

# The Status of the Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires Project in Mauritius and its Challenges



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the Zones d'Education Prioritaire Project  
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# Abstract

This paper describes the Zones d'Education Prioritaire (ZEP) / Education Priority Zone project as being an important government initiative to structure efforts to bring more resources to those primary schools which are found in the deprived regions of the country. The project goal is to increase the percentage pass rate of those underachieving pupils in the ZEP schools through socio-pedagogical actions undertaken at the level of the schools. The ZEP strategy is here discussed in Mauritius in the backdrop of the realities of its primary education sub sector. Its strengths and weaknesses are also outlined with a view to bring attention on features of the project that could be improved so that it may still deliver on its promises. The challenges that the project pose in its nearly 10 years of existence are highlighted by putting emphasis on the fact that the success of the pedagogical aspects of the project is dependent on the teachers as the main agents of change. Attempts entertained by the ministry to train the teachers to enhance their teaching in the ZEP scenario have been described. Proposals at the level of policy have also been made in view to reinforce capacity to better equip the ZEP initiative with the right human resource to improve the project deliverables. The significance of this paper is to broaden the perspective of the community of practitioners operating in the promotion of inclusive education to help fight social exclusion and poverty through socio-pedagogical projects as is the case with the ZEP.

**Keywords:** Zone d'Education Prioritaire (ZEP)/ Education priority Zones, Primary schools, underachievement, In-service training, deprived areas

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# 1.0 The context of the ZEP project in Mauritius

The Republic of Mauritius is an island nation in the Indian Ocean about 2,000 kilometres off the south east coast of the African continent. Politics in Mauritius takes place in a framework of a parliamentary representative democratic republic. The country includes the islands of Agaléga, Saint Brandon and Rodrigues. The area of the country is 2040 km<sup>2</sup> having Port Louis as its capital city. The population estimate (as of 1 July 2012) for the whole Republic is 1,291,456. Considered part of Africa geographically, Mauritius is a friendly country and it entertains good relations with the great nations of the world. Mauritius's real GDP growth rate remains strong although it is estimated to have moderate growth at 4.0% in 2012 as the euro area, the country's main export destination, falls into another recession.

For the year 2011, government expenditure on education was estimated at about \$ 378 million (USD), representing 12.5% of total expenditure and out of which about a third goes towards financing the primary education sub sector. The education system in Mauritius consists of pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary sub-sectors. The structure comprise 3 years of pre-primary school, 6 years of primary schooling leading to the Certificate of Primary Education, followed by 5 years of secondary education leading to the School Certificate and a further 2 years of higher secondary ending with the Higher School Certificate. Education is compulsory up to the age of 16 years and is free for the primary and secondary students while it is heavily subsidised for the university students. All students including those at tertiary level benefit from free bus transport. As a part of the welfare policy of the government, pupils at the primary schools benefit from free text books.

Primary schools cater for children aged 5 to 11 years old enrolling pupils in standard I up to Standard VI where the primary education cycle ends with the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examinations. The latter is a cut throat national competitive examination to admit the brightest pupils in the National colleges while the rest

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will be directed to regional colleges. Over the past 3 years the overall percentage pass rate at the CPE examination is around 68%. Those who do not succeed at the CPE are admitted in the Pre-Vocational streams at secondary school. Admission to the primary school is done on a regional basis and to this date, some 305 primary schools are operated across the island to cater for 116,068 pupils who are under the care of 5,701 teachers. The pupil/teacher ratio is 27 on average. It can be said that Mauritius has attained universal primary education with a Gross enrolment rate of 100% and a gender parity index of 1 (Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2011 – Education statistics 2011).

At policy level, the education sector in Mauritius is under reforms and the strategy seems to be guided by the Education and Human Resource Strategy Plan (2008 – 2020) wherein mention was made that the inefficiencies of the current education system in Mauritius are the still relatively high percentage of students failing and/or repeating the CPE and an alarming attrition rate of young children turning out to be barely numerate and literate... The Overall Goal of the Ministry for primary education is to sustain equitable access to quality education, ensuring that all learners attain high levels of achievement in Literacy, Numeracy, Information and Communications Technology and essential Life Skills as the basis for both personal development and lifelong learning. (Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2009).

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## 2.0 Background information about the Zone d'Education Prioritaire in Mauritius

The ZEP project which was conceptualised into a strategy document dedicates a special unit called the ZEP Unit at the Ministry of Education to man the reforms in those 30 selected primary schools whose percentage pass rate were continuously under 40% prior to 2003. The latter has been the only criteria for the selection of schools in the ZEP category assuming that there is a direct and strong correlation between the academic performance of the pupils and the poor socio economic indicators of their families (Kulpoo & Soonarane, 2003).

The mandate of the ZEP Unit under the headship of a Project Manager is to see to it that decisions and actions are fast tracked to address emerging urgent issues, plan and implement actions in the best interest of the pupils. As at to date, the ZEP project concerns some 8,139 primary school pupils (as at 2012) representing around 8% of the total primary school enrolment which presently stands at 116,068. Government annual expenditure on the ZEP Project for the year 2012 stands at some \$1million (USD) representing 0.3% of the Ministry of Education annual budgetary expenditure. The government has just approved the free provision of a hot meal for the pupils in the ZEP school for the year 2013 at the rate of an annual expenditure of \$3.6 million (USD). Presently some 350 teachers representing 10% of the teaching workforce in the primary sub-sector are posted in the ZEP schools and they are directly accountable to their Head Masters. A 'responsibility allowance' is paid to the administrative, teaching and non-teaching staff of the ZEP schools as a means to recognise and value the additional efforts that they put in their work. It can be said that the ZEP project also caters for about 7000 families whose socio economic conditions are less than average in the country. The latter statement is to be correlated with the fact that on average only 16.15% of the parents in the ZEP schools completed high school education and 33.3 % of ZEP pupils' parents earning less than \$100 (USD) per month



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(The Indian Ocean Child Rights Observatory, 2008). However, it has been noted over the years that the enrolment of pupils in the ZEP schools is on the decrease. From about 10,000 pupils at the beginning of 2003, there has been an attrition of 18.6% to today's pupils' enrolment rate. The direct implication if such a situation is a lower of pupil/teacher ratio in the ZEP school to 25. Despite the additional efforts put in by government in the ZEP sector, the CPE pass rate is stagnating at a deceptively low average of 36 %. Few schools have shown a noticeable improvement with one nearly equalling the national average.

## 2.1 The rationale for the setup of the ZEP project in Mauritius

The Zones d'Education Prioritaires (ZEP) project is a revised initiative of past attempts by the Mauritian government to cater for the underachieving schools in Mauritius (Viz. the 'Project schools' and the 'Special Schools Project' in 1992 cited in Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2002). However, it was noticed that the schools which were targeted would not improve if the management of their additional needs was carried out with the same bureaucratic red tape that often characterise public sector administration. At the same time, a serious attempt at linking the school with the home environment of the pupils was felt critical to seek for greater parental responsibility. In response to the above, the ZEP Project was launched in Mauritius in July 2003 following the approval of its strategy document by the Government.

The ZEP ('Zones d'Education Prioritaires' / Priority Education Zones) Project is therefore a structured response to the continued high academic failure of some 30 primary schools found in the deprived regions of the country where 27 schools are in the main island, 2 in Agalega and 1 in Rodrigues (Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2002). The Zones d'Education Prioritaires (ZEP) project in Mauritius has been implemented in response to achieving the Education For All (EFA) goals by 2015 (UNESCO (2000), Dakar Framework for Action, Education For All) by giving more resources to the pupils found in the disadvantaged schools of the country.

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A brief overview of the pupils' status in ZEP schools would indicate that it is common feature for a teacher in a ZEP school to be faced with a class where the daily rate of absenteeism is at least 10% and where 22% of students live in poverty as many of them lack basic food, shelter, and health care. The above figures cry out for the Government's actions to protect the Rights of the Children of the Republic (United Nations, Child Rights Convention, 1990). In particular Article 3 and Article 19 of the Convention emphasise the responsibilities of the state parties to ensure care and protection of the children and initiate actions to prevent neglect or negligent treatment of the children.

The application of the Children Rights Convention and adopting the guidelines for achieving the EFA Goals by 2015 make of the implementation of the ZEP project in the educational landscape of Mauritius a guarantee for the state to meet the Millennium Development Goals 1 and 2 of the United Nations. On the one hand as universal primary education is achieved and sustained, on the other hand, government fight social exclusion and eradicate absolute poverty through the National education system. ZEP proposes not only to have local actions in the primary school but also proposed to train parents and enrol the participation of local communities in the concerted efforts to provide education to the children.

It is here argued that the ZEP project strategy development some 10 years back has been *avant gardiste* of the Education First Initiative of the UN General Secretary where the 3 pillars of its success are (i) Put every child in school (ii) Ensure quality of learning (iii) foster global citizenship . The ZEP project proposes to accomplish these goals by its deployment as school based level. The ZEP strategy of the Mauritian Government bases itself on sound and strong premises so that it becomes critical to ensure the safe and healthy development of ALL the children of the Republic before one can think of empowering them.

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## 2.2 The management structure of the ZEP initiative

Policy decisions concerning the welfare of the ZEP project are taken by a ZEP Council which is under the direct chairmanship of the Minister of Education. The ZEP Council members comprise a plethora of professionals coming from the public (including the high officials from the Ministry of Education), private/business and Non State sectors (such as respected individuals or Non-Governmental Organisations from the civilian society who have a track record to work for the welfare of the needy).

The ZEP schools are managed under the operative guidelines of the ZEP Unit but considerations are given to the specificities of the schools and the implementation of the directives is done at the school level by the head master. The latter is assisted by an enlarged team of partners coming from the public, private and non-state sectors. This team of resource persons sits in a School Development Unit committee to help the Head Master to better care for the welfare of the students. Hence, it can be argued that the ZEP Project is sensitive to a bottom-up approach as recommendations from the Head Master are given due consideration before critical decisions are taken. The Head Master plans his school's obligations in a School Development Plan and constitutes the working document to drive initiatives with the help of the ZEP Unit and the Local Education Authority. Hence the Head Master oversee progress of work concerning 4 aspects, namely: (i) the school infrastructure, (ii) the pedagogical undertaking which favours an inclusive approach, (iii) a food and health programme for the pupils and (iv) a welfare programme where part time officers accompany the parents of those children who are in distress.

## 2.3 The unique features of the ZEP project

The ZEP project has been designed to fight the root cause of the pupils' academic failure and in its elaboration, the primary education sector witnessed an unprecedented effort deployed at the level of the ZEP schools. In the context of the project, new features and practices have therefore been deployed only in the ZEP schools. Those

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aspects which have been institutionalised and which are not to be found in any other primary schools in Mauritius are described below.

***(a) The ZEP project at the school demands for a collective effort from the community***

The ZEP project defines the school under its aegis within its environment and aims at mobilising all the resources within the locality within which it is found to contribute in raising the standard of achievement of the school. This will mean empowering Head Teachers and his/her team, crafting a shared vision and mission and implementing a school development plan with all the other key players in education, that is, the parents, the community-based associations, NGOs, and business organisations.

***(b) Compensating the environment constraints of the children***

The ZEP schools being located in deprived areas of the country comprise families where children are not well catered for all their needs. Considering the constraints within the child's environment, the ZEP schools:

- Promote the integration of early childhood development programmes: From Nursery to Pre-School to Primary School. Hence all the ZEP schools as at to date have a pre-primary unit attached to it to encourage early acquisition of learning competencies and therefore primary pupils in the deprived areas do not start their schooling with a deficit.
- Has introduced a Health and Nutrition programme have been implemented in all ZEP schools within 6 months of its launching. Every child in a ZEP School has a Health Card and medical practitioners recruited by the School Development Unit carry out the '3 earlies', that is, early screening, early diagnosis and early referral action of children detected with health impairment. In parallel, a daily supplementary meal is offered to the pupils of the ZEP schools.

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- Caters for a social welfare programme with the help of the private sector which sponsors the recruitment of a social worker who reports to the School Development Unit through its employer concerning the accompaniment of parents of those pupils who are in distress.

### *(c) A strategy based on partnership around the school*

Basing itself on an inclusive approach, the ZEP concept aims at improving the school standards which it deserves. In order to obtain tangible results, the school should not be left alone while facing its challenges. Partnership of schools with the business sector, local communities, NGOs and parents are the main means to help deliver the much-needed improvements in the educational experience of the pupils. These agents of change work closely with the Head Master in the School Development Unit at the level of the school. A Memorandum of Understanding has also been signed between the Ministry of Education and The Mauritius Chamber of Commerce where the main aim is to avail of each ZEP school the opportunity to work with a Business Sector Partner along the lines of Management of Objectives while implementing the School Development Plan. The latter initiative is still on-going and a representative of the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce is a member of the ZEP Council to help formulate policy decision concerning the welfare of the ZEP project.

In 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding was also signed between the Ministry of Education & the United Nation Development Programme, UNDP (Mauritius) where funds were committed to tackle the issue of underachievement of pupils in the ZEP primary schools. The funds were used to provide In-service training to the ZEP school teachers as well as to retain the services of a ZEP project consultant to help implement the understanding of the agreement between the Ministry of Education & UNDP (Mauritius). After 7 years, UNDP (Mauritius) is still supporting the ZEP initiative in Mauritius along the same initial guidelines.

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### *(d) Building capacity at school level through the right kind of human resource*

The ZEP project strategy document advocates that the ZEP initiative depends heavily on the commitment of human resource as its critical success factor. Indeed, at each corner stone of the improvement efforts, there lies a strong dependency of the project on human capital. From the government side, the institution of the ZEP Unit and its officers monitor the implementation of the ZEP project and help coordinate actions to inform policy at the level of the ZEP Council. At the level of the school, a plethora of professionals team up to deliver services to help broaden the circle of opportunities of the pupils. Hence servicing the cause of the project, the following professionals team up around the head teacher: the school psychologist, the social worker, the medical practionners, the school inspector, officers of the ZEP Unit, the private sector representative, the parents and the class teacher. Each of these professionals delivers along a chain service where each link is vital to the success of the initiative. However, the strongest link remain the class teachers who are at the fore front caring, protecting and helping the pupil to make the right meaning of his/her world.

## **2.4 Outlook of the ZEP project in Mauritius: what it wants to achieve.**

The prime objective of the ZEP project was to invest more resources at the level of the underachieving schools so that the children found there are given a better chance to perform in the examinations. Besides aiming at increasing the pass rate of these schools at the Certificate of Primary Examinations (CPE) and achieving universal primary education, the ZEP has structured itself to fulfil other objectives which are here explained.

### *(a) Eliminating inequalities in the primary education sub sector*

The philosophy of the 'Zones d'Education Prioritaires' (ZEP) is based on the premise that positive reinforcement is required to create favourable learning conditions for

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children living mostly in the less developed regions. This approach aims to reduce school inequalities and in a broader perspective, to combat social inequalities by providing equal opportunities to all primary school children of the Republic of Mauritius. Giving more resources at where the disadvantaged schools are to be found is a means to create more access to those children who have additional needs. Hence along these lines, the ZEP project is regarded as an innovative approach in the primary sub sector in Mauritius to ensure equity of access to all the children of the Republic.

### ***(b) Creating parity of esteems for all schools in the country***

The ZEP schools have been given a special attention. The school infrastructure has been enhanced and with the help of the special support programmes, the children are valued as their parents are invited to participate more in the school life of their children. All these efforts are geared to bring good repute to the ZEP schools through initiatives that increase their visibility. It is hoped that ZEP schools are viewed as being schools where innovations prime. Arguably, the creation of the ZEP schools brings along a parity of esteem of ZEP schools to all the other schools of the Republic as no child is left behind.

### ***(c) Fighting poverty and social exclusion through the National education system.***

The Zones d'Education Prioritaires project in Mauritius has also been cited as a model in the fight against social exclusion by enlarging access to education (Ramlugun, 2009). It is here argued that there is no best way to fight social exclusion than to empower people with education. Indeed, acting earlier to forestall a social problem, rather than waiting and then coping with its consequences, is likely to be cheaper in the long term, as well as better for those involved. Hence an initiative in the form of the ZEP helps government to ensure that actions are deployed as early as possible to help break the vicious circle of poverty brought about by social exclusion following illiteracy.

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### ***(d) Presenting a new model of schools' deliverables based on a partnership approach***

The ZEP schools have been created to reduce academic failure through a socio pedagogical approach. However, the ZEP project philosophy is not limited to the underachieving schools. Instead, the strategy of operation adopted by a ZEP school to bring additional resources at the level of the school can be practised by any other school. Hence, in presenting the *modus operandi* to implement additional programme for the benefit of the student, the ZEP strategy emerge as being a new model for the operation of school. More authority is invested in the head of schools to enable an onsite model of school management. A self- managing school can have greater legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders as they team around an empowered head of school as s/he opens the doors of the school to partners to help the school succeed in its mission.

### ***(e) Strengthening the human capital through training***

In the deployment of the project at national level, a series of training programme have been devised for those who are in charge of the project at the level of the school. Hence Head Masters have been called for training on management of the programmes and to align work process flows along those of the ZEP Unit. At the same time, teachers have been called under In-service programmes to develop capacity to better be attentive to the needs of those children found in the deprived areas. Such training programmes have been carried out by outsourced professionals from the private sector, international agencies and from the Mauritius Institute of Education. Hence in the change process, policy has made sure that the main agents of change are made aware of the requirements; create a justification and a desire for the change as well as passing on the knowledge of how to make the change. Capacity building has therefore been tackled at the grass root level.



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## 3.0 Focus on teachers as a critical success factor in the ZEP strategic initiative

Dakar Framework for Action, (2000) highlighted the role of teachers as being essential players in promoting quality education, whether in schools or in more flexible community-based programmes. At the fore front of delivering education to the children, teachers are truly advocates for change and they incarnate the essential catalysts for it to happen. Indeed, no education reform agenda is likely to succeed without the active participation and ownership of teachers.

The ZEP strategy has likewise publicly advertised that it has at its core the human resource factor as critical determinant for the success of its implementation. Teachers have been given the free choice to be posted in the ZEP schools in a way to ensure that the element of commitment will prevail. However, only 36.8% of the ZEP teacher population have opted freely to work in the ZEP schools and the rest (63.2%) was posted there by administrative convenience.

Undoubtedly it takes much for a teacher to teach students in the ZEP schools as already the home situation of many are simply not conducive for pedagogical follow up to ensure the overall development of the children. In this situation, teachers more than ever are called to be child centred and to understand the child as a learner, the spirit of every child and find a way to nurture that spirit (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teachers imperatively need the skills to construct and manage classroom activities efficiently, communicate well, use technology, and reflect on their practice to learn from and improve it continually. The importance of powerful teaching is increasingly important in contemporary society - teachers' abilities are especially crucial contributors to students' learning.

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The call for the active engagement of teachers goes far beyond their roles in the classrooms. The urgent and pressing needs for them to deliver adequately as in the ZEP schools scenario also means that teachers as educators must take up the charge of educating policy makers and the public about what it actually takes to teach effectively in today's world both in terms of the knowledge and skills that are needed and in terms of the school contexts that must be created to allow teachers to develop and use what they know on behalf of students (Fullan, 1993).

## **4.0 Investment in capacity building of Head Masters and teachers in the ZEP sector**

The ZEP strategy of the Ministry of Education places a high emphasis on the project as being inclusive in nature so that no child is left behind from a perspective that every child matters. The Tomlinson Report (2004) reaffirms the belief that learning can only be fully effective if it is inclusive. Booth and Ainscow (2000) discusses the concept of inclusion in education as being concerned with breaking down barriers to learning and increasing participation for all students, treating all learners on the basis of equality and non-discrimination. Hence actors in the ZEP scenario need to be aware of what is to be done and build competence in view to live the fundamentals of the process of making their school truly an inclusive one.

In the wake of the ZEP project launching in 2002, the Ministry of Education organised a workshop with the Head Masters of the ZEP schools to critically examine their 'taken-for-granted' processes and procedures in order to identify the barriers towards the implementation of an inclusive socio-pedagogical policy which befits the nature of the project. It was then observed that changes to the practices, processes and structure of the ZEP school administration are not merely accommodations to involve a specific category of pupils, but are changes to unlock and engage the

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intellectual resources that this extra participation represents and harness potential to include all children in the process of growth. Not only is education and training required to meet the higher demands in terms of learners achievement, but the ZEP schools were also required to improve levels of learner engagement in education. As stated by Booth and Ainscow (2002) inclusion is also about making schools supportive and stimulating places for staff as well as students. It is about building communities which encourage and celebrate achievements of the pupils.

Hence the attempts to train the personnel of the ZEP to give them confidence to change the school routines and evolve processes to better address and respond to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. The strategy befits UNESCO's (2005) principle of inclusion which involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children"

In July 2005, the government in Mauritius changed and a new minister of education was appointed. Nonetheless the need of the ZEP project was felt. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the Ministry and the United Nation Development Programme in Mauritius where capacity building programmes for the ZEP School teachers were institutionalised with the support of the Mauritius Institute of Education. Amongst all initiatives 3 major ventures of teacher development programme in the ZEP sector are discussed hereunder.

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## 4.1 Details of the organisation of the in-service training for teachers of the ZEP schools

Since 2003, meetings and working sessions were carried out with the teachers of the ZEP schools at the site of the schools by the Project Manager and officers of the ZEP Unit, mainly to create awareness around the advent of the ZEP project and to convey the expectations of the initiative. At the same time the teething problems of the project implementation were addressed and solutions found as the schools learnt to open up their barriers to the parents and to the community. Such meetings were carried out during working hours at the school and were done in a way that did not hamper the running of the school. Either replacement of the teacher participant was arranged by the Head Master or officers of the ZEP (parent mediators) will be supporting the Head Masters to replace the classes. Private agencies operating in the sector of education such as *OMEPE* (Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Préscolaire/ World Organisation for Early Childhood Education) or 'Craft Academy' a Non- Governmental Organisation also helped to foster the momentum aimed to bring the know-how to motivate the school personnel in alternative ways to cater for the pupils.

However, the Ministry's endeavour to formally train the teachers of the ZEP schools came with the support of the United Nation Development Programme (Mauritius) as from 2005 where the latter funded the capacity building programmes of the ZEP Unit for its personnel including the teachers. The 3 major capacity building programmes sponsored by the UNDP (Mauritius)/ UNESCO are recapped in the table below.

	Training initiative	Year/ duration of training	Approved organisation to deliver training	Main objective	Participants	Mode of training
1	INSET (Acronym for In-Service Training)	2006 (1 year with a twice a week contact time with trainers)	Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) <sup>1</sup> and University of Brighton, UK	Renewal of the school curriculum to address the additional needs of the ZEP pupils	28 Teachers of Standard IV, 27 Head Masters 4 Pedagogical Inspectors	Off the school at the MIE
2	Teacher diagnostic approach – ZEP workshop	2008 (1 week training of 27 ZEP schools and 23 additional non ZEP low performing schools)	International Reading Association (IRA), Cape Town South Africa	Effective instructions and assessments in classrooms: educational strategies to provide students with opportunities to gather information, communicate, cooperate, problem solve, and use critical thinking	Trainers comprising: 4 remedial education teacher, 6 pedagogical inspectors and 10 teacher/ researcher from the MIE	Off the school at the MIE
3	Capacity building of ZEP school teachers	2009 – till date (continuous as per agreement with Head Masters & teachers)	Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE)	Tackling underachievement through literacy	Teachers of ZEP schools all over the main island (Teachers of Standard I – Standard V)	School based

Table 1: recap of the major capacity building programmes conducted for teachers in ZEP schools

***(a) Planned sequential steps to ensure systemic alignment with the capacity building programme.***

The capacity building programmes were planned in the first place to involve Pedagogical Inspectors, Head Masters and Standard IV teachers on themes concerning aspects of discounting a time bound curriculum and focusing on the additional needs of the pupils. Possibilities of looking at alternative ways of teaching pupils were also explored while addressing the renewal of the school curriculum in

1 The Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) is a training institution established by an Act of Parliament (1973) to provide facilities and to engage in educational research, curriculum development and teacher education and thereby to promote the advancement of learning and knowledge in the field of education and, in particular, to provide a teacher education responsive to the social, economic, linguistic, administrative, scientific, agricultural and technological needs of Mauritius.

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the ZEP schools. The University of Brighton, UK was associated with the initiative through its resource person.

The International Reading Association provided a training of trainers' course on notions of differentiated teaching for effective instructions in class situation. The training aimed at having a multiplier effect as the trainers would carry out on site training with a larger audience at the site of the ZEP schools.

As from 2009, MIE took over the capacity building of teachers in ZEP schools through a systematic manner taking on board all the 10 trainers who followed the International Reading Association programme. The capacity building of teachers takes the form of an accompaniment of teachers in classroom situation at the site of the ZEP schools. The programme is currently on-going.

### ***(b) The participants in the capacity building programmes***

Teacher participants who called at the In-service training initiatives were those who were already in employment and who were already in post in the ZEP schools. While pre-service student- teachers were trained at the Mauritius Institute of Education on this important government policy; those already in the ZEP schools were mandated to follow the training courses.

Standard IV teachers of the ZEP schools were selected as most of the time they were the same teachers who would be teaching the students up to Standard VI. The primary education sector prior to 2006 was viewed to consist of 2 main cycle which were Standard I - Standard III in the first and Standard IV - Standard VI in the second (Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2001). Teacher participants at the start of the second cycle were deemed to secure the return on investment as additionally the policy on the posting of teachers in ZEP schools was of 6 years duration.

Only few teachers were selected so as not to hamper the smooth running of the schools. Replacement of those teachers in training at the rate of twice a week were

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replaced by colleague teachers at the level of the school or arrangements were made by the Head Masters to have the class do activities with the officers of the ZEP schools.

### ***(c) Contents of the 3 main capacity building programmes entertained since 2006***

#### **The 2006 INSET initiative by the MIE supported by University of Brighton UK**

The main themes of the initiative were the renewal of the school based curriculum in the ZEP schools and the latter was based on the following themes:

- i. Young child development, care and protection with parental involvement programmes re-visited
- ii. Elaboration of new pedagogical approaches towards inclusive pedagogies
- iii. Development of pedagogical support materials
- iv. Monitoring and evaluation of teacher and school progress
- v. Initiating action research programmes- documenting the progress

#### **The 'Project ZEP Workshops' by the International Reading Association (IRA), 2008**

Based on strategies to evolve effective instructional strategies in classroom teaching and assessment, the International Reading Association provided capacity building to trainers on the following themes:

- i. Knowledge to use a professional development approach to help workshop facilitators increase participants' instructional practices in basic literacy and the content subject areas.
- ii. Strategies and activities that are consistent with the National Curriculum Framework (English).

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- iii. Supports which will help them to teach more effectively by using simple materials. Classroom assessment strategies are included throughout the Guide in order to assist teachers in conducting on-going assessment.
  - iv. Provide activity-based methods of teaching with both interdisciplinary and single-subject approaches.
  - v. Opportunities for participants to enhance their own knowledge of effective literacy practices.

Literacy was given a special attention as it would seem that pupils often fail in elementary numeracy as they probably could not understand the instructions which are laid out in English language. Language was the issue and had to be tackled. The MIE took over the approved initiative of the IRA till date.

### **‘Tackling underachievement through literacy’ by the MIE (On going)**

This effort of the MIE was strengthened after the IRA workshop in 2008. The endeavour of the MIE is now to follow on the training provided by IRA and be responsible to give a regular support to all the ZEP schools through on site-school mentoring and coaching to teachers in class situations. 6,200 primary school pupils are presently involved in the capacity building programme and 216 teachers are directly concerned with it. To achieve its aim of enhancing the literacy skills of the pupils of ZEP primary schools, the MIE has set up a support system for the teachers as well as for the pupils of all ZEP schools in the island. The support system consists of the following:

- i. Facilitators with a long experience of teaching in the primary schools, as well as lecturers from the MIE give pedagogical support in the classroom to teachers in each school on a fortnightly basis.
- ii. Regular workshops are organised by the MIE, with the help of the ZEP Unit of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources. During these workshops, all the teachers of standard I to V of the ZEP schools are trained, at least three times a year.



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- iii. Teachers's guide for each unit in the English text book as well as occasional model lesson plans.
  - iv. Hand-outs on different issues related to the teaching of literacy in primary schools.
  - v. Worksheets for pupils are regularly prepared and distributed. These worksheets are based on the prescribed textbook, with exercises to help to develop further the literacy skills of pupils.

Regular evaluation of the pupils through a combination of both summative and formative assessments is carried out to check upon their progress. The implementation of this project is made possible through the collaboration of the various stakeholders that is the MIE facilitators, the teachers, the head masters of the different schools, the cluster coordinators of ZEP unit as well as the primary school inspectors.

#### ***(d) Expected outcomes of the capacity building programmes for the ZEP sector***

The teachers are an essential part of a much wider set of conditions necessary to bring about real change in terms of enhancing and sustaining the overall experience of education and learning for all the pupils. In the context of the renewal of a school based curriculum for the ZEP school, the capacity building programmes entertained harboured the following expectations:

#### **Teachers' care for the children**

- i. Understand children within social, cultural and political contexts;
- ii. View learning as a search for meaning out of personal experience;
- iii. Understand the way learning occurs, possible ways of creating conducive conditions for learning, differences among pupils in respect of the kind, pace and styles of learning.
- iv. Improve students' ability to read, write, think critically, and to successfully complete other tasks effectively in language and content areas;

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## Teachers' classroom practice

- i. Teachers were expected to exhibit a conscious and visible commitment to fostering and promoting inclusive values in all aspects of life. Therefore values and processes involved in pedagogy were considered and these were measured against the principles of inclusion.
- ii. To encourage teachers to approach learning and teaching by using sound educational practices.
- iii. Develop lesson plans which include instructional class materials, artefacts and kits which will enhance pupils' interaction
- iv. Develop, adapt, and apply a set of easy-to-use techniques for monitoring students' literacy development;
- v. Develop an understanding of the connection between instruction and assessment;

## Teachers' reflective practices and professional development

- i. Develop a process of reflection in order to understand literacy and the effectiveness as literacy teachers;
- ii. Develop an understanding of the process of literacy development;
- iii. Effectively bring together knowledge from current theoretical thinking, discourses of learning differences to improve their own professional practice;
- iv. Develop teachers' own knowledge of cognitive thinking processes;
- v. Engage in collaborative learning through peer learning, graded assessment of problem complexity using scaffolding methodology and online discussion activities with the use of media materials;
- vi. Develop professional and personal skills for lifelong learning, such as critical analysis, reflection, action planning and evaluation;

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- vii. To create a learning environment where classroom teachers, resource personnel, and other interested practitioners can meet and share information, and encourage continued communication and support for improving education for the pupils attending the ZEP-designated schools.

***(e) The evaluation of the training programmes given to reinforce capacity around the ZEP initiative***

With the expected outcomes of the training programmes clearly spelt out, meaningful changes in teachers' behaviour, classroom practices and students' academic results were expected to be evident. The dimensions of the training effectiveness that were provided to the ZEP personnel were expected to source from:

- i. Reports on the submissions of assignments by teachers involved in the capacity building programme. Equally acceptable would be reports from trainers conducting the training sessions;
- ii. The interest of teachers in the training sessions carried out and the relevance of the training modules to the training gap felt on the field in classroom situations;
- iii. Noticeable changes of behaviour and teachers consideration for the pupils in class situations;
- iv. Ability to use the newly acquired methods with pupils in class ;
- v. Noticeable changes in classroom practice to improve teaching-learning interaction during classroom observations;
- vi. Motivation level as witnessed by strong commitment of teachers to be at school. A survey of teacher attendance at school could be a good indicator as well as rate of turnover of teachers at the time of transfer exercise ;
- vii. Positive feedback comments from teachers during surveys and interview
- viii. Collaboration of teachers with Head Master to participate in school activities aimed at welcoming parents and other stakeholders at school.

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However, a documentary search reveals that there is no evidence of any official paper drafted to report on the evaluation of the capacity building programme funded by the UNDP (Mauritius)/UNESCO to inform policy decision. Coupled with this fact, it has been reported that school visits by pedagogical inspectors at the level of the ZEP schools were not regular (ODEROI, Indian Ocean Child Rights Observatory, 2005). The same visits made by the pedagogical inspectors also did not meet the objectives set/ expectations of the Head Masters. Despite attempts to bring cohesion and alignment of the technical cadre of the Ministry to support to the ZEP initiative, it was noted that more efforts would still be needed in this direction.

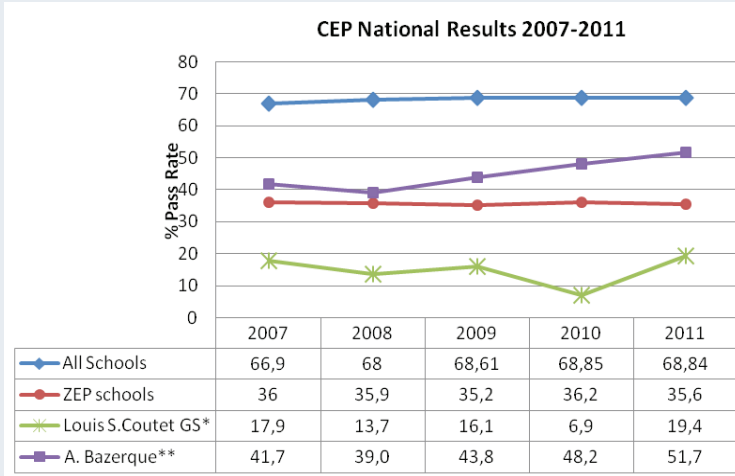
## **5.0 Impact of the ZEP initiative in the primary education sub sector of Mauritius**

### **5.1 Academic results of the pupils at the Certificate Primary Education**

Based on facts and figures from the yearly reports of the Mauritius Examination Syndicate<sup>1</sup>, it is evident that the low performances of the ZEP schools continue to be a recurrent feature. The academic pass rate of the ZEP schools seems to have plateaued around 35% for the past five years. The trend is shown in Figure 1.

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1 The Mauritius Examinations Syndicate is a body corporate and was set up by an act of parliament (1984) to organise and conduct examinations consistent with national policies and goals and in line with emerging international trends. It is also a certificate awarding body. The MES ensures that its examinations are valid and reliable and that standards are maintained in view of international recognition.



\*Louis S. Coutet is a ZEP school case there underperformance is most critical

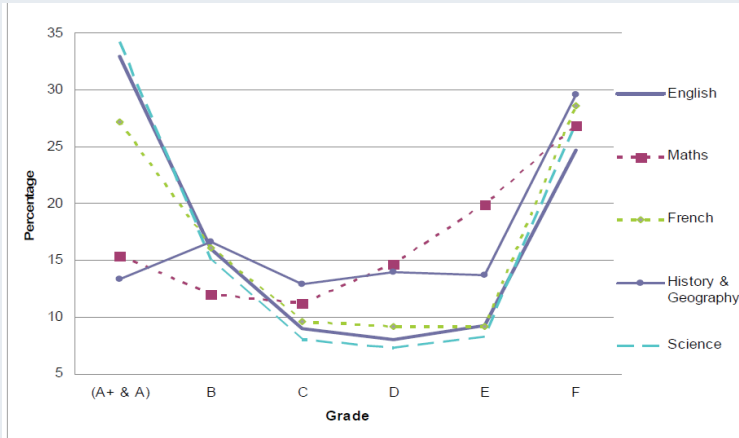
\*\*A. Bazerque is a ZEP school where underperformance is average amongst ZEP schools

Figure 1: Comparative results at National level and the ZEP schools

(source: Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, 2011)

Despite all efforts made by the government since the past 10 years that the ZEP project has been launched, it would seem that most of the ZEP schools are still lagging behind. All initiatives undertaken to fight the environmental constraints of the child coming from a disadvantaged region are taking too much time than expected to yield results.

When the academic results of the ZEP schools are matched with those at national level, a dreadful pattern is seen. The “U-shaped” curve indicates that the National Educational system in the sub primary sector has developed into a two-track system and is drawing attention to an appalling phenomenon, that of the creation of an important inequity in learning pupil achievement.



Source: Adapted from ADEA-WGESA (2007) The Peer Review Report on Educational Reforms in Mauritius, 2000-2005.

Figure 2: The U-Shaped statistical curve of primary school pupils' performance (source: Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2009: pp 28)

The upper rising curve on the right of the curve representing the failure rates includes the 65% of students in the ZEP schools who each year fail their examinations. Clearly, the academic performance in the ZEP schools remains a major concern and the root cause of failure of pupils still remains elusive to governmental efforts.

The solution to this problem probably lies in addressing the weaknesses of the ZEP initiative in Mauritius. Though well designed, there may still be staunch systemic weaknesses which are adamant to flaw the process flow and preventing the ZEP initiative to keep afloat.

## 5.2 Improvement in absenteeism rate of pupils and parental engagement in schooling

At the start of the project in 2003, the rate of absenteeism in the ZEP schools was as high as 20%. The situation in those schools was characterised by parent disaffection in the schooling of their children. 10 years later, school absenteeism has been reduced

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by half due to concerted efforts of the school, the community and the stakeholders to bring awareness in the importance of education for life.

The socio pedagogical nature of the ZEP project has been effective in calling for parental responsibility. The work achieved by part time officers of the ZEP Unit to hand shake with parents is commendable and the effects generated are synergistic to the efforts made by social workers, Non-Governmental Organisations, Community Based Organisations as well as socio-religious organisations like the church and the parish.

### **5.3 ZEP project emerging as a model for other primary schools in the country**

The approach used in the design of the ZPE Project has been found commendable by the government and the Education & Human Resource Strategy Plan 2008 – 2020 (Ministry of Education & Human Resources, 2009) proposes to use the ZEP model to replicate its benefits on the other primary schools in Mauritius. In the broader perspective, the ZEP approach will surely aim at combating social inequalities by providing equal opportunities to all primary school children of the country. Although progress has been slow in terms of pupil achievement as measured by the CPE pass rate, ZEP schools are recognised to have, on the other hand, managed to produce some good practices such as holistic educational approaches, school-community partnership, active parent involvement in the educational process, fund-raising models for school improvement projects, etc. Perhaps one of the most interesting outcomes of the philosophy upon which the education methodology for ZEP schools is based is the social outcomes it has achieved. In the case of ZEP schools, what needs to be removed is the negative branding/labelling but without losing the added value it has provided to the education system. In other words, the spotlight with regard to ZEP schools must be taken away from 'failure' by promoting measures to enhance the 'successes' of ZEP students and schools.

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## 6.0 The strengths and weaknesses of the ZEP project in Mauritius

The existence of the ZEP project for nearly 10 years in the educational landscape of Mauritius has been one where it has allowed for greater space to cater for the additional needs of these children who live in the deprived regions of the country. An analysis of the project's strength and weaknesses also provides a means to audit the effectiveness of the project and may shed light on proposed policy action to address the lacunas.

### 6.1 The strengths of the ZEP project

#### *(a) The ZEP as an integrated approach to compensate for environmental constraints of the children*

The major strength of the ZEP project in Mauritius probably resides in the elaboration of its design as it tries to implement remedial actions at the site of the school and in the living environment of the pupils. The ZEP project as it is defined in Mauritius tries to create the link between the home environment of the child and compensate for same at and from the school. The programmes embodied in the four pillars (namely: redefining the school based curriculum, the food and health programme, the parental accompaniment programme and infrastructural development programme) that define the ZEP project at the level of the school place the child as the learner at the centre of all interests. The actions entertained represent an integrated approach in a way that not only does one action leads to the other and they are dependent on each other. All aimed at the overall development of the children by broadening their circle of opportunities.



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***(b) The operation of the ZEP favours a bottom-up approach to inform policy of appropriate decision***

The ZEP project in its deliverables encourages the Head Master to take the lead in implementing the project imperatives. The idea behind implementing the ZEP project is to distribute leadership to the Head Masters to develop initiatives that will best suit the interest of the children by respecting the specificities of the school. Hence the implementation of the ZEP project is viewed as being a delicate process and is paced carefully to gain acceptance with parents and the partners. Hence guidelines are issued by the ZEP Unit but the project gets its life and blood at the level of the School Development Unit where the desired changes occur.

***(c) The adoption of the concept of ‘three-earlies’ in caring for the children in the ZEP scenario***

Ingrained in its fabric, the ZEP project at the level of policy favours a novel concept which is the ‘three earlies’. That is the children in the disadvantaged areas are screened for problems as early as possible. In terms of detecting early health problems, children are (1) screened, (2) diagnosed and (3) proper referral actions are listed out with the support of the parents to carry forward the care. Hence health impairments are taken care through an elaborate health programme which only exists in the ZEP schools. It is commonly known that taken at the right time, health problems common in deprived regions such as scabies, tapeworms, head lice may help in integrating the pupils better in schools. At the same time impairments such as myopia, dyslexia, hearing problems can be detected as early as possible and a better chance be given to these children.

The same approach is used when it comes to prepare the children for the academia as early as possible. Indeed as to date all the ZEP schools has a pre-primary section which welcomed the children as they start to acquire the competencies as early as possible so that they do not suffer from lateness accrued in starting their academic journey.

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***(d) ZEP schools are fertile grounds that encourage innovations***

With the introduction of ZEP as a government policy, it was the first time that the government in Mauritius had deployed resources in such a powerful and structured manner around primary schools. Elaborating on such a whole range of new services in a school and bringing in people from outside the school to work with the Head Master bring in many thinking heads. Ideas flock and the school becomes the community's prized asset. No wonder that parents' attention is heightened to cooperate with schools as a new hope for the children. At the same time, business sectors pour in their expertise and resources to make the school ground a privileged place to start changing the life of community members. During the implementation of the ZEP project, there have been show cases where the community members have taken bold steps to start working hand in glove with Head Master (*viz.* Emmanuel Anquetil GS in Roche Bois)

***(e) The ZEP Unit is a safe guard against administrative delays.***

The creation of the ZEP Unit in the Ministry of Education started with the right idea to dedicate a special operating machinery which would receive information from the ZEP schools and would process same with celerity to address the pressing and urgent issues in sensitive schools of the Republic. At the same time, the ZEP Unit would be a fast track to decide on matters and issues arising in ZEP schools. Hence the ZEP project demonstrates alternative ways to work and prevent unnecessary delays which sometimes may crop up in public administration due to the red tapism that characterises bureaucracy.

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## 6.2 The weaknesses of the ZEP project

The advent of the ZEP provided a wonderful opportunity to learn new ways of adjusting with the demands of the low performing schools and also pressed its proponent to develop responses that sometimes would require one to move outside the realm of the ordinary. However, as with all good intentions, the ZEP project also suffered from its unique of a kind programme status as its rather 'overnight' set up was met with resistance from the established bureaucrats. Here probably lies the greatest weakness of the ZEP project: while its schools were planning its implementation, there cast a shadow of suspicion and mixed feelings about it. The project was first dented when it did not receive full support of an established public bureaucracy who would not welcome the change or who was not properly convinced about the intentions. The ZEP strategy which would depend on human resource as a critical factor received the first blow and its effects lingered. The systemic barriers are many folds and need a close consideration.

### *(a) The working structure agreement of the ZEP Unit is not fully integrated in the bureaucracy of the Ministry*

The mid-term evaluation review of the ZEP Project in 2005 by the UNDP commented on an apparent uneasiness of Head Masters of the ZEP schools with regards to the official hierarchy of the Ministry. With the ZEP Unit operating on the one hand and the Local Education Authority (called the Zones Directorates) on the other hand, a 'dual administrative set up' started to exist where conflicting roles came up between the ZEP working management structure and the main stream of the Ministry of Education. The mid-term review report of the United Nation Development Programme (Mauritius) (2005) called for a participatory mechanism which would embrace both inspectorate cadre and the Head Masters of the ZEP schools in the best interest of the pupils. Under this visible tension, it was remarked that ZEP teacher development projects which have been implemented have simply fizzled out and their impact not really felt on the ground since no follow up was carried out by the inspectorate cadre and no evaluation of participants' knowledge and practice acquisition was carried out.

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Private sector & NGO-led initiatives to involve parents in alternative school projects or to access school facilities outside normal hours were often stalled, because the necessary clearances from Directorate & Inspectorate were not obtained.

***(b) Recruitment of teachers in ZEP schools is not totally voluntary: Teacher retention in ZEP school is a problem***

The ZEP project affirmed its successful implementation on the commitment of an unflinching human resource that would be willing to work in the ZEP school scenario on voluntary basis. Hence the point of departure to build on the willingness of school personnel to collaborate with the central policy to help fight the underachievement of the pupils in those deprived areas.

Unfortunately, the situation is very different as revealed by the Indian Ocean Child Rights Observatory (2008) which report that teachers' retention in the ZEP sector is a major obstacle to have a continuity in the policy to build the capacity of teachers in that sector. Teachers' motivation in the survey was measured inter alia, by the percentage of teachers who would like to change their profession being given the chance and the desire to be transferred from their present posting. The survey showed that more than 60% of the teachers surveyed would like a transfer away from the ZEP school to a non ZEP school.

***(c) Lack of coherence in policy at the center concerning ZEP teachers posting and development***

It is right to say that there are many factors which are tributary to teachers being transferred away from the ZEP schools even before the prescribed normal cycle of 6 years. On the one side there is a problem of teacher retention in the ZEP as argued earlier and on the other side, there is also a lack of commitment of the central administration of the Ministry to support the ZEP initiative as underlined on several occasions in the mid-term evaluation review report published by the UNDP in 2005. The effect of transferring a teacher who benefitted from a capacity building programme

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to enhance learning of the ZEP pupils definitely breaks down the continuum of the process and each time the cycle starts anew. The transfer of teachers away from the ZEP school resulting probably from the lack of information by the high officers carrying out the transfer have devastating effect on the whole capacity building programme initiative.

#### ***(d) A lack of communication on the whole ZEP strategy***

In their paper on the ZEP strategy implemented by the government, Mahadeo & Gurrib (2009) reviewed the problem areas of the ZEP sector and reported that the lack of communication and knowledge about the ZEP project in the public pulls back the efforts of the government to make of it a national project to be accepted and be endeared by all. The paper observed that the teaching personnel working in the non-ZEP schools have no idea about the activities and achievements of the ZEP schools. Moreover, this lack of communication affected the recruitment of teachers to work in the ZEP schools. Attempts to reinvigorate the 'info-doc-com' (Information, documentation and communication) strategic action with Head Masters never yielded much result as the cooperation with the ODEROI ('*Observatoire des droits des enfants de l'Océan Indien*') Indian Ocean Child Rights Observatory) with the Ministry of Education stopped after the publication of the List of Indicators for the ZEP sector essentially due to lack of funding. Hence the action planning to engage in schools to develop the know how to work out and publish the school data as dash board key performance indicators died an early death.

#### ***(e) School organisational factors rarely support teacher development***

School organisational factors are known to support teacher development process. Ouedraogo (2011) points out organisational factors such as schools' systems planning, the management, the physical logistics of the school and the distribution of the load of work will impinge on the teachers' positive psychology. In addition it is also noted that the interpersonal relationships amongst teachers and between the

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headmaster and the teacher plays a decisive role to the support of the teachers in their endeavour to put extra efforts to value their persons as well as their workplace.

Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case for the teachers in the ZEP schools in Mauritius. In some cases Head Masters would barely hold staff meeting specifically on pedagogical issues and disaffected school inspectors would not be regular in their school visits to these schools. Such an absence of institutional support and sound policies concerning the Human Resource Management and Development policies at the level of the school and the ministry, teachers who are trained will too quickly lose interest in the new skills acquired as all innovations are not sufficiently valued to encourage the teachers to explore and use their creative potential to develop further to the advantages of the children they serve.

***(f) Accrued expertise expected from Head Masters who were formerly teachers***

With the advent of the *Zones d'Education Prioritaires* project, the schools categorised in the ZEP category have seen their basic functional modalities changed overnight. The ZEP school is now a place heightened to fight social exclusion and inequality through the National System of education. The socio pedagogical obligations direct the Head Master to be more than instructional leaders. In face of such situation, the head masters have not only seen their load of work increased but they are requested to have the right acumen to manage situation which may be often beyond their normal training.

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## 7.0 Proposals from a policy perspective to reinforce the ZEP initiative as a good practice

The ZEP project was launched in 2003 taking into account the experience of France in the matter. The project design had taken into consideration the review comments and had secured planned actions to prevent what then seemed would strike a lesser note in the endeavour. Yet, despite the thinking behind the project and the efforts that were deployed, the weaknesses of the ZEP project witnessed as *ex post facto* occurrences are simply too appalling and is so overwhelming. One can easily make out that without systemic support and the right human resource to drive it at the fore front level, the project will barely be able to deliver let alone bring a change to the present system. Here under are proposals that if considered rightly in its perspective could help change the present configuration.

### 7.1 Developing National Teacher Policies in the ZEP sector

Barber & Mourshed (2007) stated that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (cited in Ouedraogo, 2011). This statement is powerful to heighten the importance of teachers in the making of any educational reform agenda successful. This statement is being used time and again by (Obanya 2010) to signal that it is high time to consider the teacher and particular those servicing the ZEP sector as a professional and at par with those liberal jobs that command respect in the eyes of people.

The seriousness of the ZEP project that it commands will acquire recognition only if teachers in this sector benefit from adequate treatment and receive due attention. It is here argued that the above can only be achieved if teacher-specific policies are developed for teachers servicing the ZPE project.

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Enriching ourselves from the Nigerian experience of its National Teacher Education Policy (NTEP), we can also derive the same principles that would touch on some of the key challenges we have seen in the ZEP sector (Obanya 2010). These are:

- a. Attracting the right calibre people into the ZEP sector
- b. Screening the right teacher into teacher education programmes,
- c. Monitoring and evaluating the quality of teacher education programmes,
- d. Gauging teacher's mastery of the subject matter,
- e. Assessing teachers' level of classroom effectiveness,
- f. Reviewing professional support for teachers, and
- g. Ensuring their continuous education and professional development.

The above sound explicit teacher policies of the ZEP sector in primary education will draw attention to the teachers servicing the ZEP schools and they will *de facto* be the object of attention as teachers who have a committed role to the pupils as well as to themselves.

However, developing national teacher policies should not be a panacea in itself. A variety of regulatory frameworks and management structures may be needed for their implementation to have a well-articulated relevance.



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## 7.2 Implementing a set of Human Resource management policies for teachers posted in the ZEP schools.

The re-profiling of the ZEP teachers as advocated above has to be accompanied by a new set of human resource management policies in view of not only value the contribution of those teachers posted in ZEP but also to set in an element of accountability in the relationship between management and teacher performance. The relevant human resource policies which will apply in this case will be those concerned with:

- a. Qualifications for initial enrolment of teachers in ZEP schools
- b. Institution of a Performance Appraisal System of teacher performance in the ZEP sector
- c. Merit pay and Performance Related Pay for performing teachers
- d. A reviewed policy of capacity building which is institutionalised with the support of the quality assurance division to monitor and evaluate teacher development programmes
- e. Career opportunities to be offered to meritorious teachers based on promotion by selection on the basis of qualifications, experience and merits.

### *The need and purpose of the specific HR policies for ZEP teachers*

Human resources policies provide the framework by which teachers and other personnel in the Ministry of Education are expected to behave in the workplace. These policies are written statements of the ministry's standards and objectives to be attained. They contain rules on how the employees must perform their jobs and interact with each other. The main purpose of renewed human resource management policies is first to institutionalise the management agreements with the teachers and the officers in the higher hierarchy such as school inspectors and zone directors.

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The policies in the areas mentioned above ensure that the government and the special provisions granted to value the teachers for their additional efforts comply with relevant legislations and maintain collective agreement as present in the Human Resource/ Personnel manual. Policies address various areas that are critical to the company mission, thus ensuring operational efficiency. They also clarify expectations of performance and behavior and help create the desired culture. On the other hand, HR policies protect employees from arbitrary and discriminatory actions by possible casual oversights by the higher hierarchy. It is therefore advocated that by having recourse to measures such as the implementation of specific HR policies, the problem of dual administrative set up conflicting with central policy will be cleared. At the same rate, standard performance will also be established and reviewed during performance appraisal of officers serving the system.

The HR policies which are being advocated above should be in line with the provisions of the ILO/ UNESCO Joint Recommendations Concerning the status of Teachers. These recommendations were adopted by a special intergovernmental conference in Paris on 5 October 1966 and the provisions have remained relevant ever since.

As with all major decisions, the implementation of bold measures as with those cited above will require political will and prioritization as key to the sustained development of the ZEP strategic initiative.

## **7.3 Encouraging teachers' reflective practice in ZEP schools**

The term reflective practice is interpreted and understood as a means by which teacher practitioners can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development (Osterman, Kottkamp,1993). Indeed, awareness is essential for behavioral change. David Hargreaves (1996), has presented the case for, among other substantial changes, greater involvement of teachers as practitioners in the

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research process, in order to establish a reliable, evidence-base of what 'teachers do in classrooms' (p. 7).

However, the above initiative would require political endorsement for it to happen. The Quality Assurance Division of the Ministry of Education together with the Mauritius Institute of Education should twin up to provide for the 'technical' reflection as a means of increasing teachers efficiency in delivering the curriculum, in addition to building problem solving capacity and engage in self-evaluation capacities and understandings of the effects on teaching and learning of broader social and policy contexts.

## **7.4 Institutionalising community reflexion forums on ZEP reforms and progress**

There can be no precious asset to parents than their children. It is the legitimate expectations of a parent to see that the next generation will develop into better individuals. It has been argued that one of the strengths of the ZEP project in its 10 years has been the rise in awareness of parents on the importance of education. This has led amongst other features experienced qualitatively at school level in a reduction of pupils' absenteeism by half. It is here proposed to build on this result and to sustain the interest of parents in schooling. Hence in each of the cluster areas, the society may with the help of the business sectors and civil organisation put up 'observatories' on the welfare of the children in the ZEP schools. At the same time, these 'observatories' will act as watch dogs to voice out the popular feelings. The set-up of these cluster observatories may well be institutionalised and its committee mandated to represent the schools in the ZEP council and inform policy directly on the possible mismatch which may occur during policy implementation. The media may certainly act responsibly in the face of reporting matters and issues arising. This proposal may forestall any lateness accrued which may only find solution in the motivation of a committed manpower.

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## 8.0 Conclusion

After nearly 10 years of its implementation, the ZEP project of the Ministry of Education has known some progress amidst the *status-quo* noted in terms of pupils' academic performance. Remedial actions identified still give hopes to make of the project a viable project and to show case it for Africa. Today the philosophy of the ZEP initiative stands on moral grounds to give additional resources to children who are in need of additional support so that they may develop on a level playing field as compared to the other children. The morality of the action behind the enunciation of the project goes far beyond the need of the country to comply with agreed international conventions and protocols.

After a review of the teacher education and training have been considered amidst structural and conjectural factors, it is proposed that the overarching considerations to address remedial strategic plan should be:

- i. Developing tight coherence and integration of new policies in the ZEP sector with the main stream working of the supervising body as in this case it is the Ministry of Education & Human Resources,
- ii. Ensuring extensive and intensely supervised work of Head Master and Teachers at the level of the school so that there is the accountability factor with which the project imperatives are implemented on the field
- iii. Entertaining proactive relationships with schools that serve diverse learners effectively and address a rigorous teacher development strategy with a strong monitoring and evaluation plan.

This paper has endeavoured to show that the academic pass rate of students in the disadvantage regions of the country will only improve if teachers in the ZEP schools are well catered in terms of basic policies that will ensure that teachers are properly trained and valued for what they are worth as main agents of change.

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At the same time the element of accountability and the return on investment must be ascertained by developing a staunch monitoring and evaluation programme to support the capacity building initiatives. Perhaps the challenge is to align the Quality Assurance Division and the school inspectors on the modalities of the ZEP project on the basis that ZEP is and remain a National Priority until a better alternative is sought for these children of the Republic. Arguably, traits of competence of the Inspectorate cadre in this respect will be full commitment to the ZEP project deliverables to support the inclusive pedagogical approaches developed in the context of this project

This paper has also attempted to propose few solutions so that policy is informed on the basis of current research in the field. At the same time it brings comfort to read from the Education and Human Resource Strategy document 2008 – 2020 (Ministry of Education 2009) that the Government is committed to seriously address and review the issue of the bottle neck competition that the CPE examinations represent which may be a major hurdle to bring the nation's children together so that no one is left behind.

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## About INRULED Working Papers on Teachers and Teaching Profession

One of the priority areas for action listed in the current UNESCO Strategy for Teachers (2012-2015) is research knowledge production and communication: informing the global debate about teaching with comparative evidence. In line with this priority, in 2012 INRULED launched a series of working papers on Teachers and Teaching Profession.

The series is intended to review and reflect the good practices in policies and practices intended to support teaching and raise its quality in meaningful ways for student learning, particularly in disadvantaged contexts. Researchers and practitioners are invited to share their findings through this working paper series. Key issues related to teacher policies and practices, including teacher preparation; recruitment of rural teachers; retaining teachers for rural schools; rural teachers' professional development; teachers' status and working conditions, will be discussed in the series.

INRULED welcome feedback from readers and encourage you to convey your comments and criticisms directly to the authors.

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