consequences which affect the entire education system up to today. The progression from Grade 7 to Form 1 had been opened to all from 1981. Although a public examination was taken by all Grade 7 pupils, they did not need to pass in order to proceed. While it is clear from the statistics that a meaningful number did repeat Grade 7 in order to achieve better gradesxv, this was not required, and normally was requested by those parents
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who understood the importance of achieving a standard before going on to the next level. The vast majority simply went forward. Ministry began to favour this, noting that children must make the best use of their chances as no one could afford to offer them a second chance, which would also affect Ministry planning. The idea of automatic progression took hold then throughout the whole system. While teachers, especially in rural schools, continued to request some children to repeat grades, by and large everyone moved on unless they were extremely weak. This then continued through the secondary years.

This form of automatic progression without passing or reaching a minimum standard had far-reaching consequences which remain up to today. In the first place, the child is constantly being exposed to material and teaching which he cannot absorb because he does not have the prerequisite knowledge or understanding. Each year he falls further behind and becomes more despondent and lacking in confidence. The teachers, too, become depressed, as their pupils fail to grasp the material. Imagine the situation in which a Form 2 teacher of Mathematics teaches a class in which one third did not pass grade 7 Maths. The dedicated one struggles, goes back to teach basic concepts, falls behind in her syllabus, and still most of the pupils do not pass the Form 2 exam. But never fear, she will be rid of them at the end of the year as they go on to Form 3 regardless. The only problem is that she will receive another group with exactly the same problem. This situation is demoralising for both pupils and teachers, as they realise the task is impossible and give up their efforts, simply going through the motions. Automatic promotion and equal curriculum were heralded as features of an education system which gives every child the opportunity to be educated, but in fact, by forcing the pace for a child who is not as capable and needs an alternative curriculum and/or more time, this approach denies the child the opportunity of an appropriate education and produces an adolescent with a low self-esteem and a frustrated teacher who will give up trying. It is an unacceptable waste of resources, as teachers are paid to teach children who cannot learn what they are being taught.

EQUALITY, THE BURNING ISSUE

The main goal of the post-independence government was to achieve equality of educational opportunity for all children, sometimes referred to as democratisation. But in spite of the efforts, neither equality nor equality of opportunity was the result. The huge divide along racial lines which remained as a legacy from the colonial period simply shifted to create an even wider gulf between social classes and between urban and rural children. Those families who moved into former white residential areas now sent their children to former white schools which retained all the facilities for learning and for sports which they had accumulated earlier. Or they attended the mission schools which had taken the cream of black children before Independence. They did not have all the facilities of A schools, but they had well qualified teachers and traditions of high standards of achievement. Government built many new primary
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and secondary schools to cater for the growing numbers in the sprawling new townships. They did not have all the facilities like swimming pools and tennis courts found in the former white schools (now known as A schools), but they were relatively well built and adequate for learning, as well as being staffed increasingly through the 80’s by qualified teachers. Their main disadvantage was the necessity for hot seating, which A schools by and large managed to avoid.

The widest gap fell between urban and rural schools. This was partly because so many new schools needed to be built, especially for secondary school pupils. Government could not manage and relied on donor assistance, but also required parents to contribute their labour for the building. The schools were run not by government but by rural councils, where administrative skills and experience were lacking. But by far the biggest distinction came in the quality of teaching and learning, as many years passed before these rural schools were fully staffed by qualified teachers, and even when they were, most teachers tried to avoid them and find positions at least in the towns or smaller cities, if not in the major centres.

Add to these disadvantages the inability of many children, not necessarily rural, but in all communities, to cope with an academic curriculum, and the difficulty of achieving any kind of equal opportunity becomes clear. Children in different circumstances will not become equal by being offered the same opportunities; they need to be offered opportunities appropriate to their situation and their capacities. As the Permanent Secretary reported at the end of 1991: “Most of the old and well established schools continued to maintain satisfactory standards of work while the majority of the newly established schools lagged far behind”

THE DROP-OUTS

Before the consequences of expansion and the uniform curriculum on the quality of learning are discussed, it is important to see what happened to the children who entered schools in Grade 1 and Form 1. Did they remain in school? What did they learn, and how were they able to use their education after leaving school?

The ever increasing numbers tell us that the majority did stay in school. Nevertheless, there were a worrying number of drop-outs even before the end of primary school. A look at the figures reveals that of the large 1981 intake, just over 30% did not make it to Grade 7. This was perhaps to be expected from a post-war influx that included many overage children, and it was reversed when fewer than 20% of the 1982 intake dropped out before Grade 7. The dropout figure increased again, however, and remained above 20% throughout the decade.

What is even more disturbing, however, is that the majority of those who did not reach Grade 7 dropped out before they even reached Grade 4. The numbers varied, but generally ranged between 12 and 20% who did not go beyond Grade 3, with the highest being the 1989 intake
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with 22.9% and the lowest being 13.3% dropping out before Grade 4. It averages out at 17.5%. Even more startling is the drop-out rate after Grade 1, which ranges from a low of 5.8% to a high of 21%, with the average being 10.7%. A child who leaves school after Grade 1 cannot expect to benefit in any lasting way. Grade 4 is significant, because it is generally held that a child who does not have at least 4 years of schooling does not acquire literacy to a level adequate to retain it to adulthood. Thus one can expect that 17.5% of the population was not attaining lasting literacy. It is noteworthy that this level of drop-outs continued through the 90’s and the 2000’s up to the present.

This high drop-out in junior primary school questions the credibility of claims for high levels of literacy in Zimbabwe. Certainly, Zimbabwe’s literacy rates – both youth and adult - rank high amongst African nations, but it is difficult to reconcile Zimbabwe’s claim of 93.9% youth literacy (ages 15-24) in 1990 and 97.6% in 2002 with a drop-out rate of 17.5% before Grade 4. These figures also do not take account of those who never entered school at all\(^{\text{xviii}}\), or who did not acquire literacy while there\(^{\text{IX}}\). An adult literacy rate of 90% in 2002 also seems highly unlikely, as does even the 80.7% recorded for 1980. Of course, literacy is not a fixed concept and can be measured in different ways\(^{\text{X}}\), but it is difficult to understand where a figure in the high 90’s could have been sourced with continuing primary school drop-out rates averaging above 15% before Grade 4 and over 20% by Grade 7.

What happened to the approximately 75% who did complete primary school? The Ministry’s announcement of automatic progression to Form 1 without any form of selection or restriction opened the door to all. However, not all ventured through it. In 1981, 85% of Grade 7 leavers proceeded to secondary school, as the excitement of the possibilities open to them took hold. However, it never reached that level again, and by the end of the decade it had dropped below 70% and there it remained. If we consider those children who entered Grade 1 after independence, the percentage of each cohort which transitioned to Form 1 hovered around 50%, for some years going just above, and some just below, but never reaching above 54%. This was, nevertheless, a staggering increase from the less than 20% of pre-independence days.

The drop-out rates of those who did proceed to Form 1 are also worth looking at. The first group who started Form 1 after independence, in 1981, followed through well, with only 15% failing to reach Form 4. The rates improved for the next two years, and then began a steady decline, from 17.9% of the 1984 Form 1 class to 38.9% of the 1987 class, then improving to 30% and finally 22% for the 1992 class. If we look at how many survived from Grade 1 right through to Form 4, the story is similarly grim. Of those entering Grade 1 in 1981, only 32.8% registered for Form 4 eleven years later. However, from there, figures improved slightly over the next few years, rising to 41% for the 1992 Grade 1 cohort.
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Ultimately, however, the overall percentages who continued in school until Form 4 took a steady downward trend. Those who entered Grade 1 in 1993 showed a dismal record. Before enrolling in Grade 2, 21.3 % had already dropped out. And by the time that cohort reached Form 4 in 2003, only 38% remained in school.xxii

The compelling question of course, is what happened to those who dropped out – at whatever stage along the way. But we will leave the answer until we have considered several other aspects and impacts of the development of the education system through the 1980’s.

**STANDARDS OF LEARNING ACHIEVEMENT**

For an impressionistic view of how well the children were doing, we have to look at the Grade 7 exam results. Pupils were examined in only two subjects, English and Mathematics, and graded with a score from 1 to 9. Anything up to a 6 was considered a pass. In 1988, the year the 1982 cohort were in Grade 7, 31.5% failed English, obtaining marks of 7, 8 or 9, and 25.2% failed Maths. This is not a very edifying result, but also not too discouraging, given the disruption of these years, with many schools resorting to hot seating, others being constructed, many having secondary classes located within them, and virtually all rural schools, and many urban ones, having large numbers of untrained teachers.

The combination of the relatively poor primary school performance, the desperate staffing situation and the academic curriculum should temper our expectations of success for pupils at O Level. Again, we must turn to examination results for an indicator. In 1984, a mere 21.9% of O level candidates passed 5 subjects at O level. But these pupils had been privileged to be in the first cohort experiencing universal transition to Form 1, when the confusion in the schools had not yet developed as it was to do a few years later, and the post-independence excitement about schooling still permeated the atmosphere. By 1989, however, only 13.4% of pupils writing O levels managed to achieve a pass in five or more subjects. xxii In that year, 39.2% passed no subject at all, and another 36.7% passed 1 or 2 subjects. These were pupils who had entered Grade 1 just before independence, had passed through primary schools just ahead of the post-independence bulge, but experienced throughout their primary years the serious problems of adjustment to huge numbers of children and an absence of qualified teachers. They had transitioned to Form 1 in 1986, when there were beginning to be more trained teachers, especially in urban schools, but the majority of teachers were still untrained.

Doubtless, if a detailed study were to be done, it would show that most of those passing had attended urban schools, mission schools and private schools, and very few had attended rural day secondary schools. At this stage, the examination offered was still the English Cambridge certificate, although syllabuses had changed to suit Zimbabwean children, and plans were already under way to create a home-grown examinations board. But unfortunately, the 1989
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results were to become more or less the standard achieved throughout the 1990’s – sometimes slightly higher, but rarely reaching above 15% of candidates passing five subjects.

It is possible that the low pass rate at O level, particularly in rural schools, influenced the drop-out rate. Children in secondary schools could see the poor success rate of the pupils just ahead of them, and lost hope that they themselves could benefit from continuing to Form 4. Better options for a future life beckoned from South Africa or from the growing practice of illegal gold digging or panning in rivers.

**SOCIAL IMPACTS**

Prior to Independence, as noted above, few children progressed to secondary education. Segregated schools for Africans existed in the urban townships, but more opportunities were available in the mission schools, primarily located in rural areas. It was the general assumption that attendance at secondary school led to an escape from rural life and integration into the wage earning urban classes. Leaving for boarding school at the age of 14 was the beginning of a new life, away from the village home. Since only the select entered secondary schools, results were usually very good, and those who completed secondary school did obtain permanent employment within a narrow sphere of occupations. Those who did not obtain a place in the secondary school remained at home to help with the field work and the household chores, at least for the next few years until they reached adulthood and perhaps sought employment as wage labourers or lower level clerks.

When secondary education was extended to all, a policy was implemented to provide day schools throughout rural areas. In densely populated areas, this was not a problem, and children might walk 2 or 3 kilometres to their new school. But in areas where the population was more widely distributed, the norm was more likely to be 5 to 10 kilometres. This then occupied a good portion of a child’s day – at least an hour in each direction, often more. And it represented not only time but energy, which took its toll especially when there were drought years and little to eat. The young person of 14 or 15 found himself or herself in a dilemma. Long hours were spent at school and travelling to and fro. Homework assigned was meant to be done, but in the absence of electricity, it had to be done by candle or paraffin light and only after household chores like gathering firewood, cooking, washing or ironing clothes had been completed.

Furthermore, the absence of adolescents from the home during school days deprived the rural economy of much-needed labour in the fields. Many families tried to balance the role of pupil with labour, withdrawing children from school on those days when they were required to take the cattle for dipping, or when help was needed with the ploughing. Children who previously spent days chasing birds from ripening grain were now in school on most days and not available
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for such chores. Thus a labour shortage was felt, and at the same time, adolescents were torn between their seemingly conflicting roles. Given the long days at school, the ambivalent family roles, and the poor conditions at home for studying or even doing homework, it is hardly surprising that many rural children dropped out of schools and those who did not achieved very low pass rates. There were many rural secondary day schools where no student had ever achieved passes in five subjects at O Level up to the end of the 1990’s.

But there were further problems for some: what about those areas where it was not viable to build a secondary school within walking distance of everyone? A secondary school could not be built for the 100 pupils who might live beyond a 10 km radius. They may have walked 3 kilometres to primary school, but more than 10 or 15 kilometres to the secondary school was not a distance which could be walked to and fro on a daily basis. Still, many refused to be deprived of their chance to continue with their schooling. If the school was 20 kilometres away, they simply camped out near the school during the week, sleeping on shop verandahs, erecting temporary shelters, and in effect creating informal boarding arrangements which were totally unsupervised. It does not take much imagination to conclude that a miniscule number of these pupils could benefit from this type of provision. Girls became pregnant, boys overindulged in alcohol and most dropped out of school before reaching Form 4. Very few of these children made any progress with their education, and yet they had been divorced from their traditional roles in their homes and often became a problem to themselves and their families, seeing themselves as failures, without a new direction to take for their lives.

SCHOOL LEAVERS

The statistics on drop-outs given above indicate quite clearly that through the 1980’s, on average more than 60% of the pupils left school before completing Form 4. Of those who did complete Form 4, not more than 15% obtained the five passes required to go on to tertiary education or acquire some form of training or employment. That means that out of all the children who entered schools, only about 6% had a clear road ahead of them when they left, at whatever stage that might be. What happened to the others? A substantial number did not complete Grade 7, more did not transition to Form 1 or dropped out during the high school years, and to these were then added those who failed to make the grade at O level – altogether on average 94% of each cohort.

Those who had reached Form 4 and failed, often repeated subjects until they managed to accumulate 5 passes. Then they could proceed to a course which might secure them employment in the formal economy. Others went back to Form 3, but these were not the majority, especially in rural schools. The rest just disappeared into the community, forever changed by their experience of attending secondary school and raising their hopes of escaping
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from village life, only to have them dashed. They had for the most part achieved literacy and numeracy but were not prepared for any further training or for anything else. Few had learned skills which they could put to productive use, and furthermore they had adopted the attitude that they should be employed. That was the goal, but few attained it, leading the rest to see themselves as failures. Much research needs to be undertaken to find out the types of adjustments made by these children and their families and what the impact was on rural livelihoods. Surely if the post-independence policy makers had been less concerned with achieving an equality which was unattainable, by providing an academic education for all, we could have made better provision for the hundreds of thousands of young people who left schools unprepared for tertiary education and unequipped to enter anything but a subsistence economy. Surely alternative arrangements for schooling and for appropriate curriculum might have served them and their families and the rural economy more effectively to make the money and energy expended on rural day schools become an investment rather than an expensive consumption component of the national budget.

**ECONOMIC IMPACTS**

Education is frequently viewed by economic planners as an item of investment rather than consumption. However, it will only be a productive investment if there are future returns to the economy from the vast sums expended to educate all children. In 1991 28% of Zimbabwe’s population were in school. This became an enormous burden on the treasury, and was identified by the IMF as an expense which had to be reduced. This resulted in the reintroduction of school fees for urban primary school children, and the reduction of inputs from government which had supported operating costs. Resentments were widely expressed, but it was indeed a fact that government was spending far beyond its means. Education had become a consumption item, when the economy was not growing fast enough to generate revenues to invest or to create the jobs which would enable those young people to be more productive, adding value to the national economy. In 1982, there were 80,000 school leavers, but only 10,500 jobs were created. This trend continued through the 80’s, with total employment actually dropping in some years. xxiii Analyst Brian Raftopolous points out that this lack of jobs for school leavers had begun already in the pre-independence period, but with the numbers escalating so rapidly, the problems produced would become a social and economic time-bomb. As a prominent educator Rungano Zvogbo wrote in 1985 “While free primary education for all is a sound democratic ideal, it is not sound and practical economics, particularly for a developing country.”xxiv Aside from the strain put on both the economy and the education system itself, he notes that the expansion raises the “question of the provisions that have to be made for the future employment of such large numbers of students who will leave school each year to seek jobs in an economy that is not growing at a corresponding rate.” And yet the demand for human resources required in the technical and professional areas is
unlikely to be met “because so far there has been no radical transformation of the curriculum to facilitate the achievement of national objectives”\( ^{xxv} \). The education planning falls short, he notes, because it fails to take account of the future of the huge numbers of school leavers.

**REFORM ATTEMPTS**

By the late 90’s it was clear to all that the education system was in deep crisis. Although nearly 100% of classroom teachers were now trained, schools had been built, and even the examination system localised, there were intractable problems. The mismatch between the economy and education was clear – both in terms of the unaffordable budget inputs and in terms of the large outputs of school leavers with no place in the face of declining production. Examination results were not improving for those at O level\( ^{xxvi} \) and indiscipline in schools, among both teachers and pupils was being noted.

The President appointed a commission to enquire into education and make recommendations for changes. This commission, generally known as the Nzirimasanga Commission, publishing its report in 1999\( ^{xxvii} \), was scathing in its criticism of a system which it deemed to be in a parlous state. Amongst many other suggestions, its major recommendation was the differentiation of the system, introducing separate streams especially after Form 2, which would provide vocational and technical courses for those less suited to purely academic work. The government chose to suppress the report to avoid public discussion, while quietly paying lip service to some of the recommendations. However, no attempts were made to undertake a wholesale revision on the lines recommended. Through the first decade of this century, the system as it was developed in the 1980’s has remained in place, while being severely buffeted by political and economic gales which played havoc with even its better features.

**CONCLUSION**

The democratisation of education, making schooling available for all, was a great achievement of Zimbabwe’s post-independence government. However, we do ourselves and Zimbabwe no favour if we simply praise the expansion and make questionable claims for its great success, without examining the legacy of problems which it bequeathed to future generations. It is difficult to deny that the system served the few very well, while failing to provide an adequate preparation for life for the many. The academic curriculum prescribed for all made attainment impossible for the majority who were unable to cope and yet could not be offered anything else and left school in limbo, unable to follow further education or gain any employment. Nearly a third had left school before completing Grade 7, and more than half did not finish four years of secondary school. The rapid expansion produced its own logic in inadequacy of infrastructure, learning materials and especially qualified teachers. Standards plummeted, being reflected in the examination scores, affecting in particular children attending rural day secondary schools.
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The O Level examination system, never intended by its originators for more than 25% of children, ensured that the vast majority failed. Vast amounts were expended on teaching children who would not be able to succeed. But even for those who did succeed, there were no jobs available, as the democratisation began to produce hundreds of thousands of school leavers every year, while the economy contracted. Equality remained a distant dream as yawning gaps developed between the successful and the rest. Zvobgo wrote with foresight in 1985:

“the overriding objective behind current planning strategies is the provision of school facilities and opportunities to all children. This is, of course, a moral, social and political obligation which the government has to fulfil, given the fact that this is partly what the armed struggle was all about. It was a fight for equal access to education for children of all races. This objective must be carefully planned for and achieved without incurring problems for which there may eventually be no solutions”

The haste of the democratisation, the lack of planning in relation to learners’ realities or economic imperatives ensured that those problems were indeed incurred for which the solutions have remained elusive up to the present. Politics trumped realism, leaving the legacy of failure which we must struggle today to overcome.

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1 The totals given in the “Monthly Digest of Statistics” CSO Harare, December 1982 are 892,651 for primary enrolments and 73,335 for secondary, together 965,986.
2 All enrolment statistics from 1980 to 1995 are from the “Annual report of the secretary for education and culture for the year ended 31st December 1995”, 45.
3 Ministry also began to allow children to enrol in Grade 1 in the year they would turn 6 instead of 7 as previously.
4 The figures are for the gross percentage, which means the total number of all ages enrolled compared to the population of the appropriate age group. www.indexmundi.com/facts/zimbabwe/school-enrolment
5 Population figures for 1991 were given as 10.7 million www.google.co.zw/publicdata.
6 “Annual Report of the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education for the year 1981” p. 2
7 It must be remembered that this number would be low because many schools were closed due to war.
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a Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education Course

xi Chivore, B.S.R. *Teacher Education in Post-Independent Zimbabwe*  ZIMFEP 1990 p. 122-123 quoting sources from the Ministry of Education Planning Division

xii Colclough C et al *Education in Zimbabwe: Issues of Quantity and Quality* SID Education division documents No 50. December 1990 , 49

xiii *Ibid*, 53

xiv See Secretary’s report for 1990, p. 6

xix Generally the number of pupils in Grade 7 is larger than the figure for the same cohort in Grade 6

xix Annual Report of the Permanent Secretary for Education and Culture for the Year ending December 31 1991, p. 4

xvii Calculations have been made by the writer, based on figures in the PS Report of 1995

xxiii The numbers were likely very few – estimated at 2.1% in 1984 and 3.2% in 1986 www.indexmundi.com/facts/zimbabwe/school-enrollment.

xix Extremely difficult to estimate. Many would have dropped out before Grade 7

xx In an article entitled “Monitoring and measuring literacy” in 2005, D.A. Wagner noted on page 5 that “countries... typically rely on a national population census model, which most often determine literacy ability by self-assessment questionnaires and/or by means of a proxy variable utilizing the number of years of primary schooling (i.e. 5 or 6 or 8 years of primary schooling equals a ‘literate’ person”). He further notes that “literacy may be simply inferred from school attendance: those with 4 (or 8 or 12) years of formal schooling are assumed to be literate. Or, in other societies, literacy rates are calculated from the numbers of persons who answer ‘yes’ to the simple question ‘Can you read and write?’ It is now known that such approaches to presumed literacy may be quite misleading, for a host of reasons.” As a result, such methods are increasingly being questioned, and there is a move to estimate literacy only through actual reading and writing performance. Wagner also notes that “it must be recognized that any change in the methodology used for calculating literacy rates in a population might result in uncomfortable political consequences” www.literacy.org/sites/literacy.org/files/publications/Wagner_MeasLit_GMR06_UNESCO.pdf


xxii Permanent Secretary’s Reports 1986 and 1989


xxv *Ibid* p. 345 (both quotations)

xxvi Results at A Level were of course much better, considering the stringent selection process which admitted only the best O level candidates to the sixth form

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xxvi The report was produced under the title “Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, August, 1999