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Extrapolating the Plight of Learners During Socio-Political and Fiscal Mayhem: A Case for Zimbabwean Schools

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Abstract: Learners, who are why schools exist, are normally forgotten during mayhems in a country, as the politicians tussle with the educators. This cascades into the home and immediate environment as the upheavals negatively impact the learners, particularly the family unit fragmentations and relocations. The objectives of the study were, to find how social, political, and economic turbulences affect learners in such an environment, and then suggest remedies. The current research is a qualitative case study, conducted in four schools in the Marondera District of Zimbabwe teases the voices and perceptions of school heads and teachers on the learners' plight during turmoil. This has been escalating, to date, since the spiraling fast-track land reform programme of February 2000. Four school heads and sixteen teachers were purposively sampled. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with the school heads and focus group interviews with the teachers. The findings suggested that teacher absenteeism, learner abuse, lack of instructional resources, deterioration in the quality of students' assignments and assessments, learners' delinquency, and child-headed families harm teaching and learning during such neglect. The study proposes top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top ethical governance, driven by the values of *Unhu* and Decoloniality strategies vested in the Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and consulting all the key stakeholders.

Keywords: Learner welfare; socio-political mayhem; instructional supervision; decoloniality; unhulized leadership

Introduction

When an economy takes a knock, like is the case with Zimbabwe since the Fast-Track-Land-Reform implemented in the year 2000, to date, it is the social services that suffer most, and education is chief among them. Learners are caught in the melee that ensues between the government and its workers, the teachers, and the social upheaval within the community. Zimbabwe is under the category of predatory states according to Reeler (2014), who asserts that the Zimbabwean government uses the armed forces, law enforcement, and agents of the Central Intelligence Organization to impose its will. In addition to traditional leaders, local government, and other government officials like teachers, school administrators, and other civil servants, these state organs are connected to other government entities.

Teaching and learning become heavily compromised as a new equilibrium, running battles, and some negotiations are underway. Kgari-Masondo and Mkhabela (2020) vow that no matter the type and magnitude of disturbance in the community, no child must be left behind. Against such a background, the current qualitative case study was conducted in Marondera District. It involves one Council, one Government, one peri-urban Farm, and lastly one peri-urban Township school. Of these, four school heads and sixteen teachers

were the participants. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with the school heads and focus group interviews with the teachers.

The objective of the study was to isolate the plight of the learners, in such a troubled social, political, and fiscal upheaval. In the current scenario, thousands of educators left their jobs for the informal sector and the diaspora, educational funding systems are collapsing, and teacher strikes are incessant, with parents leaving child-headed families as they forage to screech a living in the diaspora. This *mélange* creates an environment where schools lose all normalcy, and the eminent 'beneficiary' of this concoction is the learner. The remedies being mulled are the use of *Unhulized* leadership, based on the *Ubuntu* African Philosophy, tapping into the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and applying the Decoloniality approach.

According to Smith (2012), indigenous peoples worldwide have maintained unique culturally grounded understandings over time that direct interactions between humans and nonhuman species within particular ecosystems. Indigenous knowledge, also known as traditional knowledge, is a system made up of these relationships and understandings. Applying Indigenous Knowledge, as this study suggests, will result in long-lasting domestic solutions for the students.

Unhulization is derived from instilling *Unhu* values into an individual. Meylahn and Musiyambiri (2017) have projected that the terms leadership and *Unhu* are synonymous, emphasizing human servanthood and providing the essential foundations of leadership values. No one should be thrown away, indicating that *Unhu* ideals, which promote participation, respect, love, and human rights, can help heal the schools and protect students' personhood. Kgari-Masondo and Chingwanangwana (2024) contend that *Unhulization* is the transforming leadership approach that draws from the values of love, peace, participation, hospitality, care, social justice, respect, guidance, human rights, and the overall well-being of humanity.

Literature from this era of decolonization shows how important it is to use indigenous knowledge to address issues facing Africa and promote sustainable development. "One must impart this understanding to others to change a society—one must understand its nature, workings, and failures" (O'Malley, 1970, p. xiv). This suggests that to change the educational system, even within the African education community, we must take inspiration from our surroundings, using homegrown solutions. The current study was thus guided by the following questions: What is the socio-political and economic environment like in Zimbabwe? How is the current environment affecting learners? What interventions can be employed to assist learners navigate through the current gridlock?

Literature Review

Hargreaves and Fink (2016) advocate that educators and administrators should be in charge of their students' instruction if they believe that schools have a significant role in their future well-being and usefulness in society. The plight of learners in the current upheaval is the focus of this study, and literature related to that is reviewed in the next paragraphs. This literature seeks to cover the gap identified by the current study, which seeks to answer these questions: What is the plight of learners in Marondera schools today? How is the current socio-political and fiscal environment contributing to the learners' predicament? What interventions can be applied to circumvent the prevailing situation in these schools?

1. Child-Headed Families

Manguvo, Whitney, and Chareka (2011) claim that the majority of Zimbabweans who moved to the diaspora left their children behind, resulting in millions of child-headed families. Children whose parents died from COVID-19, HIV/AIDS, and other illnesses multiplied these child-headed households. Learners are severely impacted because it fosters a permissive home environment where adolescent delinquency—including theft, drug and alcohol misuse, larceny, promiscuity, and even rape—becomes widespread. Students from such socially volatile backgrounds will inevitably engage in similar activities in school, some of which will involve their teachers. The girl child becomes more vulnerable in such circumstances (Mawadza, 2009). More still, school heads and teachers do not have any parents to communicate with on school or discipline matters. As a result, the learners suffer psychologically, and some get abused or neglected when there is no one to give account to, given the missing parents. This state of affairs further erodes instructional leadership and discipline in the schools.

2. Same Age Syndrome

There has been a massive exodus of highly qualified professionals from Zimbabwe, affecting all fields, including education. Former Education Minister Coltart disclosed that a total of 45,000 teachers had departed Zimbabwe in search of better opportunities overseas (Coltart, 2010). The government responded by employing school leavers to fill thousands of vacant teaching posts, leaving schools being manned by other children. Relatedly, they lowered entry requirements into Teacher Training Colleges, and young school leavers have become teachers, filling some of the vacancies left by seasoned educators, and these have no one to mentor them into the profession, exacerbating an already dire situation (Chingwanangwana & Kgari-Masondo, 2024).

3. Deterioration of Instruction

In order for principals to effectively improve student learning and turn around underperforming schools, they need to focus on instructional leadership and make the most of individual teachers' strengths as well as the strength of the school as a whole. Khandelwal and Biswal (2012) posit that teacher quality in schools does not only refer to academic qualifications and training, but it includes professional commitment and the ethical behaviour of the teachers. Chimhenga and Mpfu (2016) maintain that the main cause of student indiscipline in Zimbabwean schools is a permissive school environment in which teachers are either not caring because of low morale or, on occasion, inadequately trained, which leads to poor classroom management practices. The quality of educational instruction declined because the government hired inexperienced workers, the majority of whom had only just finished high school, to fill the majority of the open positions (Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). This was described as a recipe for catastrophe by Mafa & Makuba (2013), who noted that children were teaching other children, increasing the number of sacrifices made for instructional quality.

4. Rampant Learner Indiscipline

Israel (2023) asserts that when schools are not performing well there is a high failure rate, early school dropout, lack of discipline, poor morale, and anti-academic attitudes among teachers and students. As espoused by Edwards (2008), there are a wide range of diverse and multifaceted causes of school indiscipline and other issues, including the family, school, and society. Mthiyane (2013) contends these causes include social, communal, internal, and external elements. Edwards (2008) goes on to say that learners frequently carry issues from other parts of their lives—like divorce, abandonment, death, and other difficulties—to school. Chaux (2009) drawing on the Ecological Theory of Human Development says the political and economic climate of a given nation has a significant impact on children's behavior. Furthermore, Chiviru (2008) has shown that teachers believe that the current decline in the socio-political and economic climate is exacerbating student indiscipline.

5. Improper Association

Nur Salam Man (2024) equivocally maintains that role modelling is about setting standards that can be seen and emulated through the day-to-day interaction between a mentor and the mentee. According to Magwa (2014), child sexual assault is becoming more common in Zimbabwean schools, yet it often remains unreported. Additionally, he stresses that abusing students sexually is against both their human rights and ethical standards. The World Health Organization (2009) said that 223 million children globally had been victims of forced sexual relations or other forms of sexual violence, with teachers being the majority of those perpetrators. Regardless of the justification teachers offer, these acts have long-lasting effects on children, such as difficulty forming lasting bonds, and must be stopped immediately (Magwa, 2014). Mafa and Makuba (2013) have documented that the situation in Zimbabwe is made worse by the pervasive death of ethical conduct in the schools and that "children are educating other children."

6. Exclusion Due to Lack of Fees

The 1987 Education Amendment Act (1) in Zimbabwe clearly states that education is a fundamental human right to children and that it "shall be compulsory with minimal fees charged" (Zimbabwe Education Act, Chapter 25.04 p. 617). However, recent developments in Zimbabwe have indicated that thousands of students have not been able to access education because the fees have become too high, or the parents cannot afford

whatever they charge. Additionally, in most cases in private schools, the school heads and school development committees and associations collude to hike the fees beyond the reach of many students (Erlwanga, 2013). The fact that children in urban areas are present on the streets during school hours is proof that education is not mandatory and that those children's rights are being violated; they are on the streets because they have been expelled from their schools for not paying the required fees (Sachikonye, 2011).

7. Abuse of School Funds

Regarding the rules governing the financial management of schools, Mistry and Grobler (2007) identified many shenanigans involving the SDC/SDA personnel in collusion with school heads. These included, among other things, "giving each other hefty sitting allowances, regular meetings on allowances, appreciation gifts to the school heads soliciting political interventions." Similar problems include members embezzling money in concert with school heads and bypassing tender procedures for projects that would benefit SDC/SDA members and heads (Mupindu, 2012, Chibaya, 2021).

8. Lack of Instructional Resources in Schools

Dugger (2008) indicated that in the run-up to the 2008 elections, one hundred and twenty-one schools were taken over by the ruling ZANU PF party as bases for party militia. He adds that half of the fifty-five non-profit organisations that were in the country assisting with educational programmes had left the country and fully suspended their aid to the schools, severely making them under-resourced. The parents' ability to pay levies assigned to them deteriorated to a point where most could not remit anything at all due high to unemployment (Mafa & Makuba (2013). Education funding through programmes such as the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), existed in name only as the government ceased to have the capacity to honour payments. Pedagogical as well as human resources became a major challenge to the provision of education due to the meltdown of the economy, Nyazema (2010). Basic laboratory, technical subjects, and classroom needs such as chalk could not be availed due to lack of funds Chibaya, (2021).

9. Absent (Ghost) Teachers

The significance of creating a favourable environment for the provision of education is widely recognized (Hussein, 2011). However, even in unstable circumstances, governments have been urged to safeguard schools and ensure the continuity of learning (Smith & Vaux, 2003). Mawadza (2009) associates the challenges being faced by learners in Zimbabwe today with school leadership and teachers who are experiencing high levels of stress and are significantly underpaid. Consequently, they are compelled to seek additional informal employment to meet their financial needs while still being employed as teachers. The absence of teachers can make learning challenging as they are essential in facilitating classroom activities Healey (2011). Setting aside money for these educational expenses can be difficult for families that are trying to meet their fundamental requirements. This financial hardship highlights the necessity of policies and funding to ensure that everyone has access to and benefits equally from education Shamsudin et al. (2023).

10. Double Dipping

The unsettling legacy of Zimbabwe's political and economic unrest has contributed to the collapse of the teaching and learning culture (Hammer et al., 2016). Situations were prevalent where kids were required to bring groceries, including sugar, butter, cooking oil, and so on, to help cover their teachers' underpayment or nonpayment. Students who failed to bring these things were inevitably made victims in one way or another, which would negatively impact their academic performance. Chingwanangwana (2019) observes that teachers conducted supplementary classes at their homes for the same students whom they did not adequately teach at school, making parents pay double. This phenomenon is referred to as 'home tutoring', it disenfranchises students in that they invest twice as much time and usually costs USD\$10 per subject per month for the majority of students, which is costly.

11. Corporal Punishment

The elimination of physical punishment has become a contentious subject both domestically and globally,

according to Kapungu (2008). Similarities between what occurs at home and in schools are the primary source of the issue. Therefore, rather than seeing it as a breach of any rules, some instructors appear to regard it as their loco-parentis responsibility inside the school (Shumba, 2007). Although corporal punishment has been outlawed in Zimbabwean schools by legislation, the reality shows that it is still widely used there.

12. Examination Malpractices

Muchemwa and Dhliwayo (2017) indicate that there are officially perpetuated malpractices such as examination leakages; illegal assisting candidates, poor invigilation, and fabricated student coursework, some out of negligence, but in the Zimbabwean melee others are for financial gain and covering up for negligence of instruction. This also goes for students' acts like taking foreign assisting materials into the examination room; using programmable calculators; body writing; impersonation and stealing of examination question papers before the set date, with the assistance of teachers in some cases. It follows that, in Zimbabwe, the school heads and teachers are not employed by the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) to administer and transport examinations, and yet they are not paid for these services. Factors contributing to school examination leakage in the current turmoil include a lack of security, poor syllabi coverage, and a poorly paid and demotivated teaching force that is grudgingly executing examination duties for ZIMSEC (Mashanyare & Chinamasa, 2014).

13. Psychological Trauma

Scholarly investigations have demonstrated that educators and parents who experience abuse typically go on to maltreat their students and offspring, respectively, perpetuating the abuse of learners throughout generations (Shumba et al., 2008). However, other research has found that pupils who experience harsh discipline in school may suffer from a condition known as Educationally Induced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (EIPSTD). According to Hyman, Irwin, and Laily (2012), these pupils show signs of exhaustion, difficulty falling asleep, feelings of worthlessness and melancholy, suicidal thoughts, anxiety attacks, increased resentment and aggression, poor attention, and a distaste for authority. There is a need to protect students from damage.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories underpin the current study, Decoloniality and *Unhu* Theory. These are discussed briefly:

1. Decoloniality

This theory explores removing colonial influences embedded in present-day cultures; they are enduring remnants of historical oppression still holding onto emancipated societies. Decoloniality is founded on the idea that colonialism is the foundation of the everyday operation of capitalism, modernity, and imperialism, so it aims to deconstruct these systems and create space for alternative ways of living on the planet. This is achieved through epistemic decolonization, decolonial aesthetics, and universality. The theory, not only critiques past discriminations but also aims to establish fair and equal societies Quijano (2000). This theory is relevant to this study in that it helps highlight the power dynamics and exposes the imbalances between the Global North and the South in knowledge, power, resource exploitation, and distribution. Again, Zimbabwe is in the current scenario due to land redistribution, where there was a move to correct colonial land-grabbing. Lastly, the theory offers a framework for a critical view for understanding and correcting social, economic, and political inequalities.

2. Unhu (Unhulized) Theory

A person is more than simply a body, according to Khoza (2012), and they have moral, intellectual, and emotional lives as well. People's lives are inextricably linked to their social environment. A person is a person via other people; I am because you are, you are because we are. This is the idea behind the vision of a leader who connects with followers compassionately. *Unhulized* leadership should embrace humility, decency, competence ingrained in caring and respect, and serving others with integrity and accountability (Kgari-Masondo & Chingwanangwana, 2024). This theory is relevant to this study in that it can help instill holistic learning in both the learners and the teachers, where each learns from the other, thereby instilling mutual

respect. It further enhances the community orientation where teachers prioritize the collective growth and well-being of the learners and their immediate community. More still, *Unhu* unlocks empathy and compassion within the teachers, causing them to evaluate their actions. Collaboration, cultural sensitivity, relevance, patience, understanding, and integrity are some of the virtues espoused in this theory, making it speak directly to this study.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The current study was thus guided by the following questions: What is the socio-political and economic environment like in Zimbabwe? How is the current environment affecting learners? What interventions can be employed to assist learners navigate through the current gridlock? The design of the study is a qualitative case study. There are four case sites, which are schools. According to Litchman (2011), there can be one site with distinct settings for multiple case studies, or there can be separate sites, where four distinct schools are investigated.

2. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this study, where schools were sampled for the characteristics they had, which would help in meeting the research objectives. Moore et al. (2012) postulate that each case has boundaries observed at an early stage in the research study. One peri-urban school, a farm school, a government township school, and a city centre school were sampled. Sixteen teachers and four school heads were sampled; these individuals were selected as best suited to generate the data required for this study's data. The schools were given pseudonyms to protect their identities, and so were the participants.

3. Data Generation Process

Data were generated from four case sights, two primary, and two secondary schools, purposively selected due to certain desired characteristics, in the schools sampled from the Marondera Education District of Zimbabwe. Here, four school heads and sixteen teachers were sampled. For each of the four school heads, semi-structured interviews were conducted, while focus group interviews were held with the teachers at each school.

4. Data Analysis and Presentation

The data produced were analyzed using the coding techniques suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Our data analysis was guided by the thematic approach. This approach includes organizing and classifying data systematically to recognize consistent patterns and themes that arise. The themes were then grouped to come up with broader findings for the study. All ethical considerations were observed, as spelled out by Cresswell (2013). The schools were identified by pseudonyms and so were the participants. School pseudonyms were Red, Blue, Yellow, and Silver, while the schools' heads were identified as H1, H2, H3, and H4, with the teachers being T1 to T16.

5. Generalisability

The study ensured observance of generalisability through sample size and diversity, where four schools were sampled out of twenty-eight, and in these schools, the head, one HOD, and three teachers were sampled (creating sample diversity). Again, the different types of schools covered in the study helped create room for generalisability, viz; peri-urban, township, city-center, and farm schools. However, the study findings cannot be generalized widely throughout Zimbabwe because only four schools were studied. Rather, the findings can be generalized to the Marondera Education District, with the exclusion of the high-fee-paying private schools. Larger scale studies of a similar nature need to be conducted for wider generalizability. Researcher bias was dealt with through triangulation, objective coding, and thick description by using much of the direct quotes from the generated data. The participants filled out consent forms before the start of the study.

The Findings

This study set out to establish the plight of the learners during the turmoil of a social, political, and economic nature in Zimbabwe. The following questions directed the research: What is the plight of learners in Marondera schools today? How is the current socio-political and fiscal environment contributing to the learners' predicament? What interventions can be applied to circumvent the prevailing situation in these schools? The findings are presented below according to the nascent themes:

1. Child Headed Families

It has emerged from the study that the economic meltdown of the Zimbabwean economy brought about dire and diverse consequences for the learners, one being child-headed families, Participant, T7, had this to say:

"These children heading families become adults in everything, some even make advances on you, they become arrogant, do not do their homework, and are often late or absent. Not all are wild. But the majority get affected academically" (Participant T7, school teacher).

When the teachers were probed further on what interventions they employed, the consensus was that the class form teachers gave them some counselling, beyond that, they sounded indifferent voicing that they had their crosses to carry, the biggest of them being their financial distress.

2. Same Age Syndrome

There was consensus among both the school heads and the teachers in the study, that seasoned teachers have left the profession in mass, and this has returned to harm teaching and learning in the schools. Some of the participants did not hide their frustrations:

The problem we are facing now is that we have young kids who have just graduated, and the majority of the seasoned teachers who were supposed to groom these 'kids' to understand the expectations of the system are no longer there." (Participant H3, school head).

Another participant, a school head, H1, reiterated the issue of young inexperienced teachers flooding the schools.

3. Deteriorating Instruction

There has been a consensus among all the participants that teaching and learning are deteriorating due to the current turmoil. They cited teachers' low morale and absenteeism, lack of funding, textbooks, chalk, practical subjects, and science materials.:

"When teachers get into the classrooms there are no chalks, they fail to get the things they deem necessary, and they are demoralized," (Participant 10, school teacher).

"Some fail to come on time because they spend a lot of time waiting for transport, and about half the staff commutes from Marondera town," (Participant H4, school head).

4. Improper Association

The participants attested to cases of improper association between some teachers and the learners. They cited the young teachers and those who exploited their students due to economic hardships. The students were lured through money, it emerged:

The other thing is an improper association with high school children, especially when we have young guys teaching in primary schools where there are high schools nearby. Remember most of our teachers are now inexperienced and young because of brain drain," (Participant T12, school teacher).

We have situations where teachers have affairs with pupils also, all because of the economic hardships driving these pupils to this, which drives some teachers to take advantage of these school kids. (Participant H4, school head).

5. Exclusion due to Lack of Fees

Some learners have left schools permanently due to their parents failing to pay their tuition fees, even though the law prohibits sending away learners for lack of fees. The harsh economy pushes most parents to the brink, the study has revealed:

“Yes, the situation is affecting the parents’ ability to pay fees, so most of the students are not paid up. Moreover, the school is expected to use the money to function. Other expenses are mandatory.” (Participant H2, school head).

Resources are very limited, and the school is massive, one would expect more resources at such an institution, but it is the opposite. Now the pattern in payment is pathetic; it is just pathetic some parents that have gone for five, six years having paid nothing.” (Participant H1, school head).

6. Abuse of School Funds

Cases of misappropriation of funds have been raised by the participants, and the current economic meltdown has been fingered:

Currently, the teachers are not getting much, given the current economic situation. We have a certain head who ended up misusing school funds to pay for school fees for their children,” (Participant H3, school head).

Similar sentiments were raised by the other school heads, where they confirmed an increase in the number of financial misconducts by the school heads. Some of these came through dubious deals conducted when acquiring school supplies and resources.

7. Lack of Instructional Resources

There was unanimous agreement among the respondents that schools were reeling under lack, here are some of the sentiments recorded from the participants:

Textbooks, furniture, classrooms, workloads. We have got hot sitting, and we teach under trees, can you imagine, if a snake falls, can you imagine the disaster? And the pupils will be sitting on the ground while you sit on a chair, and you feel sorry for them when it’s raining or cold (Participant T5, school teacher)

8. Absent (Ghost) Teachers

In seeking to establish the availability of the teachers in the schools during learning time, the study revealed that it is erratic. Both the school heads and the teachers confessed to side hustles for survival:

“You cannot force the teacher to close his business, because probably that is his only source of money that he is surviving on” (Participant H4, school head).

“Teachers because of economic hardships, the teachers are trying to put food on the table, trying to make extra cash, so at times he does not come to work, busy somewhere trying to make extra cash for a living.” (Participant H3, school head).

9. Double Dipping

Another disturbing phenomenon that came up in the study is double dipping, where the teachers are amphibious in their dealings at the expense of the students. Here are some Participants' voices:

“You will be forced to set up a private business out there and run it whilst you are also running the profession to make ends meet. Some of the vendors who were our students are living better than us, far better,” (Participant T9, school teacher).

Sometimes we come early on an empty stomach, and we have zero-zero-one. By zero-zero-one we are saying you do not have breakfast, you do not have lunch, but you will have supper. And you are expected to perform 100%” (Participant T2, school teacher).

10. Substance and Drug Abuse

The findings indicated that the permissive environment in the schools creates room for drug and substance abuse, here is an attestation:

I can share maybe the most recent one, where we had a child who was involved in drug abuse. Aaaaa, he and some friends were taking those tablets, they called them the whatever...the ‘maragado’ thing. Yaaa, so we ended up losing him that was the last term. (Participant T6, school teacher).

Participants raised the fact that at times these students are not occupied in the schools, due to teacher indifference or absenteeism, so they have room to do drugs and abuse substances right at school.

11. Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment, whilst illegal, is still rife in these schools. One teacher participant, when asked why they would administer it said:

“Not doing their work, not covering their books, not even writing, some of them, the rest would just be sitting making noise being mischievous. At the end of the day, the Headmaster would request some exercise books from everyone, so I had to beat them” (Participant T11, school teacher).

12. Examination Malpractice

The study revealed that the current turbulence creates an environment that promotes examination malpractice. Some participants indicated:

“The school is failing to purchase essential equipment and materials, for the proper delivery of lessons and proper functioning of the school, so, it has a bad effect on the school.” (Participant H1, school head).

“So, schools are under-resourced at the moment. They do not have enough to sustain themselves Like, I am HOD for practical subjects, and we do not have materials for projects,” (Participant T9, school teacher).

Upon being probed, it emerged that in some instances examination tasks were bugled up due to a lack of resources, and some marks were fabricated.

13. Psychological Trauma

The current situation in Zimbabwe has been described as traumatizing by the participants, both for school personnel, parents, and learners:

“E..., a..., the issue is affecting almost everybody, it is everywhere. (Participant H1, school head).

“We are trying to work under these circumstances. But we are really finding it very difficult to, very difficult. We are failing to meet most of our mandates; we are failing ” (Participant H4, school head).

The trauma experienced by the learners surpasses that of the parents and the teachers in that they are still growing up. This affects them for life, there will be a lost generation (Nyazema, 2010; Magwa, 2014).

Discussion

This segment discusses the findings of the study that were presented above. Teacher exodus has been confirmed as one of the crucial causes of learners' plight. Literature has shown that seasoned teachers prefer vending and the informal sector, which is more paying than teaching. These young teachers replacing them have been noted to lack classroom practice skills and fail to handle instructional situations appropriately (Chiviru, 2009). Teacher exodus has a detrimental effect on learners in that emotionally, they may have distress,

anxiety, and uncertainty. They too can be victims of decreased motivation, trauma, and vulnerability. Developmentally, the students suffer academic disruptions, social skills deficiency, and future poor performance in examinations. Administration can provide employees with training, and career expansion programmes, and raise their remunerative packages. This will stimulate employees to remain loyal to the organization, and also reduce staff turnover (Sencherey et al., 2022).

Exclusion due to lack of fees is quite dire, as indicated by the findings of the study. Much as the fees are low, the indications are the parents are failing to raise them due to the economic environment. Millions of parents try out scratching a living through various vending activities. Unemployment is placed at around 95% due to the current fiscal meltdown Moyo (2023).

The study has established that the schools are battling for survival financially, even then, embezzlement of funds was cited as still occurring in some schools. When this happens, the already critical situation becomes more unbearable. (Kapungu, 2008) says in such circumstances, it is the learners that bear the brand.

Lack of resources has hit these schools due to collapsed funding systems and parents' lack of capacity to pay fees. All four schools indicated a lack of teaching and learning resources, which grossly impacts the students negatively. The schools become daycare centres and not the mediums of instruction they are meant to be (Mafa & Makuba, 2013) lament. Signs of dilapidation were visible in these schools, at one of them there was no door in the classroom where I held a focus group interview.

Ghost teachers, who appeared and vanished, were confirmed by the participants. The school heads admitted the teachers were erratic in their presence in the schools, citing meager, inaccessible salaries as the major problem. To that end, teacher absenteeism weighed heavily against the provision of proper teaching and learning. Chibaya, (2021) vehemently retorted that unless the plight of these schools and the teachers is addressed, the learners will continue to suffer.

Deteriorating instruction came up strongly as one of the plights of the learners in the case study schools. The teachers revealed that the teachers who went on sick, maternity, and annual leave were not replaced, exacerbating their overload. Their sentiments show that morale is at the lowest ebb, and they are not hiding their emotions. Literature indicates that when morale is low, performance is adversely affected (Kusereka, 2003). More still, the issue of lacking resources continues coming up and this adversely affects the students' performance (Manguvo, Whitney, & Chareka, 2011).

Double Dipping, where teachers benefit twice from the learners has been established as affecting the students. One worst-case scenario was when teachers at one of the schools, Yellow, were dismissed for conducting their extra lessons at their very schools. Studies carried out on countries in similar circumstances (Healey, 2011; Hussain, Ahmed & Fatima 2011) have shown that it is the learners who suffer most, as the government and teachers wrangle (Healey, 2011; Hussain, Ahmed & Fatima 2011).

Corporal punishment goes against the values of *Unhu* (Khoza, 2013). Most of these cases of corporal punishment go on in the classroom, and there are no records. Teachers confessed to taking the risk because the indiscipline levels are high, and they want to get things done. One worst-case scenario is the plight of a sixteen-year-old girl from Saruwe Secondary School in Mashonaland West Province who had her right arm broken in an attack by her female teacher for being late to class Zimbabwe News Online, November 16, 2017). As a result, she was unable to write her ordinary-level examinations.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to highlight the plight of learners during the current Zimbabwean crisis. The experiences of school heads and teachers in the Marondera were solicited and findings indicate that learners are being subjected to many challenges due to the current socio-political and fiscal mayhem. The identified negative factors were teacher fatigue, absenteeism, indifference, lack of resources, and a deteriorating instructional environment. Such an environment has been established as detrimental to the moral, physical, and spiritual well-being of the students, resulting in their academic performance being affected. From a theoretical standpoint, the study was informed by the *Unhu* and Decoloniality theories. By employing these theories to the current situation in the schools studied, sustainable and lasting solutions can be found in restoring a healthy environment and giving learners their worth in the schools.

The study recommends creating a new model of educational funding for these schools, as the current one has collapsed, leaving schools impoverished and lacking resources. It is also recommended that *Unhu* concepts be infused into the teacher training curriculum and the school curriculum, so the behaviour of the teachers and the learners will be restored, and the ills being witnessed will be healed. Lastly, addressing the issue of child-headed families through the Indigenous Knowledge Systems could heal the affected children. In African society, no children care for other children, adults in the families step in to incorporate the children, no matter the circumstances would have left them vulnerable. Studies on how to improve teacher welfare, and on the long-term impact of the current disturbances on education in Zimbabwe are also recommended.

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