

Secondary School Wastage, Continuing Education and Youth Unemployment in Zambia

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Abstract

The unprecedented population increase and onset of economic decline since mid 1985 have made it difficult for the expanded educational system in Zambia to absorb all youth of school age. For many reasons wastage is rampant at the secondary level while the non-formal education sector is incapable of catering effectively for those adversely affected due to a variety of factors. Without much opportunity for gainful employment and lacking the necessary skills for self-employment, life is unpleasant for the majority of school dropouts. The problems of school wastage, continuing education and youth unemployment merit immediate large-scale intervention from both within and outside the country to contain the deteriorating situation.

Introduction and Background

At independence in 1964 Zambia's population was just a little over 2 million. Rising at an annual rate of about 3%, the population is today estimated to be 8 or 10 million, the majority of whom are youth. Unfortunately population expansion has not been matched with economic growth. Rapid population increase and fast declining investment in education have worsened the problems of secondary school wastage, continuing education and youth unemployment. The ongoing educational reforms introduced in 1977 have not done much to solve any of these problems, due mainly to the economic difficulties the country is currently facing. This study revisits the issues and examines the current situation.

Nature and extent of wastage

The Zambian system of education has three terminal or selection examinations administered at Grade 7, Grade 9 and Grade 12, corresponding to the end of the primary, junior secondary and senior secondary school. According to Plank et al. (1991), the average annual progression rate from Grade 7 to Grade 8 between 1977 and 1988 was 22.2 percent. This means that about 77.8 percent of Grade 7 pupils each year during this 12-year period did not pursue junior secondary education and the number for 1988 was 41,174. So Zambia's national education is really primary education because this is the level which caters for the majority. Until 1977, the junior secondary selection examination was administered at the Grade 10 level. The Ministry of Education (1980) annual report shows that out of the 21,460 pupils who took this examination in 1977 only 10,988 (51%) were selected for senior secondary education.

The examinations are by no means the only reason for students leaving school. Numerous other factors are involved. One of them is lack of space in Grades 8 and 10. (The expansion of physical facilities has not kept pace with the sharp increase in enrolments.) Among the cultural factors, three deserve mention. First, boys are still considered more important than girls, especially in the rural areas. Hence more support (material and moral) is given to boys than girls. Second, girls are made to work more at home than boys, allegedly to build a good reputation for marriageability, particularly in the rural areas. Third, some religious sects, both Christian and non-Christian, discourage higher education for children in their congregations, especially girls. In addition, the demand for child labour is one of the main economic factors responsible for withdrawal from school. For example, boys in the rural areas are usually required to help the father in agricultural and other income-generating activities. Furthermore, there is often pressure from parents on a child to leave school and work to support the family or siblings.

Another socio-economic factor causing unprecedented school withdrawals is poverty. Pupils from poor backgrounds drop out of school due to lack of money for school fees, PTA dues, uniforms, books and other supplies. Pregnancy and early marriage among teenage girls also accounts for a number of school exclusions. In some instances, old age contributes to school drop out. For example, children who start school late and/or repeat a grade or two

occasionally perceive themselves to be too old and 'outsiders' in a class. A few of these students leave school to work and support themselves. Also, a number of pupils leave school through expulsion on account of bad behaviour or indiscipline. Others leave because of poor health or lack of proper foster care when orphaned by the death of both biological parents. In addition, there are some who drop out due to truancy and lack of interest in school. Various forms of child abuse at home and school and lack of a school dropout prevention policy, also contribute to the dropping out of pupils from school.

State of continuing education

The Department of Continuing Education was established partly to address problems of school dropouts (Ministry of Education, 1977). This department coordinates and supervises the running of literacy, adult, extension, correspondence, radio and television programmes. Although school dropouts are increasing year after year, enrolments in continuing education declined from 80,000 in the past to 19,000 in the 1980s (Ministry of General Education and Culture, 1985). According to Plank et al. (1991), the problem of school dropouts had worsened and the need for continuing education was now greater than ever. However, the provision of continuing education in Zambia faced many problems including:

- **Funding:** Since its establishment in 1979, the Department of Continuing Education has been allocated only 55 percent of the total education expenditure per year or less (Kelly, 1986). This poor financing adversely affects its activities and operations.
- **Staffing:** Because of poor funding, the Department is unable to attract and retain suitably qualified teachers for its programmes.
- **Materials:** The programmes are short of teaching and learning materials due to inadequate funding.
- **Coordination:** The programmes are poorly administered and coordinated by part-time staff.

- **Subjects:** It is not possible to study most practical, technical and science subjects through the programmes offered, due to a lack of laboratory kits, recommended textbooks, equipment and so on.
- **Fatigue:** Most of the learners embark on studies after the day's normal work load. As a result, learning is ineffective.
- **Environment:** Most learners live in places that are not conducive to study (such as crowded homes and neighbourhoods, no electricity, loud noises and so on).
- **Duration:** It takes longer to complete a programme of study.
- **Publicity:** Because of poor dissemination of information about the Department's programmes, most potential learners are unaware of the existence of these programmes.
- **Cost:** Most of the learners are young unemployed youth who can hardly meet the high price of textbooks, examination fees, and other expenses.
- **Status:** Learners are accorded a low status by society. For example, they are labelled as "second-chance" fellows. Or they carry the stigma of "repeater".
- **Employability:** Not many employers are enthusiastic about hiring someone who completed a course of study by unconventional means.
- **Attitudes:** Taking into consideration the problems mentioned above, it is quite likely that dropouts may have a negative attitude towards continuing education.

Self-employment and self-reliance possibilities

Research studies (Kelly, 1986; Sifuna, 1986) indicate that mere vocationalization of the primary and secondary school curriculum does not

improve the employability of dropouts and school leavers. One alternative for these young people is to engage in productive self-employment that can make them self-reliant. This is not easily achieved either, unless schools help them develop appropriate affective and cognitive skills such as initiative, self-motivation, resourcefulness, creativity, effort, persistence, and perseverance (Raven, 1988). In a declining economy like Zambia's where there are only a few jobs in industry and government service while the population is increasing rapidly, notions of self-employment and self-reliance cannot be over emphasised. The school curriculum should impart these notions and constantly evaluate students' attitudes toward them. Self-employment and self-reliance would be good ways of minimising unemployment, crime, prostitution and delinquency among young people.

Conclusion and recommendations

Secondary level education in Zambia has a real wastage problem which needs to be addressed urgently before it grows too large to handle. Some of the measures already in place include the establishment of girls' schools and the introduction of lower cut-off points in the selection of girls. These strategies are inadequate because the dropout rate is still higher for girls than boys. The country may wish to consider the feasibility of readmitting young mothers. A quota system might assist to maintain a balance between enrolled males and females in schools. Affirmative action laws need to be enforced to educate all persons, especially women, about their civil rights to education. All forms of education and training should be free from all types of discrimination based on gender. More significantly the country needs to have a dropout prevention policy. Finally, the non-formal education sector should be revamped and improved greatly. A needs assessment survey should be conducted to determine the kind of skills dropouts require if they are to function productively and meaningfully in society.

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