



## **THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC MELTDOWN ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF ZIMBABWE**

**Tichaona Mapolisa**<sup>†</sup>

*Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University*

**Theminkosi Tshabalala**

*National Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management at the Zimbabwe Open University*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The right to education has been enshrined in a number of international treaties and is regarded as a fundamental social, economic and cultural right. Access to education particularly schooling is a mechanism through which all people can integrate into mainstream society and a means through which they can exercise social, economic and cultural rights. According to Christies (1991) education produces knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. It is essential for civic order and citizenship and for sustainable economic growth and the reduction of poverty. Education is also about culture; it is the main vehicle for disseminating the accomplishments of a group of people. It encompasses general skills such as language, science, mathematics and communication that provide the foundation for further education and training. Education also includes the development of values and attitudes necessary for meaningful contribution and participation in civic life. These multiple purpose make education a key area for human rights in all countries. In fact, the right to education is accepted internationally and enshrined in major international conventions and many national constitutions including our own (Zimbabwe's) constitution. It therefore, becomes a very disturbing phenomenon, to observe that Zimbabwe's education standards are falling down at an alarming rate, thereby, negating the noble objectives of this service (education). It is a fact that a multiplicity of factors contributed to this deterioration of standards. However, it is this writer's contention that the economic meltdown the country was experiencing was the main cause of falling standards in the education sector. This hypothesis or conjecture had to be empirically tested and this is exactly what the research project set out to do. The study used the descriptive survey research method. It was carried out in two urban provinces, three rural provinces as well as three farming provinces. The sample consisted of 304 responds of which 49 percent were male and 51 percent female. The bulk of the information was*

<sup>†</sup> Corresponding author

ISSN(e): 2224-4441/ISSN(p): 2226-5139

© 2013 AESS Publications. All Rights Reserved.

collected through the questionnaire and some collected through interviews. For the quantitative data, descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret data and for qualitative data, similar and related responses were recorded and discussed.

© 2013 AESS Publications. All Rights Reserved.

---

**Keywords:** Education, Economic meltdown, Education system, Impact, Education standards

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, formal public education is regarded as a birthright for every child. Most Zimbabweans, and indeed, all progressive nations; generally believe that good education is the gateway to success and the cornerstone of social emancipation, economic achievement and national development. It can also be empirically argued that, failure to provide relevant and adequate educational opportunities to blacks by the successive colonial governments was one of the major reasons that fueled the protracted armed struggle. The pre-independence era was characterized by discriminatory policies which marginalized and disadvantaged learners on the basis of their race, colour or creed (Chung, 1996). Provision of education for the majority of the population remained low at both the primary and secondary school levels. There were bottlenecks throughout the system. Transition rate from primary to secondary education was fixed at fifty percent (50%) of which twelve and a half percent (12,5%) of this figure were earmarked for the academically qualitative F1 school system; and the remaining thirty-seven and a half percent (37,5%) were channeled through the then unpopular F2 system which had a seriously watered down curriculum perceived by most blacks as a way of brainwashing their children so that they could not challenge the settler government (Christies, 1991). The other fifty percent (50%) were closed out of the formalized secondary education system altogether.

In 1980, there was a deliberate policy shift to address the imbalances in the education provision. The government acknowledged that education was the key to socio-economic development and political transformation. It also acknowledged that education was a basic human right which played a pivotal role in combating ignorance, disease, crime and poverty. The first fifteen years of Zimbabwe's political independence witnessed an unprecedented expansion of the education system. The seven year primary school education cycle had more than 100% gross enrolment because of the over-aged learners who had missed going to school because of war disturbances (Chivore, 2005). The six year cycle of secondary school sector experienced the widest expansion as bottlenecks were removed and all primary school Grade 7 graduands were able to register in Form One classes. There was a near 90% transition rate from Grade Seven to Form One (Chivore, 2005). There was automatic progression from Grade One to Form Four, which constitutes a total of eleven (11) years of basic education (Nziramanga, 1999).

The massive expansion at secondary school level resulted in marked shortages of qualified teachers and learning space. Primary trained experienced teachers were engaged to teach lower secondary school classes (Jansen, 1991). Foreign teachers were recruited to argument in the teaching of key subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Technical and Practical subjects. Centrally located primary schools, or part of their sections, were converted to become upper-tops for use by secondary school learners where there was no secondary school in close proximity. More

candidates were, therefore, recruited to be trained as primary and secondary school teachers. The country almost reached a 100 percent teacher requirement level by the late 1990s at all learning institutions (Nziramanga, 1999). Meanwhile, tertiary education expanded phenomenally, as over sixteen teacher training colleges were operated and twelve universities churned out more teachers, social scientists and technicians.

The above information clearly demonstrates that from 1980 right up to the late 1990s, the government of Zimbabwe tried its level best to improve the quality of education notwithstanding the various obstacles that stood on its way. However, the new millennium ushered in an era where the phenomenal achievements of the first two decades of our education system were quickly erased. Today, it is an undeniable fact that the once mighty Zimbabwean education system is a pale shadow of its former self.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

### **2.1. Statement of the problem**

The study sought to explore the impact of economic meltdown on the education system of Zimbabwe

### **2.2. Purpose of the study**

The study sought to establish the impact of the economic situation on the education system in Zimbabwe through scientifically analyzing all variables at play.

## **3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The study intends to:

- Expose the magnitude of the impact of the economic meltdown to the Zimbabwean education system.
- To conscientise stakeholders about the urgency of mobilization of resources for the resuscitation of the Zimbabwean education system.

## **4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- To what extent has the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe led to brain in the education system?
- How has the economic situation affected the provision of teaching and learning resources?
- What rescue measures can be adopted to mitigate the effects of the meltdown on education?

### **4.1. Significance of the Study**

The importance of this study lies in that it seeks to establish the impact of the economic situation on the education system in Zimbabwe. It is hoped that the results so obtained from this empirical process will provide tangible evidence to key stakeholders so as to address the crisis in the education system in a collective and collaborative manner. It is also envisaged that the results may be used to engage cooperating partners and funding agencies who might wish to positively intervene to address some of the pressing problems.

#### 4.2. Limitations of the Study

The decisions about the limited number of provinces, teachers and heads of schools, lecturers and principals naturally limits the feasibility of this study. Whilst it is quite possible for the perceptions of a small number of teachers, heads of schools, lecturers and principals to be representative of many of their colleagues' perceptions in their locality, the same cannot be said with any great confidence with regard to the perceptions of the rest of the principals, heads, teachers and lectures in Zimbabwe in general.

#### 4.3. Delimitations of the Study

The research confined itself to challenges posed by the decline of the Zimbabwean economy. Views from teachers, heads of schools, college and university lecturers were solicited. Views from other key stakeholders like government, parents and students were not sought by the study.

### 5. LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been already noted that the pre-independence education system was racialist, dual and discriminatory. [Watkins \(2000\)](#) concurs and states that, "before independence, average expenditure for each white pupil was about 20 times higher than that of a black pupil". More resources were channeled towards the education of white children than for black ones. This discrimination relatively ended in 1980 when the education system was democratized. After independence, education saw a substantial increase in budget allocation making it one of the most funded sectors. [Saunders \(2000\)](#) states that, "... education was consistently the single biggest item of budgetary expenditure, accounting, for an average of 18% of total government expenditure in the 1980s. This saw the education system grow in leaps and bounds. [Saunders \(2000\)](#) further states that the share of gross Domestic Product (GDP) allocated to education increased by 3% between 1980 and 1985; one of the highest levels of investment in education in the developing world. It is no wonder, therefore, that literacy levels rose to highest levels of over 80%.

The second decade saw the real spending on individual students falling, mostly due to poor economic performance. [\(Nziramasanga, 1999\)](#) states that the impact on the education system was devastating. Real spending per student in primary school fell by 40% over the period 1990 – 1995, to the lowest level since the early 1980s. Since that time, real spending never improved again, with the year 2000 and after, hard hit by economic meltdown [\(Kothan, 1990\)](#).

#### 5.1. Education and Training Responses to Financial Constraints

According to [Samoff \(1994\)](#) several responses to financial constraints are possible:

- To cut or reduce spending either across all expenditure categories or selectively; affecting some activities more than others; access to and quality of education services are likely to decline.
- Expenditure reduction has taken many forms e.g. reduction in spending on supplies and stationery – reduced expenditure on instructional personnel, generally the largest portion of the education budget.
- Least common has been an absolute reduction in teachers' salaries. Most common has been a freeze on teachers' salaries, effectively reducing them through inflation.

- The teacher-pupil ratio has been increased by increasing class sizes and by requiring instructional personnel to teach more than one shift.
- Lower paid instructional personnel have been employed both officially by hiring teachers with less training and experience and thus lower salaries; unofficially paying some teachers less than the regular teachers' salaries.
- Reduce expenditure on construction, maintenance and student support.
- Formerly disdained unregistered back street colleges and semi-formal apprenticeships are increasingly accepted as legitimate alternatives to registered education and training programmes.

## 5.2. Main Variables Affecting Education and Training during Financial Crises

[Kothan \(1990\)](#) states that the effects of crisis and adjustment policies on household incomes represent a complex web of interrelationships among many factors, including:

- The level and distribution of employment (e.g. between urban and rural areas).
- The real wage level, which fell sharply in real terms in terms of economic crisis.
- The price of food and other essentials, which has in many cases risen as a result of adjustment policies.
- The cost of transport, energy, health and other social services, which have also risen as a result of withdrawal of subsidies.
- The policy towards user charges in education, training and other social services. In many countries there is now an explicit or implicit policy of shifting more of the cost of social services from the public treasury to the consumers of those services both directly (e.g. fees) and indirectly (e.g. making parents, responsible for providing their children's textbooks and other instructional materials).

## 5.3. How Some Countries Have Coped with the Experience of Economic Meltdown

In a comparative study of five countries that went through economic challenges, [Gilborn and Marais \(2001\)](#) came up with the following conclusions. (The countries are Brazil, Costa Rica, Hungary, Senegal and Tanzania).

- Families accepted an increasing share of the cost of education.
- The crisis had adverse effects on education, in terms of both access and quality, but the high priority given to the sector by government and by households has provided some shelter for investment in human capital.
- Reallocation of resources has taken place among levels of education, among different types of expenditure, and among different levels of government, for example in Costa Rica, Senegal and Tanzania, structural adjustment involved reallocation of resources among primary, secondary and higher education.
- Most countries have imposed budget cuts or allocated resources in ways which favour higher education and penalize primary or secondary education.

- The balance between public and private finance has shifted. All countries respond to the constraints on public expenditure by shifting some financial burdens to families and to enterprises, despite the fall in real incomes and profits that economic crises entailed.
- Alternatives to improve resource use have had limited success. Cost per pupil has certainly fallen. More often, the results are cuts in expenditure rather than conscious attempts to improve efficiency.
- Quality and success rates have declined. Most other case studies also conclude that the effects of budget cuts can be seen in declining quality in terms of low teacher morale and reduced expenditure on books and materials. In many cases, school success rates have also declined as repetition and attrition rates have increased in primary and secondary such

## 6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used the quantitative methodology and made use of descriptive survey. According to Miles and Huberman (1984) "... a survey is a method for collecting information from a sample of people by the administration of a questionnaire. The population consisted of 304 primary and secondary teachers and administrators as well as college and university lecturers and their administrators. Simple stratified and proportional random selection procedures were used to get the sample. A questionnaire which contained more close ended questions and a few open-ended questions was used to collect data. Questionnaires were sent to Bulawayo, Harare, Midlands, Matabeleland North, Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland East provinces. Data from close-ended questions were computer analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). For the open-ended questions the tallying system was used to determine the frequency of common responses. These were then quantitatively analysed to determine the pattern of qualitative responses.

## 7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings for this paper are presented using tables, described and discussed. The section begins with the presentation, description and discussion of demographic data.

**Respondents were distributed by Gender as shown by table 1 below (N=304):**

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	149	49
Female	155	51
Total	304	100

The majority of respondents in the sample were female. This was to be expected as there are more females than males in the teacher population of Zimbabwe particularly in the urban schools where a sizeable number of respondents were drawn. The figures also represent the national composition of the population of the country.

Respondents were also distributed by the nature of appointment as indicated in table 2 below(N=304):

Nature	Frequency	Percentage
Qualified	258	85
Unqualified	46	15
Total	304	100

The data reveals that the majority of respondents were qualified teachers / lecturers constituting 85% of the sample. Those who are unqualified make up 15% of the sample. The unqualified are mainly found in the rural and farming institutions.

Respondents were also distributed by length of service in the education system as shown in tables 3 below(N=304):

Length of service	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 5 years	35	12
6 – 10 years	12	4
11 – 15 years	50	16
16 – 20 years	109	36
21 + years	98	32
Total	304	100

Table 3 indicates that the majority of respondents (84%) had more than ten years of teaching experience. Only 16% of the respondents had less than five years teaching experience. These could mainly be the untrained and the newly qualified teachers from teacher training colleges and universities.

**Table-4.**composition of respondents by highest professional qualification (N=304)

Professional Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate / Diploma	102	34
BED / Graduate certificate in Education	126	41
Masters Degree	30	10
N/A	46	15
Total	304	100

The demographic characteristics for the respondents by highest professional qualifications are summarized in table 4. Quite a significant number of respondents (51%) in the sample have professional degrees. Those who hold the Certificate or Diploma qualification constitute 34% of the sample. The not applicable categories are most probably the unqualified teachers found in some of the institutions.

**Table-5.**Composition of respondents by level of education institution (N=304)

Institution	Frequency	Percentage
Primary school	178	59
Secondary school	91	30
Trs' College / University	35	11
Total	304	100

As table 5 depicts, most of the respondents (59%) came from the primary schools. Secondary schools contributed 30% of the respondents and the remaining 11% were lecturers either at teacher training colleges or universities. This composition reflects the general trends in the educator’s population in the country.

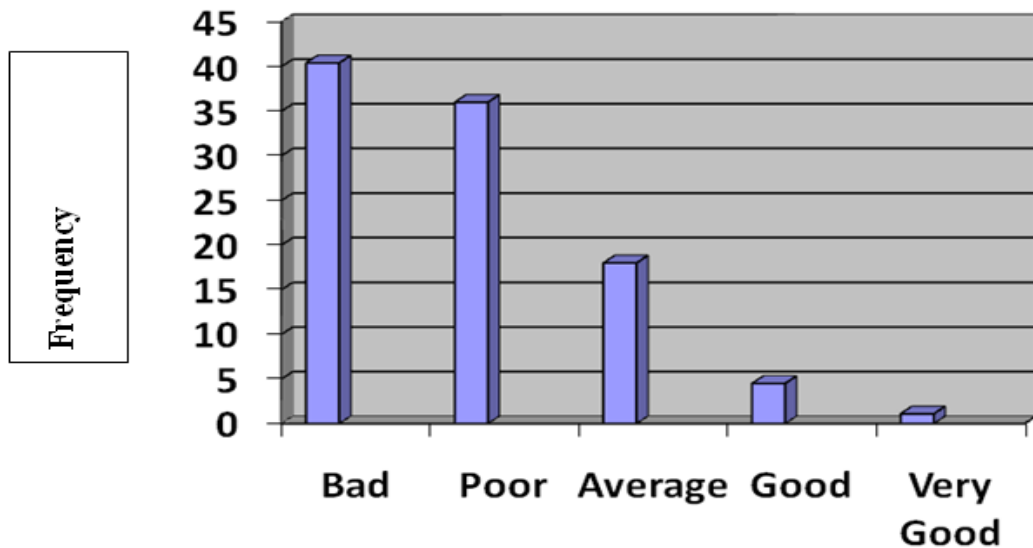
**Table-6.**Composition of respondents by location of education institution (N=304)

Location	Frequency	Percentage
Urban	105	35
Rural / Communal	126	41
Farm	73	24
Total	304	100

As table 6 indicates, a significant number of respondents (41%) came from the rural / communal institutions. This was to be expected since the majority of Zimbabwean teachers work in rural areas.

The second largest group of respondents (35%) came from the urban areas. The farming areas contributed 24% of the respondents. This is because more people now live in farms as a result of the recently introduced settlements on farms and the subsequent mushrooming of new schools to cater for children of the new farmers.

**Figure-1.** indicates perceptions of respondents on the state of furniture at their institutions (N=304)



**7.1. State of Furniture**

A noteworthy finding revealed in figure 1 above is that a significant number of respondents (40.4%) felt that the furniture at their institutions was bad. Those who thought it was poor constituted 36% of the sample. Significant to note too is that only 5,6% of the respondents perceived furniture at their institutions as either good or very good.

This therefore implies that the state of furniture in the majority of institutions covered by the study was poor. This has serious implications for quality public education because learners should



have adequate sitting and writing places for them to effectively learn. Proper desks, chairs and benches for pupils are essential for high performance.

As Chivore (2005) observes, writing from the floor or sitting on the hard floor or on poor furniture may cause fatigue on the part of learners which naturally affects their concentration span during the teaching / learning process.

**Table-7.** shows views of respondents on the state of buildings at their institutions (N=304)

State of buildings	Frequency	Percentage
Bad	155	51
Poor	40	13
Average	68	22.5
Good	24	7.9
Very good	17	5.6
Total	304	100

The data reveal that the respondents who viewed the state of their institutions' buildings as being bad and poor constituted 64%. Those who thought the state of their institutions' buildings was good or very good constituted 7, 9% and 5, 6 % respectively.

This study, therefore, revealed that the state of buildings in most of the institutions covered by the study was generally poor. In some instances, classrooms and other learning rooms were inadequate; and in extreme cases, like in the new resettlement farm areas, classrooms were non-existent. Learners were using old farm houses or any structure available in the farms.

However, in the majority of cases, it is the state of existing infrastructure that was described by respondents as deplorable.

Most structures, particularly in rural areas and farms were described as old, dilapidated and in some cases, a threat to the lives of both learners and educators.

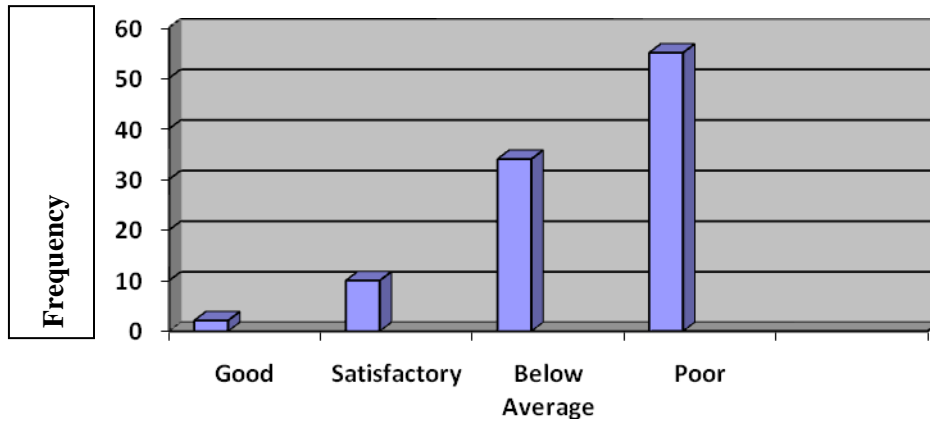
Some, if not most of these structures have broken window panes, falling or missing doors, roofs are leaking and floors are potholed.

The same situation obtained in urban areas where respondents revealed that ablution blocks were a health hazard as all their systems had broken down. Roof and floor tiles were missing and those that remained had moved from their original positions.

There was total lack of maintenance of infrastructure. Respondents indicated that it appeared as if nobody cared anymore. Everybody, including the administrators and supervisors had accepted the deplorable state of infrastructure as immutable, and therefore, normal.

In the majority of cases, respondents admitted that the funds were the limiting factor for the procurement of materials to repair and rehabilitate damaged structures. However, in some cases, the repairs did not need any funds, but just commitment from the officers in charge to maintain the structures.

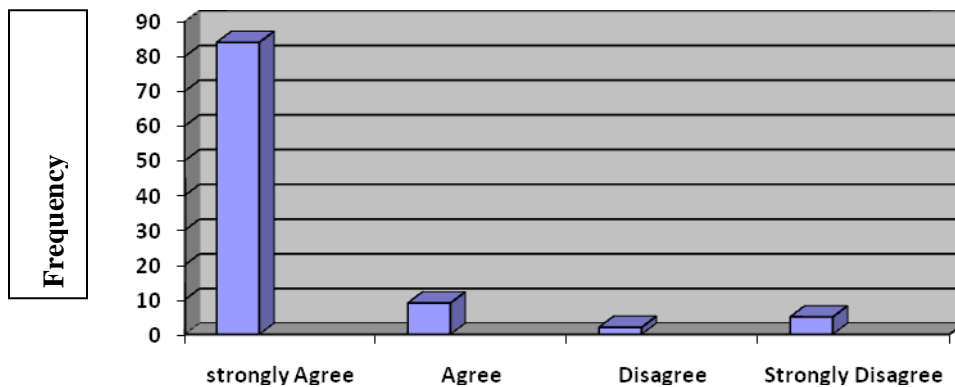
**Figure-2.** shows perceptions of respondents on the management of examinations in the last two years. (N=304)



### 7.2. Management of Examinations (N=304)

The information depicted in figure 4.3 indicates that the majority of respondents (89%) perceive the management of examinations as falling far short of international expectations. This implies that the way how the examination system has been run for the past two years requires some significant improvement. On the open-ended question on the conduct of examinations, respondents were lamenting the poor allowances paid to markers and the way how the examinations material was distributed particularly in rural areas. There were also cases of embezzlement of examination funds by some school authorities as well as cases of missing results. It also took very long periods of time for certificates and transcripts to be produced, thereby, delaying candidates wishing to continue with their education or wishing to look for employment opportunities.

**Figure-3.** Respondents' views on whether economic meltdown led to teacher attrition (N=304)



### 7.3. Economic Meltdown Led to Teacher Attrition

The information on figure 3 above reveals that the overwhelming majority of respondents (93%) felt that teachers who left the education system did so because of the economic challenges that the country was experiencing. Only 7% of the respondents felt that the departure of teachers from the education system in Zimbabwe had nothing to do with the economic challenges the

country was experiencing. The respondents indicated that the majority of teachers who left the education system went to neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa, where some of them joined the teaching service while others did menial jobs. Some of those who left the education system and remained in the country joined better paying sectors particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and others joined the informal sector where they became small scale entrepreneurs. In most cases, it was revealed that those who left the system did so unceremoniously; through abscondments or through abrupt resignations without giving adequate notice as per requirement. The major reason sighted for leaving service being poor working conditions, chief among them, being the ridiculously low salaries.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

The respondents in this study revealed that the economic meltdown has negatively impacted on the education system of Zimbabwe. Most, if not all, inadequate and operational deficiencies point to one conspicuous causal factor: lack of resources as a result of the collapse of the economy.

- Furniture in most educational institutions is quite a challenge; desks, chairs, tables and stools are broken. In most institutions, there are heaps and heaps of broken furniture stacked in various locations while learners have inadequate facilities to use for sitting and writing on.
- The state of buildings is even more deplorable. Classrooms and other teaching / learning rooms are inadequate, those available are dilapidated and in some cases, in a state of disrepair.
- The management of public examinations was said to be chaotic and disastrous, thereby, profoundly discrediting the certification process and the entire education system.
- Many teachers left the education system to work outside the country and those who remained joined better paying sectors within the country.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above findings, the following recommendations are put forward:

- The government should increase the vote allocated for infrastructure development and reconstruction in educational institutions. All learning institutions should be provided with proper learning and teaching facilities like classrooms, specialist rooms and teachers' accommodation. The government should partner international stakeholders to provide the resources for the various structures required by schools.
- There is also need for institution based and external based supervisors to prioritise maintenance of infrastructure during their supervision programmes. Admittedly, financial resources are the major variable behind the magnitude of dilapidation in most institutions, however, negligence also plays a significant role. There is a general tendency for many people to only care for personal property and neglect public property. This mentality or culture must be nipped in the bud and where there is evidence of deliberate neglect of institutional infrastructure, the system must introduce punitive measures or if they already exist, these must be swiftly implemented.
- The government should adequately fund examination bodies so that unnecessary in fighting for resources does not spill over to the public eye as this destroys the confidence that parents and

students have on the education system. Any signs of chaos, mayhem or inefficiency in the running of the examinations systems discredit not just the certificates or diplomas or degrees, but the entire country's education system.

- The government should work very hard to improve the working conditions of teachers as evidence from this study clearly indicates that teachers left the education sector because of poor working conditions, particularly salaries. Education is a fundamental human right and there is no effective learning that can take place without motivated teachers. It is therefore, incumbent upon those organizations that promote children's rights to be lobbied so that they mobilized resources not only for instructional materials for learners, but for motivating and retaining quality teachers as well so that children / students, who are their targets (children rights organizations) enjoy fully this basic human right (education).

## REFERENCES

- Chivore, B.R.S., 2005. A situational evaluation of the implementation of education for all in Zimbabwe. Harare: University of Zimbabwe.
- Christies, B., 1991. The right to learn. Johannesburg: Sached/Lavern.
- Chung, F., 1996. What causes differences in achievement in Zimbabwe's schools. Harare: Government Printers.
- Gilborn, B. and S. Marais, 2001. How the education system is affected by an ailing economy. London: Sage Publishers.
- Jansen, B., 1991. Coping with austerity. New York: The Free Press.
- Kothan, S., 1990. Understanding structural adjustment programmes. New York: The Free Press.
- Miles, M.B. and M. Huberman, 1984. Qualitative data analysis. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Nziramanga, C.T., 1999. Report of the presidential commission of inquiry into education and training. Government Printers, Harare.
- Samoff, B., 1994. Planning for education under austerity. Paris: The Hague.
- Saunders, J., 2000. Deciding to use a qualitative approach. Pretoria: Van Shaik.
- Watkins, F., 2000. Education in mozambique: Addressing the crisis. Homewood: Dorsey Press.

## AUTHORS' BIO-DATA

1. **Professor Tichaona Mapolisa** is a National Programme Leader for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. To date, he has published 25 research articles international peer reviewed journals. He has presented 22 papers at international conferences and five papers at local conferences. He has published two books with Lambert Academic Publishing House (LAP). He can be contacted by business address: Zimbabwe Open University P.O.Box MP1119 Mount Pleasant Harare, Zimbabwe OR by Cell phone:+263 733 608 577 or +263 775 987 351 or by E-mail: [tichmap@gmail.com](mailto:tichmap@gmail.com) / [tichmapolisa@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:tichmapolisa@yahoo.co.uk)



2. **Dr. Thembinkosi Tshabalala** is a Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. To date, he has published 8 research articles international peer reviewed journals. He has presented 8 papers at international conferences and 10 papers at local conferences. He can be contacted by business address: Zimbabwe Open University P.O.Box MP1119 Mount Pleasant Harare, Zimbabwe OR by Cell phone:+263 776 425 222 or by E-mail: [tshabalalathembinkosi@yahoo.com](mailto:tshabalalathembinkosi@yahoo.com)



*Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the authors, International Journal of Asian Social Science shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.*