THE IMPACT OF BASIC EDUCATION ON THE QUALITY OF ZIMBABWE'S SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In Zimbabwe, 'O' Level education is embraced in the concept of basic education. The concept entails that primary school completers automatically progress into Form One, notwithstanding their Primary School Leaving Examination results. This has resulted in an increase in the progression rate of Grade Seven completers into Form One. While proponents of equality and equity in education may view this as a giant step towards equalisation of educational opportunities, there may be deep fears in some circles that the quantitative increase may compromise quality. The unprecedented increase in Form One enrollment has drastically changed the academic profile of Form One classes, resulting in the creation of wider ability ranges. Invariably, this has organisational and didactic implications. This study explored teachers' views on universal basic education and its impact on quality of education. The investigation adopted a qualitative method where interviews were conducted to elicit teachers' views on the phenomenon. Twenty secondary school teachers were purposively sampled for the study. Findings were that basic education adversely affected the quality of education by the creation of large wide ability classes which most teachers found difficult to teach, overstretching teaching – learning resources and congesting infrastructure creating unconducive learning environments.   Recommendations include – better preparation of teachers during pre- and in-service training, effective instructional supervision, positive discrimination when resourcing and funding schools, careful use and management of educational resources, strengthening home-school partnerships and revisiting the curriculum and its assessment, so that it becomes responsive to basic education.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe's pre-independent era was characterised by policies which were discriminatory in nature and which marginalised and disadvantaged the majority of the population. While education for the white children was made free and compulsory as far back as 1935, education for the black population remained a privilege. Between 1951 and 1955, for example, the expenditure for African Education was 2 209 389 British Pounds (42% of the total Education Budget) against the vote for European Education of 3 096 175 British Pounds (58% of the total Education Budget). The discrepancy becomes even more apparent when one considers that there were 56 000 White and Asian pupils against 800 000 African pupils. The annual unit cost per European pupil was 126 British Pounds compared to 6 British Pounds per African pupil. Participation rates for the majority of the population remained low at both primary and secondary school levels (The Republic of Zimbabwe, 2005).

There were bottlenecks throughout the Education System, the most serious of which was the transition rate from primary to secondary education, which was fixed at not more than 12.5%. Not more than 37.5% of primary school graduates were channeled to vocationally oriented junior secondary schools (F2 schools), while the remaining 50% were expected to fend for themselves. The need to address these and other imbalances in the Education System formed the basis for the post-independence policies. At independence in 1980, education policies in Zimbabwe were a result of deliberate effort by the new Government to address the gross inequalities and imbalances which existed. The Government acknowledged that education was key to socio-economic and political transformation. It also acknowledged that education was a basic human right, which played a pivotal role in combating ignorance, disease and poverty. It was against the above background that the Government of Zimbabwe declared that Grade 0 to Form Four ('O' Level) constitute the country's basic education.
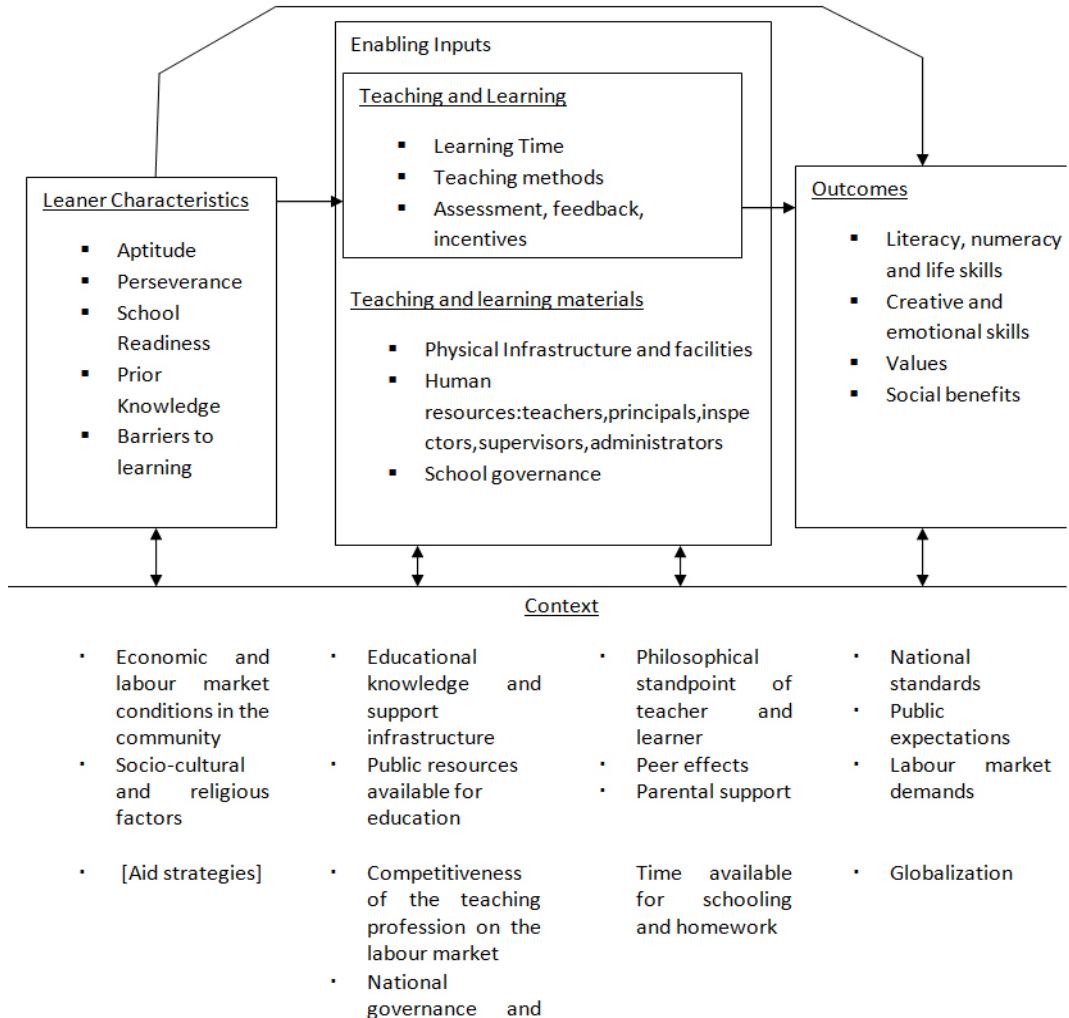
Since independence in 1980, the expansion of the education system in Zimbabwe has been described as phenomenal. This followed the democratisation of education to enable the formally deprived majority to acquire education as a basic human right. The number of secondary schools for example increased from 197 in 1980 to 1 642 in 2006, while the number of primary schools grew from 3 161 in 1980 to 4 842 in the same period (The Republic of Zimbabwe, 2006).

1.1. The meaning of Quality of Education

The different major alternative traditions of educational thought view quality of education differently. However, this study adopts the UNESCO's 2005 definition of quality. UNESCO views quality at the individual and societal levels. At the individual level, quality education is one which allows children to reach their fullest potential in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capabilities. At the societal level, the education received by children should allow them to meet societal expectations. Three principles that are broadly shared and are thought to influence quality of education can be summarised as the need for more relevance, for greater equity of access and outcome and for proper observance of individual rights (UNESCO, 2005). In much current international discourse, these principles guide and inform educational content and processes and

represent more general social goals to which education should contribute. Figure 1.1 presents a framework for understanding education quality.

Figure- 1.1. A framework for understanding education quality

Enabling Inputs

Teaching and Learning
- Learning Time
- Teaching methods
- Assessment, feedback, incentives

Teaching and learning materials
- Physical Infrastructure and facilities
- Human resources:teachers,principals,inspectors,supervisors,administrators
- School governance

Leaner Characteristics
- Aptitude
- Perseverance
- School Readiness
- Prior Knowledge
- Barriers to learning

Outcomes
- Literacy, numeracy and life skills
- Creative and emotional skills
- Values
- Social benefits

Context
- Economic and labour market conditions in the community
- Socio-cultural and religious factors
- [Aid strategies]

- Educational knowledge and support infrastructure
- Public resources available for education
- Competitiveness of the teaching profession on the labour market
- National governance and

- Philosophical standpoint of teacher and learner
- Peer effects
- Parental support

- Time available for schooling and homework

- National standards
- Public expectations
- Labour market demands

- Globalization

Adapted from UNESCO (2005).

1.2. The concept Basic Education

The concept basic education entails that primary school completers automatically progress into Form One notwithstanding their primary school leaving examination results (Mafa, 2003).. Commenting on basic education in Botswana, The National Commission on Education (1993), notes that the unprecedented increase in Form One intake drastically changes the academic profile of Form One classes, as it creates a wider ability range. Invariably, this has some organisational, and didactic implications. Pupils' academic diversity means that teachers face difficult pedagogic decisions if pupils are to learn effectively and enjoyable (Lou *et al.*, 1996).

While proponents for equity in education may view this as a giant step towards the equalisation of educational opportunities, there may be deep fears in some circles that the quality of education may be compromised, unless if appropriate teaching strategies are adopted, backed by adequate teacher support, guidance and resources. Nyagura (1993) citing Zimbabwe's experience in Mafa (2003), argues that the increase in access to secondary education which allowed pupils of low ability to proceed to secondary education indiscriminately, whilst the academically biased curriculum remain unchanged, was a recipe for the decline of the quality of education. This inverse relationship between quantity and quality was noted as far back as 1988, when Eisemon (1988) made the observation that the quality of schooling has suffered in consequence of increasing school enrollments. Esteve (2000) lends credence to this observation by opining that:

> The change from a system designed to educate an elite to one of mass education that aims to educate the whole of the youth of our countries, not only increased the numbers of teachers and pupils, it also brought perplexing problems related to quality. . . . To teach today is a very different activity to that of 20 years ago. It is very much more difficult to deal with mixed-ability classes that comprise 100% of the children of the area with all the social and psychological conflicts of our present societies, than it was to teach more or less homogeneous classes of children selected for their academic ability.

1.3. Zimbabwe's Basic Education

Zimbabwe's basic education system comprises:

- Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system;
- Primary school education cycle comprising 6 – 12 year olds;
- Secondary Education up to 'O' Level; and
- Lifelong and continuing education.

Early Childhood Education (ECEC)

ECEC is a three-year cycle for 3 – 6 year olds. The Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture has a new policy which incorporates ECEC into the primary education cycle. To this end, at least 2 ECEC classes are attached to every primary school.

Primary Education

Primary Education is a 7-year cycle and the official entry age is 6 years. This Programme espouses the policy of compulsory education and automatic promotion from one level to the other. There is a national examination at the end of the cycle. Due to the shortage of secondary schools in some disadvantaged areas and the inability of some parents and/or guardians to pay fees, the Primary School Leaving Examination becomes terminal to about 30% of the pupils at the Grade 7 level (The Republic of Zimbabwe, 2005).

Secondary Education

Secondary Education comprises a four-year General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level cycle. The official entry age is 13 years. There is automatic progression from Form One to Four. At the end of the four years, pupils sit for the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examination. Pupils who succeed can proceed to do a 2 – year General Certificate of Education Advanced Level cycle. However, this cycle is outside the scope of this study.

Lifelong and Continuing Education

This runs parallel to the formal education system, and aims at according access to and participation in education to the previously denied and disadvantaged members of the society. Adult Literacy classes and Distance Education are used to teach these learners. This component of basic education is also outside the scope of this study.

1.3. How Basic Education impact on Quality of Education

The Republic of Zimbabwe (2005) states that quality in education embraces several dimensions that include resource inputs like financial, material and human. It also embraces curriculum relevance, breath, depth and content and influences the output in terms of the number of children who successfully complete various levels of education. Other dimensions of quality include appropriateness of teaching, level of children participation in the system, survival, coverage and performance of pupils in public examinations.

1.4. Variations in Learning Achievements

According to the World Bank (1992), the rapid expansion of the secondary school level as a result of increased progression rate from Grade Seven, has not led to an even pattern of learning achievements, as pupils with high achievement levels are concentrated in comparatively few schools with better resources. Learning achievements in the largest share of secondary schools, especially district council schools in rural areas, remain very low.

1.5. Shortage of Qualified Teachers

The increase in the number of pupils enrolled at every level of basic education has outstripped teacher supply. Furthermore, the economic sanctions and the general down-sizing of the economy, has led to exodus of teachers from the teaching field – with some teachers joining the private and informal sectors of the economy, while others have emigrated to the diaspora. As a result, the quality of education has been affected negatively due to the high teacher-pupil ratio of about 1:40 in primary schools and an average of 1:27 in secondary schools. This situation has been exacerbated by human resources depletion due to HIV/AIDS, as well as, the need to provide for the newly resettled families under the land reform programme (The Republic of Zimbabwe, 2006). To ameliorate the situation, the Government ends up employing temporary teachers. Yet as argued by The Malawi Institute of Education (2004):

> The quality of education depends to a larger extent, on the quality of teachers involved in its development and delivery. A quality teacher will acknowledge the needs and interests of the pupil, permit the pupil to learn at his/her pace, encourage learning through participation and where necessary provide remedial and enrichment instruction among others.

In our view, the adaptations that a teacher makes to accommodate pupils of different abilities depend among others on teacher attitude, experience, support from instructional leaders and level of training. This implies that untrained teachers may find it difficult to adapt their teaching so as to cater for diverse pupil populations.

1.6. Inadequate Teaching – Learning Resources

Other challenges include high pupil-textbook ratio of 1:10, shortage of textbooks and teaching materials. Until recently, with the intervention of UNICEF in textbook supply, it was not uncommon to witness a situation where the teacher was the only one having a textbook in a class of 40 pupils. This situation was worse in rural schools and schools in the resettlement areas. In such a situation, pupils cannot practice reading and solving mathematics problems on their own. It also becomes a challenge for teachers to assign their classes homework, most if not all the written work has to be done in class. Subjects of a practical nature are not spared this predicament. In the absence of adequate tools, equipment, apparatus, chemicals, *inter alia,* the teaching of such subjects suffers. Pupils will leave school without acquiring the necessary skills as outlined in the syllabi.

1.7. Inadequate Infrastructure and Facilities

The education system also faces challenges pertaining to the learning environment, which can be poor and inadequate infrastructure such as classroom space, teacher accommodation, libraries and ablution facilities. School children are also affected by accommodation constraints faced by parents. This affects Government efforts to zone residential areas to particular schools so that children attend Government schools nearest to their residential areas. This has become difficult to achieve as parents move in search for cheaper accommodation.

1.8. Creation of Wide Ability Ranges

As alluded to earlier, basic education creates wider ability ranges at all the levels. Therefore, teaching methods associated with mixed-ability or inclusive classes are vital if pupils are to benefit from time spent in schools. Unfortunately, teachers do not only have difficulties in planning learning activities for the different ability levels in inclusive classes, inclusion is also an organisational nightmare for most teachers who were used to teaching relatively homogeneous classes (Mafa, 2003). Esteve (2000) likens the present day teachers to a cast of actors on stage in period dress who are subjected to a sudden change of scenery in the middle of an act. He points out that:

A new backdrop is quickly rolled down to hide the previous scenery. The new scenery is postmodern; there are lively fluorescent colours that contrast completely with the classical atmosphere on stage seconds before. The first reaction of our actors would be surprise and confusion, before tensions give rise to aggressiveness in certain of them, who demand an end of the play and an explanation. . . . Like the actors just described, the teachers of our present-day society are confronted by circumstances that limit their effectiveness and often oblige them to do their work badly. Moreover, these same circumstances expose them to the public criticism by people who are criticising the present from the conceptions of their own education. Consequently, the public believes it is the teachers who are directly responsible for the present state of affairs and for the failings of present-day teaching.

Basing on the above, questions being raised in some quarters pertaining to the suitability and effectiveness of both pre-service and in-service teachers' training are not misplaced. It can further be surmised that presently the inclusion of inclusive teaching in the curricula of teachers' training institutions, is more of sensitising the prospective teachers on the prevalence of mixed-abilities in pupils, than equipping prospective teachers with necessary teaching and organisational skills that are a prerequisite for effective inclusive teaching.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How has the policy of basic education affected the quality of Zimbabwe's education?

2.1. Purpose of the Study

The primary aim of the study was to establish how the policy of basic education has impacted on the country's quality of education. The secondary aim was to explore strategies to ensure quality education achievement and sustenance.

2.2. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- What is the impact of basic education on the quality of education?
- How has basic education affected the quality of education?
- What intervention strategies should stakeholders adopt to achieve and maintain quality education in the context of basic education?

2.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- To establish the effect of the basic education policy on the quality of education;
- To explore how the policy of basic education impacted the quality of education; and

- To suggest strategies that can be adopted by stakeholders so that the quality of education is achieved and maintained.

3. RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

The study adopted a qualitative case study design. The approach accorded the researchers an opportunity to explore and understand the phenomenon under investigation from an emic as opposed to ettic perspective. Twenty secondary school teachers were purposively sampled from the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. After permission was granted by the relevant authority, appointments were done and interviews conducted. The interviews were recorded verbatim by the use of a dictaphone. After each interview, transcribing and partial field analysis were done to ensure that overlooked aspects in one interview were incorporated in the next. At the end of the interviews, before data processing and analysis, transcripts were taken to participants for verification. When the researchers were certain that they had transcribed the interview proceedings accurately, data processing commenced – which involved segmenting, coding, compilation of coding list, enumeration and categorising the data into themes and sub-themes. The analysis of the findings was done thematically.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings are presented as per the research questions.

4.1. What Is the Impact of Basic Education on the Quality Of Education?

Generally, teachers were of the view that while the policy was a noble idea in that it equalised educational opportunities, it has ushered a plethora of challenges whose cumulative effect has been the lowering of the quality of education. The prevailing consensus was that the policy of basic education has drastically affected the quality of education negatively. Captured below were some of the dominant sentiments from the teachers who were interviewed:

It is not good, it reduces 'O' Level results pass rates and undermines the Grade 7 Examination.

. . . those pupils with weak passes at Grade 7 will just be in secondary school to grow up. They will not cope with secondary school demands.

The quality of education is compromised as the teacher has to accommodate pupils of mixed abilities and at the same time race with time to cover the syllabus.

The teachers' sentiments underscored the observation that the education system is obsessed with examination results. It was evident from the teachers' submissions that quality is measured in terms of examination results. This may also mean that teachers may end up employing teaching strategies which they think may bring higher pass rates, notwithstanding the wide ability that may be present in their classes. Perhaps in view of the academic profiles populating schools, there is need to shift to an assessment method that is appropriate for diverse pupil populations. The alternative assessment should assess

the pupil's performance against a set criterion, as opposed to the current assessment method which ranks pupils.

4.2. How has Basic Education Affected the Quality of Education?

The interviewed teachers noted that the basic education philosophy affects education in the following ways: by creating wide ability ranges; increasing classes; overstretching teaching – learning materials; congesting the infrastructure and creating conditions in schools which impinge on the socio-economic status of the pupils and their parents/guardians. Below is a detailed discussion on each of these.

4.3. The Creation of Wide Ability Range Classes

Most of the teachers concurred that basic education affects education quality in a number of ways, chief among them being the creation of wider ability ranges, which teachers find difficult to teach effectively. The general feeling was that inclusive classes create challenges that interfere with the teaching of pupils occupying both ends of the ability continuum. Below are some of the teachers' sentiments on how basic education affects quality negatively through inclusive classes:

> It is disappointing because one comes across pupils who cannot comprehend anything to the extent of copying questions they are supposed to respond to. . . in extreme cases some pupils cannot spell their names.
> . . . catering for these different abilities, it takes a lot of time . . . it is very difficult to meet each individual's demands because of time, e-e, and some sometimes it is because of too much content. . . .
> You want to complete the syllabus, meanwhile they are slow learners that need to be helped out, demanding more attention.
> Coming up with relevant teaching methods becomes difficult.

The concerns raised by teachers indicate that most teachers were not effectively prepared during pre-service training to effectively teach inclusive classes. Yet proponents of cultural responsive teaching argue that academic diverse pupils provide teachers with an opportunity to use the diversity to optimise instruction .

4.4. Increase in Class Sizes

Automatic progression of Grade Seven completers into Form One creates large classes at the secondary school level. Teachers pointed out that most classes have between forty and fifty pupils, way above the recommended teacher-pupil ratio of 1:27. Teachers contended that such large classes compromise their teaching in a number of ways – the marking loads become heavy, resulting in teachers failing to provide pupils with timeous feedback, attending to individual differences becomes difficult, and behaviour problems are common. The following contributions from some of the teachers succinctly illuminate the challenges emanating from large classes.

> . . . at the same time, the size of the class may not easily permit you to really give that adequate attention to the individuals, at the same time keeping with the

> syllabus, so that by the end of the year at least you know that you have adequate
> area of the syllabus which will see them through the exam.
>
> Teachers end up giving limited work that can be marked quickly, resorting to
> lecture method of teaching, instead of group work due to space limitation.

Teachers seemed to be convinced that it is not possible to meet pupils' individual needs when teaching large classes of up to 50 pupils. On the contrary, empirical evidence shows that there is no significant difference on the impact of teaching a class of 25 as compared to a class of 50 pupils. It is incumbent on the instructional supervisors to convince teachers that large classes of up to 50 pupils can be effectively taught, all other things being equal.

4.5. Overstretching Teaching – Learning Materials

Most teachers pointed out that the already meagre teaching – learning resources such as textbooks, library reading material, Science equipment and apparatus and tools and equipment for subjects of a practical nature such as Agriculture, Food and Nutrition, Wood Technology are overstretched. As a result, teachers are not able to effectively teach subjects whose teaching – learning materials are inadequate. The bottom line is that education quality suffers. Some of the Science teachers who were interviewed pointed out that they resorted to group experiments in some of the practical lessons due to the inadequacy of chemicals, equipment and apparatus. In such cases, very few pupils will actively participate in the experiments the rest will be reduced to observers. Some schools have been forced to select certain syllabi, due to the inadequacy of teaching – learning materials at their disposal.

4.6. Inadequate Infrastructure and Facilities

Teachers reiterated that infrastructure such as classrooms, laboratories, workshops and libraries have become congested, creating unconducive learning environments, which adversely affect the teaching - learning processes. Learning facilities are now accommodating double the number of pupils than the recommended. Lack of teaching – learning space means that certain learning activities and demonstrations cannot take place, further affecting the pupils' understanding of concepts. Most urban schools have attempted to circumvent this problem by adopting double shifts, normally referred to as hot-sitting. While this stop-gap measure solves the problem of inadequate space to some extent, this approach has its own share of problems such as the accelerated deterioration of teaching – learning facilities and pupils' difficulties to concentrate during afternoon lessons, especially during hot seasons.

4.7. Pupils' Socio-Economic Background

While the pupils' socio-economic background has nothing to do with the policy of basic education, teachers were in accord that the two may be related in that, the shortage of teaching – learning materials, brings to the fore the effect of the pupil's socio-economic background in a number of ways. First, shortage of reading materials, set-books and textbooks, mean that parents and guardians may be required to buy or photocopy the prescribed set-books and textbooks for

their children. Second, due to the under-achievement of their children in certain subjects, parents may be forced to pay for extra lessons and holiday lessons. Third, affording parents may send their children to reputable boarding schools. Fourth for children in urban day schools, affording parents may be dropping their children at school, giving them transport money to board public transport or buy them bicycles. In contrast, children from weaker socio-economic backgrounds may not be in a position to enjoy the above benefits. While it may be difficult to quantify the effects of weaker socio-economic backgrounds on academic performance, the general consensus among the teachers who took part in the interviews was that the effect on achievement is not negligible. The argument underpinning the connection between basic education and socio-economic background is that in the absence of the myriad of problems ushered into the schools by the policy of basic education, the parental intervention strategies discussed above would not be necessary.

4.8. What Intervention Strategies Should Stakeholders Adopt to Achieve and Maintain Quality Education in the Context Of Basic Education?

Teachers were aware that the policy of basic education was here to stay, it was like the proverbial burning platform – it created their working environment. This being the case, teachers reiterated that their way out was the acquisition of survival skills. They suggested the following strategies, which they said if adopted will ameliorate their predicament, and bring about quality education. First, teachers suggested that pre-service and in-service teaching should focus more on the teaching of diverse populations. Their observations were that at present, pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes were not adequately preparing teachers for the challenges of basic education. As a result, teachers enter the teaching field with some vague theoretical knowledge of inclusion and inclusive teaching strategies, but devoid of the necessary organisational and teaching competences required for the effective teaching of such classes. Second, schools must take very good care of the scarce teaching resources entrusted to them. This will ensure that any additional money generated or disbursed by the Government to the schools will be used to augment already existing resources, instead of replacing lost, stolen, embezzled or broken resources. Third, pupils should not be rushed through the 'O' level syllabi, those pupils who feel that they are not ready to sit for the examination after four years should be allowed an extra year. Fourth, streaming should be reintroduced. Their argument was that streaming makes it easier for teachers to prepare, deliver and assess pupils' work. This was premised on the idea that streaming narrows the ability range of classes.

5. CONCLUSION

Findings indicate that while the policy of basic education, which entailed the automatic progression of Grade Seven completers into Form One was a noble idea, it resulted in lowering the quality of education. The quality was negatively affected due to lack of prior arrangements to cater for the unprecedented increase of secondary school pupils. Teachers were ill prepared for inclusive teaching; resources were not enough to cater for the increase; infrastructure was inadequate; teacher-pupil ratios were high and in some cases the weaker socio-economic

backgrounds of pupils meant that pupils could not get support in form of extra reading materials and books from home. The interviewed teachers implicitly underscored the pivotal role teachers play in any innovation, without proper and effective teaching, achieving quality education, will keep drifting away like mirage to the weary traveler. The cumulative effects of all these challenges translated in the lowering of Zimbabwe's quality of education. As succinctly stated by UNESCO (2005) 'It is obvious that schools without teachers, textbooks or learning materials will not be able to do an effective job'.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the above findings and conclusions, we recommend that:

- Pre-service and in-service teacher's training prepares prospective teachers for the pedagogic and didactic challenges they are likely to encounter in the teaching field as a result of the philosophy of basic education.

- Instructional supervision should be strengthened so that teachers receive appropriate support, advice and guidance in handling large classes of wide ability range.

- The limited resources available in schools must be well looked after and used with great care.

- Fora such as Open Days, Consultation Days and School Development Association meetings must be used to strengthen Home – School partnerships so that behaviour problems and achievement problems are nipped in the bud.

- The curriculum and the present assessment method need to be revisited, so that they both take cognisance of obtaining academic profile of secondary school pupils.

- There is need for positive discrimination in the allocation of resources and money to schools. For example, former Group A Schools, that used to cater for the education of white pupils are relatively better equipped than former Group B and C schools, which were for indigenous people.

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