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# **Cry, the Beloved Profession: A Study of Short-text Messages Service (SMSs) on the Teaching Profession**

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and Tavuya Jinga, Former lecturer at Masvingo Teachers' College**

## ***Abstract***

*The paper is based on a collection of cellular phone text messages (also known as S.M.S (Short-text Message Service) on the teaching profession that are currently being floated around in Zimbabwe. The observation technique was the major data-gathering instrument. The three researchers all set to gather verbatim the SMSs. Over one hundred SMSs on different subjects were gathered and stored in the 'archives' of one of the researchers' phones. It notes that these messages, largely ignored in academic discourse as mere trifles of humor, should be taken seriously as social commentaries. The paper finds that the messages in question bemoan, decry and poke fun on the declining standing of the profession in the country and do so with a condor, merit of form and structure that should earn them a place in the world of literary works of art. The paper calls for the improvement of the status of the profession in Zimbabwe so that the profession is restored to its glorious past.*

## **Introduction**

Fairly recent technological changes have altered the communication landscape in Zimbabwe. The fixed telephone system has lost its monopoly as the favored mode of interpersonal communication. Not only has the offering of cellular phone services by three providers given consumers the usual advantages of increased choice and other benefits related to the portable and unfixed nature of cellular phone services but it has also afforded its users extra facilities such as the Short Message Service (SMS). This particular service, cheaper than voice calls, generally works even where network is weak. Apart from its commerce-based uses, the facility of sending messages electronically from one phone to another has had social uses such as giving users a chance to give an immediate social commentary on goings-on in people's lives. This facility, despite imposed length constraints, has come to occupy a very important place in interpersonal communication in Zimbabwe. The resultant text messages are not just matter-of-fact, flat, technical, lifeless pieces of discourse but are rich literary products not devoid of content, style and structure. Some text messages are as equally deserving of recognition as any other forms of literature (Nyoni, Jinga and Dzinoreva, 2008). In fact Austen's **Pride and Prejudice**, which so much depends on the letter as a mode of communication, might have contained short-text cellular phone messages (replacing the numerous letters in the text) and Bathsheba Everdene's Valentine message to Boldwood:

'The Rose is red  
The violet blue  
Carnation's sweet

And so are you' (Hardy, 1991:106) so crucial to the plot of **Far From the Madding Crowd** first published in 1874, might have been smsed (sent/triggered through an SMS) had the works been written during the computer age, we contend. We also contend that those we collected and analyzed are a serious reflection on the status of the teaching profession in Zimbabwe.

### **Objectives**

This study seeks to:

- i. unravel the literariness reflected in some SMSs in spite of their length constraints.
- ii. analyze SMSs as vehicles of social commentary
- iii. Show how the erosion of the dignity of the teaching profession is reflected in SMSs

### **Communication and cell phone messages**

Communication is according to DeVito (1991:5) 'the act by one or more persons of sending and receiving messages that are distorted by noise, occur within a context have some effect and provide some opportunity for feedback'.

Other authorities on the subject look at it as 'a two-way process during which a message is conveyed in a specific format through an appropriate channel from a sender to a receiver who may react by giving feedback' (Conradie, Konog, Koti, Pillay and Valkhoff, 2003:5)

There are components of the communication process which are evident in the two definitions and which any book on the subject worth its salt always tackle and which some writers have christened the 'universals of communication' namely the sender, message, channel, receiver and feedback. In addition to these the other very important aspect is noise which may be a physical, psychological or semantic threat to the receiver getting the intended message.(Berko, Wolvin and Wolvin,1998;DeVito ,1991)

The components mentioned above can best be conceptualized by asking the following questions posed by Harold Lasswell in 1948 as suggested by Conradie, Konog, Koti, Pillay and Valkhoff (2003:5) :

Who?	- a sender
Says what?	-sends a message
Through which channel?	-through a channel

To whom?	-to a receiver
With what effect?	-Who gives feedback

Communication may be within an individual (intrapersonal), between individuals (interpersonal), between people and animals or inanimate objects (extrapersonal) or between a sender and large number of people communicated to directly or indirectly since the interlocutors may not be geographically at the same place (mass). (Brook et al, 1980; DeFleur and Dennis, 1994; Beebe and Masterson, 1996; Conradie et al, 2003)

Means of communication include face-to-face, letters, magazines/newspapers, books, radio, television, telephone and electronic mail. It can be argued that short text messaging is part of e-mailing since the cell phone is an electronic gadget or microcomputer and messages are sent to recipients electronically. This form of communication has virtually revolutionized the business of letter writing and has had a tremendous impact on the culture of communication. Those who do not have the gadgets simply approach those who have them and ask them to *sms* on their behalf and often do so for free and of course 'sign' to indicate the real encoder of the message. Some companies such as those in the telephone business send bills via *smes* because it is cheaper and the communication is instantaneous.

When we write our real intention is to speak but certain constraints dictate that we write instead. Therefore through the *sms* we speak variously: we persuade, we inform, we rebuke, we manipulate, we threaten, we crack jokes, we vent our anger and frustrations, we evaluate and much more and we often do this in style-we carefully pick the right signs from a plethora of potential and competing ones to accurately express our feelings or to let our intentions known.

### **A brief note on methodology**

The observation technique was the major data-gathering instrument. The three researchers all set to gather verbatim the SMSs. The fact that there were three had a sociometric advantage since each had, as expected, a rich network of friends and associates to supply the raw materials, the SMSs. Over one hundred SMSs were gathered and stored in the 'archives' of one of the researchers' phones. The SMSs were varied and included the graphic, the pictorial, the poetic, the prosaic, the dramatic, the abbreviated, the unconventional in terms of spellings among many others and in terms of content they touched on the political, the economic and social aspects of the Zimbabweans (Nyoni, Jinga and Dzinoreva, 2008). It was noted with some interest that most of those which touched on professions were almost always devoted to the teaching profession. This observation partly explains why the authors decided to analyze the SMSs in terms of their form and content.

### **Why the 'fuss' on the teaching profession?**

Teaching entails investing in the nation's future in as far as human resources are concerned. It also entails influencing learner attitudes through the affective domain, inculcating practical skills through the psychomotor domain and cultivating the intellect through the cognitive domain. In Greek times there was the mentor, the skilled and experienced and more knowledgeable teacher who imparted the invaluable skills and knowledge and the mentee or student. The two's relationship would, at times, take years or even decades. For instance Socrates was Plato's mentor and the latter in turn became Aristotle's. The mentor-mentee relationship ensured the transmission of key skills, knowledge and attitudes but also a general ability to engage in intellectual endeavors not necessarily in the direction of the mentor's disposition. Hence we note that although Plato is renowned for positing Idealism, Aristotle, his mentee, is regarded as the Father of Realism (Stumpf and Fieser, 2003; Ree and Urmsion, 2005). In Africa the teachers were the parents, siblings and a rich network of relatives and neighbours. Parents played a very important role in the education of their children. The mother, with the assistance of the female members of the family, educated all children in the early years. Her main 'classroom' was the kitchen while the father, assisted by the men folk, took over education of male children later, at the 'tougher' *dare* while the mother remained in control of the females assisted by the womenfolk. The two classrooms were augmented by the whole social and physical environment which took the position of an infinite supermarket of knowledge where the young, under the tutelage of the elders, would pick and choose, where each living member learnt something daily throughout one's life span (Sifuna and Otiende, 1994) hence the saying '*Ukufunda akupeli*' (Ndebele)/ '*Kudzidza hakuperi*' (Shona) which literally means 'learning does not end [as long as one is alive]'. Psychologists describe learning as change of behavior. This is necessary for the survival, not only of individuals, but also of species. If a species fails to learn and adapt and adopt then it is doomed. Luckily for the homo sapien species instead of learning almost always instinctively and at the mercy of the environment we make conscious efforts to set programs to impart crucial skills and knowledge to our offspring-they do not learn just by accident or through trial and error-that would be dangerous and costly. Preschools, schools, colleges and universities are part of this grand plan to ensure the survival of mankind's civilizations and the teacher is at the epicenter of this. When in droves teachers turn their backs on this noblest of responsibilities and choose to emigrate to do menial tasks to eke out a living or, for those remaining, receive insults for their efforts, then society should start, not only to worry but also, to act to address the anomaly. The aforementioned Greeks imparted their wisdom to their mentees who admired their mentors and chose to become teachers. Aristotle is well known for his tendency of 'walkie-talking' (hence the term peripatetic associated with his teaching

methodology) and his students and other admirers along the way would literally follow him ( Stumpf and Fieser,2003). How many would be so enthralled by a teacher in present-day Zimbabwe? Onlookers, including colleagues, are likely to ask in disgust '*Unombopiwa marii teacher yu?*'(How much is this poor fellow earning, anyway to exert himself/herself so?) Very few Zimbabweans want to be teachers. One of the researchers went to King Mine Primary School in Mashava on Teaching Practice Supervision and noted in the student teachers' Individual Record Book that only one pupil out of twenty eight 2008 Grade 6 A pupils indicated that he wanted to be a teacher! It is ironical that in the face of a crippling brain drain colleges are finding it difficult to recruit student teachers that should be trained to fill the void. Colleges are resorting to readvertising which is costly. Some of those who would have successfully gone through the course opt to stay at home doing odd jobs for a living instead of going to teach. The nation that would have invested in manpower development of such professionals stands to lose and so will the pupils. Government has introduced the Cadetship Scheme, an acknowledgement of the problem of the brain drain, which has affected the nation, and the education sector is not spared. When the cream of the nation's professionals leaves in such numbers then the quality of instruction is compromised and compromised instruction has a ripple effect: it is not uncommon in Zimbabwe today to talk about appalling typing by typists, appalling quality of written and spoken English by teachers of English, appalling reporting by journalists, newspaper articles literally littered with spelling and grammatical errors, a stenographer who can not boot a computer and an 'O'-level graduate who cannot spell his name! More of such embarrassing incidents will be raised as long as we pretend that all is well with 'the mother of all professions' and we choose to bury our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich when a conflagration is swiftly approaching. The three authors of this article have amongst them almost half a century of teaching service. As teachers we feel we are the best-positioned people to articulate issues about teaching. The best people to talk about medicine and the plight of the medical profession are medical personnel, the best person to talk about pregnancy is a person who is pregnant or who has been pregnant, the best people to talk about hell are those who have been there and are back and the best people to talk about the teaching profession are the teachers-*quod erat demonstrandum!* Besides experience it is the duty of those in the profession to talk about the profession with a view of contributing to its betterment for the good, not only of the practitioners but also , of members of the society which will stand to benefit from a more settled state of affairs in the domain of education.

Great literary products usually reflect on the grand themes. The teaching

profession is so grandiose that it is associated with the Ministry of Jesus Christ who, in Christian circles, is recognized as the greatest teacher that ever was. In Biblical times a teacher/rabbi was considered a source of knowledge and wisdom. Jesus Christ, as a great teacher, always had people pestering him in need of advice, direction and guidance. The rich young ruler who asks: 'Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 18 verse 18) is a case in point. Another example is 'teacher... is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?' (Mark 12 verse 14). It is therefore not surprising that the profession should inspire the creation of great works of art in the form of cellular phone text messages. Such terms as 'the noble profession', 'the mother of all professions', which have been conferred on teaching, have served to create the expectation that the profession should be resplendent in glitter, glamour and glory.

Traditionally, Zimbabwean schoolteachers, like all teachers, have been viewed as repositories of knowledge, authority figures, and role models and therefore people of high social and moral standing. The President of the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (ZIMTA), an affiliate of Education International, describes teachers as 'the cream of our human and technical investment' (<http://www.ei-ie.org/statusofteachers>).

A South African newspaper, *The Mail and Guardian* of 27 October 2006 also describes Zimbabwean teachers in superlative epithets such as 'highly qualified', having 'excellent qualifications', 'priceless exports', being able to speak 'excellent English' and capable of producing 'very good results'. For these reasons, the South African government is reported by the paper to be 'casting covetous eyes' on them.

That notwithstanding, tables have turned on Zimbabwean teachers, who constitute the bulk of the civil service. Intermittent salary increments have not helped alleviate their plight. In fact the current (August 2010) salaries which average US\$160 per month for teachers is a far cry from the US\$455 Poverty Datum Line. In such scenarios, regular visitors to schools will find that clear telltale signs of poverty are often not difficult to discern. These include worn out clothes, particularly shirt collars and torn clothes. It is therefore little wonder that Zimbabwean teachers are leaving in drips and droves for South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Australia, New Zealand and the UK to take up menial jobs (<http://www.ei-ie.org/statusofteachers>). The majority, who cross into these countries illegally according to *The Mail and Guardian* of 27 October 2006, fail to register as professional teachers and end up in catering and security as they, in the words of one of teacher emigrant, search for 'recognition as human beings'

A cursory look at local newspapers shows how the massive brain drain and desertions are literally hemorrhaging the education sector. No teacher, for instance, turned up in some schools in the third term of 2007 forcing them

to close and in others only the head and the deputy remained (*The Sunday News*, 7 October 2007) Newspapers are awash with advertisements on lecturers and teachers. For example in one paper *The Sunday News* of 16 November 2007, Mtshabezi High School advertised for 13 permanent and 1 temporary teaching post, Embakwe High School, 8 'O'-level and 4 'A'-level posts and Manama High School, 7 posts. Munda High School advertised for 7 posts (*The Chronicle*, 15 December 2007) and Gwanda High School 10 (6 permanent and 4 temporary) (*The Chronicle*, 22 December 2007). The former had the following incentives for teachers:

i. transport on monthends to Bulawayo ii. free accommodation iii. monthly Parents Teacher Association allowance iv. teacher's wardrobe (*sic*) v. sponsored children's education

In the space of two days J.Z. Moyo Government High School had vacancies for 8 permanent and 4 relief teachers (*The Chronicle*, 7 January, 2008) while Cyrene High School had vacancies for 4 A-level teachers (*The Chronicle*, 8 January, 2008). The exodus does not only affect schools. For instance, The United College of Education had 21 vacant lecturing posts as advertised in *The Sunday News* of 28 October 2007 and Hillside Teachers' College advertised for 24 posts (*The Chronicle*, 10 January, 2008). Of interest is that five were in Professional Studies, 3 in English and 3 in Music, just to mention a few. These figures are more or less the numbers obtaining in most colleges as the 'normal' subject establishments. This shows that some subject areas were grounded or almost grounded when they advertised a situation that is not unique to the college cited. Teachers' colleges have an average establishment of about 60. If one college advertises for about a third of its establishment then there is a huge problem and those in the profession such as the authors of this paper need to air their views in the hope of changing the status quo.

Dennis Sinyolo, the former ZIMTA Secretary General and now International Co-ordinator for Education and Employment with Belgium-based Education International (a diasporan himself) has this to say on the situation in the education sector:

We had (authors' emphasis) quality teachers in Zimbabwe but the problem is that they are leaving the country in large numbers. The government should act as a matter of urgency and address teachers' grievances so that we stop the migration. (*The Chronicle*, 29 December, 2007)

Morris Mkwate, in a feature entitled 'Teachers' new paymasters' that appeared in *The Sunday Mail* of February 24 1 March 2008, a state-owned paper and many believe to be the government mouthpiece, says



In what is fast becoming a disturbing trend in the Zimbabwe education system parents are being asked to pay monthly stipends towards the welfare of teachers ... (*The Sunday Mail*, February 24 1 March 2008)

The article specifically names Blakiston Primary School among the many, which have started this 'incentivisation'. The head of the school who is described in the article as the president of the National Primary Heads' Association (NAPH) sees nothing wrong with the practice and so did Zimbabwe Teachers' Association (ZIMTA), the largest teachers' association in Zimbabwe, through its Chief Executive, Peter Mabande who 'welcomed the incentives'. Government is reported not to be entirely against the practice according to the then Minister of Education, Sport and Culture, who is quoted as saying:

We are not against the schemes as long as they are within the law. Zimbabwe's laws make it imperative that the opinion of parents should take precedence in school fees determination. It therefore follows that proposal for such motivational packages should be the collective view of the parents present at a given meeting... (*The Sunday Mail*, February 24 1 March 2008)

Accompanying the feature article is a computer graphic showing six pupils with a variety of grocery items in front of them that include cooking oil, sugar and laundry soap (the teacher's pay) with the teacher busy teaching. The picture depicted of the teacher is that of helplessness and one who lives from hand to mouth from alms and a *rombe* (an irresponsible fellow of no fixed abode) who has some skill who then needs to perform it first in order to be paid otherwise he would get the money and disappear into thin air without performing. In fact one is reminded of the Sophists, the mercenary intellectuals in ancient Greece, who were really intellectual vagabonds who moved from place to place 'selling' their 'wares' to willing buyers and who would stop at nothing to get customers in order to get daily sustenance (Livingston, 1923). Is this the teacher Zimbabwe wants? Teachers who would deliberately plot not to complete the syllabus so that they can hold their own pupils at ransom and teach them at a higher fee at weekends or over the school holidays under the guise of 'extra lessons'? We thought extra-lessons were for the not-so-intellectually-endowed as remediation and we also thought the time allocated for lessons, the three terms, were sufficient for a serious teacher to teach catering for the three ability groups, the struggling, the mediocre and the high fliers. We were wrong. It is now the norm to have 'extra lessons' over the holidays during which the teacher, who has been turned into a sophist, will then be serious with syllabus coverage because of the jingling coins in the pocket.

Universities are, as mentioned earlier, no exception from this unfortunate practice. In a front page article entitled 'Students Augment Lecturers'

Salaries' *The Financial Gazette* of 31 July 2008 to 6 August 2008, reports that Masters of Business Administration students are reported to be paying incentives to lecturers to 'entice' them to continue teaching them a practice the writer of the article is afraid compromises professional ethics. Does the 'enticing' end at just encouraging the tutors to teach or, more frighteningly and less likely to be admitted by beneficiaries of the not-so-clean deal on both sides of the divide, to dish 'acceptable' marks to the cheque book wielding students? How many lecturers are in a position to resist the temptation to please their 'employers' (the fat wallet wielding students)? *Vangani vanozoda kutsindira mwena unobuda pwarara?* (Shona) (How many are in a position to kill (or even upset) the golden-egg-laying goose?) Equally as surprising as the ZIMTA and NAPH representatives' reactions to the emerging phenomenon aforementioned is the MBA Graduate School of Management Director, Dennis Nikisi, who is quoted as saying:

It's a good idea though it's news to me. If they have to do it I suggest they bring their suggestions to me for discussions with the authorities first. I have no problem with such a private arrangement worked outside our management structures but they have to observe proper procedures. The same article goes on to say:

A number of institutions particularly those that are privately run in Harare and its environs have put in place schemes where parents and guardians either subsidize teaching staff in the form of fuel coupons or 'allowances' to help them make ends meet.

The above example is quite saddening especially coming from an institution, which can be described as the grandfather of university education not only in Zimbabwe but also in Central Africa. More worrying is the fact that the cited students are, in most cases; quite eminent citizens in as far as management or administration of the country's institutions are concerned. What ethics are in place when students literally pay for their degree certificates instead of earning them? Does the practice not translate to a dollar-for-a-pass resulting in 'cheque book' intellectuals? If he/she who pays the piper decides the tune, is there no reversal of roles in the sense that the student would decide what should be taught, when it should be taught and how and how much should be taught? These are not explicitly said in the article but one cannot help but read between the lines. The message between the lines seems to be quite loud and clear for those who want to see and hear it. Is the ignorance of the MBA Graduate School of Management Director, Dennis Nikisi, of 'the deal' struck by the students and their lecturers, not a very very worrying development? Isn't his 'blessing' of the deal, although he claimed to have first heard it from the press, even more worrisome? Chapfika (2008,182) has this to say about the worrying development of the erosion of ethics in our society:

The commitment to carry out duties and responsibilities among both teachers and students in these institutions has been on the decline in recent years, owing to economic challenges facing the country. The economic challenges have destroyed the economic principle of 'an honest wage for an honest day's work' that generally motivates people to carry out specific tasks and duties... This resulted in some high levels of brain drain coupled with the emergency of malpractices among some of those who remained...

The fall from grace and the ubiquitous nature of the teaching professionals means that it is difficult if not impossible for Zimbabwean teachers to escape from the public glare and scrutiny. No wonder the 'profession' has come to occupy a dominant place in the SMS discourse though it has done so for all the wrong reasons. This paper is therefore concerned with making an analysis of text messages relating to the teaching 'profession' with a view to exposing their content and form. Principles of literary criticism which Tilak (1996:1) defines as 'a play of the mind on a work of literature...to evaluate its artistic worth' will be used. SMSs as argued by the same authors in an earlier effort can be seen as literary products (Nyoni, Jinga and Dzinoreva, 2008). As Spingarn cited in Tilak (1996) notes, the sole task of literary criticism is to find out what artists have tried to express, how they have succeeded in expressing it and whether it was worth expressing. In this work SMSs specifically on the teaching profession will be extracted from the silo of SMSs so far collected, analysed and their meanings brought out.

## **Analysis of selected SMSs on the teaching profession**

### ***1. The Consulting Mom's Concern\****

*\*Titles were added to the text messages by the authors; they were not originally part of the SMSs.*

#### ***Original version***

*On Consultation day tr tells a mom that son was not doing well.*

*Mom to son: Handizivi kuti unoda kuita saani!Unoda kutodza ani chaizvo?Ona ini mama vako,I am a lawyer,yo father is an engineer,yo sister is a doctor.Ha-a!Hameno hako.Uchafa uri rombe sekaticha kako ikaka!*

#### ***Edited version***

*(Who do you take for a role model? Who the hell do you take after? Look at who I am-a lawyer! Your father is an engineer! Your sister is a doctor! a-a!(An expression of exasperation)You will have yourself to blame and will die a nonentity like this little teacher of yours!)*

It should be noted that length constraints sometimes result in SMS artists having to send their messages in two batches as was the case in this SMS which exceeds the number of characters a single text message would allow

for. In this particular text message, the creator was able, through carefully contrived plot and the use of irony to show the nature of a teaching job in Zimbabwe. Three conclusions can be drawn from it: first, teaching is a thankless profession-there are no rewards, even non-material ones. All that this teacher gets in return for efforts to play his/her informative role are insults. Second, teaching has become the least prestigious of all professions, the least attractive; in fact a family disgrace, as this berating woman would like to have it. The manner in which the woman views other professions in respect to teaching is reminiscent of the Davies and Moore thesis, which underlines the belief that some jobs are more important than others. Third, this artist is saying the profession is a last resort which does nothing to advance the social mobility cause. To be a teacher in Zimbabwe is to relegate oneself to a life of a 'rombe'. This word, which we have rendered 'a nonentity' in our translation is actually more heavily loaded in Shona language and connotes the idea of a vagabond, beggar, traipse and all behaviours, circumstances and statuses that render one to be socially and materially insignificant. The irony is that the lawyers, engineers and doctors entrust their children in the hands of 'vagabonds' and come to consult the same on the children's academic future. She equates a teacher to being a vagabond not withstanding that some teachers might be having as much as six years of university education.

## ***2. The Domestic Hand's Demand***

### ***Original version***

***Prospective Employer:*** *Nhai sisi mungada kuti tikutangirei papi?*

***Maid:*** *Sezvo mati hamuna mari, ko tikatanga pane yateacher zvakadii?*

### ***Edited version***

***(Prospective Employer:*** *How much would you like to be paid?*

***Maid :*** *Since you said you have not much money, how about paying me the equivalent of a teacher's pay, for a start?)*

The job of a maid in Zimbabwe is menial and low paying in spite of the heavy responsibilities and the demanding schedule. The menial job is associated with young female school dropouts who are often orphaned and desperate and what they get in all earnestness is a roof over their heads and food.

The text message presents an opportunity to reflect on the distortions that characterize the distribution of incomes in Zimbabwe. Here are two jobs that stand in stark contrast in respect to one another. While one is menial, the other is formal. While that of a domestic hand is usually entered by school drop outs or those who would have failed to attain full basic school leaving certificates, the other job requires specialized training for a number of years by holders of full school leaving certificates. Though there are different

entry routes to the teaching profession, the average teacher has a minimum of four years of secondary education plus three years of tertiary. Domestic hands on the other hand are, under normal circumstances, not expected to produce a certificate when looking for a job. It is not the intention of the writers to justify the exploitation of domestic hands but to point out that remuneration does not reflect the difference. For a starting salary, the maid asks for a teacher's equivalent. This means that with more time and depending on how she impresses her employer, she will earn a lot more than a teacher would. In fact the maid would have asked for more had her employers been more financially endowed- she asks for a starting salary at the teacher's salary level because the employers indicated they are of modest economic standing. In short, the author seems to be saying that the noble profession has become a laughing stock- a rich source of fun.

The SMS writer uses dialogue to good effect and through it, manages to create a laid back informal situation that would characterize the domestic hand's workplace as opposed to the formal one of a teacher. The dialogue also assumes a matter-of-fact tone suggesting that the maid is not being too demanding but is only asking for the basics. The writer therefore successfully manages to communicate the idea that teacher remuneration in Zimbabwe has, against reason, become the barest minimum anyone can ask for. Teachers are paid on equal terms with their former pupils who would probably have dropped out from the schools in which they teach. The writer leaves the consumer of his/her literary effort to arrive at this conclusion that this absurdity in remuneration has made the once noble profession a rich source of fun. Characteristics of this SMS include: intra-sentential code-mixing which is a characteristic of a bi- or multilingual society (Malmkjaer, 1991, Romaine, 1995) from which the SMS was generated, borrowing for example 'mari'- from money and 'sisi' from sister [nanny] and use of direct speech which enables the reader to deduce on his/her own instead of being spoon fed.

### **3. The Poor Person's Plea**

*A teacher goes to the Radio Zimbabwe programme 'Murombo munhu'(literally means'A poor person is also human'-implying that they also have needs, wants and aspirations which society should help the poor realize)*

**Presenter:** *Mungavudza vateereri zvinetswa zvenyu kuitira kuti mugobatsirwa.(May you tell the listeners your problem so that those able may assist)*

**Teacher :** *Ndiri teacher.(I am a teacher)*

'*Murombo munhu*' is a charity program aired on *Radio Zimbabwe*, one of the country's stations that broadcasts in the two main African languages, Shona and Ndebele, and is aimed at helping the down and out. It promotes the idea

that the down and out also have aspirations and deserve to be assisted. One does not expect a professional to come to a public national broadcaster that is also accessible worldwide on the Internet to parade his poverty by asking for alms. This is hyperbolic since the broadcaster would not entertain the teacher, since there will always be more deserving cases. The author, through hyperbole, wants to show the extent to which the noble profession has become a pale shadow of its glorious past. The teacher's brief answer sums it all. The plight is so well known that by just announcing that he is a teacher, the interviewer and the listeners should know the financial implications. The curt reply reflects one who is too angry and too traumatized to utter more. A brief analysis of tendencies in Zimbabwean society would help us understand the context of the text message better.

Zimbabwean society generally tends to encourage confidentiality, perseverance, resilience, stoicism and silence in the face of personal problems. One is encouraged to put on a brave front and suffer silently. To open up about one's problems is an act of cowardice akin to spilling the beans, washing dirty linen in public, selling out, referred to as '*kufukura hapwa*' (literally meaning to expose one's armpits). Any who seek outsiders' attention or views are generally viewed with very deep contempt and resentment.

Languages have proverbs that embody traditional wisdom and philosophy and Shona language is no exception. Thus there are proverbs that encourage this silence-is-golden rule. These include '*Kufa komurume hubuda ura*' meaning men (excuse the gender insensitivity) never say die. Literally, it means a man soldiers on and only dies or concedes defeat when he gets disembowelled/viscerated. Other proverbs are '*Chakafukidza dzimba matenga*' (meaning a lot goes on in huts/houses which is only known by the inhabitants : from a distance one can naively conclude all is paradise ) and '*Chinoziva ivhu kuti mwana wembeva unogwara*' which (literally meaning it is the soil which knows whether a mouse's child is sick or not. This means that since mice have their habitats in the soil, only the soil, which covers or clothes them can tell, with certainty, how they are feeling). Only in situations of dire danger is opening up encouraged thus we have counter proverbs like '*Kambudzi kubarira pavanhu hunzi nditandirwe imbwa*' which urge the wisdom of seeking public help (literally: A goat which decides to deliver close to where people are wants them to help it keep predators at bay). With this in mind, it becomes easy to see that the SMS artist was able to aptly portray the situation of Zimbabwean teachers. The message therefore means the dagger has been thrown into the teachers' bellies to the hilt. In less metaphorical terms, they have been tested beyond their forbearance and have been subjected for too long to poverty of an extreme kind and of such mammoth proportions that it should warrant national (if not international) attention. The suffering is such that teachers cannot take it in their stride and it now defies all

discreetness. Caution has to be thrown to the wind and the public broadcaster has to be approached, though traditional wisdom would censure this. Society and authorities have to be reminded that teachers are also human and have aspirations like anyone else, so the SMS text implies. Through use of a little hyperbole, the author shows the extent to which the formerly noble profession has become a pale shadow of its glorious past.

#### **4. The panacea to monkey business**

##### **Original version**

*New farmr yaiva yavoneswa fire nemakudo.Wakazama icho nechocho zvose zvikaramba...razr wire,electric fence,etc.In desperation he put up notice. Upn seing it they ran away & nevr cam bak.Askd by neiboring farmrs wht he hd don to win the war he revealed that he hd threthend to round thm all up & send thm to a trs' colege!*

##### **Edited version**

*A newly resettled farmer had literally seen red due to baboons wreaking havoc at his farm .He tried various ways in an effort to repel the pests such as fencing the farm using razor wire and installing an electric fence to no avail. In desperation he put up notice. Upon seeing it they ran away and never came back. Asked by neighbouring farmers what he had done to win the war he revealed that he had threatened to round them all up and send them to a teachers' college!*

The SMS takes the form of a folktale, part of typical African literature (orature). Baboons in African literature are depicted as of modest intellectual capacity as well as gullible. They are also seen as a nuisance to households and are known to be good at terrorizing farmers robbing them of small domestic animals and crops. If one is described as a baboon in Zimbabwe one is likely to feel deeply offended and may declare war on the perpetrator because the animals are viewed as the epitome of buffoonery, intellectual modesty and gullibility. Children laugh their lungs out listening to grandmothers narrating folktales in which the baboon is always at the receiving end especially of hare's tricks. Baboons in a nutshell are at the butt of jokes in most Zimbabwean folktales a role they are currently sharing with those in 'the noble profession'. In the SMS it is only after the baboons are threatened with enrolment at a teachers' college to train as teachers that they leave the poor farmer alone. They even risk being electrocuted by the electric fence as well as having bowels ripped open by the razor wire. This shows the zenith of determination but that determination is severely tested and dismally fails in the face of a *real* threat that of 'conversion' to teaching.

The SMS artist succeeds in sustaining suspense up to the end of the story. Readers feel sorry for the poor helpless farmer. When the notice is put up the reader is very likely to think that the contents are 'For Sale' because of the

traumatic experience the farmer was subjected to by the baboons. We expect the farmer to throw in the towel. Farming is quite demanding physically and financially. The farmer is forced to divert some of his proceeds to install expensive razor wire and electric fences that fail to pay dividends, unfortunately. There is relief at the end (denouement) when the farmer literally shrugs off the baboons from his back. At surface level the SMS is quite funny however as one digs deeper one poses a few questions, questions which force those in the profession to laugh with tears in their eyes:

1. Why did the farmer threaten the baboons with teacher training and not any other professional training?
2. What does this reveal about the profession?
3. Why did the SMS artist amongst the multiplicity of animals choose the baboon?

Even low animals, according to the SMS artist detest the conditions obtaining in the teaching profession. They could not stand them hence the decision to leave the farmer in peace.

### ***5. Nothing to show for the slog***

#### ***Original version***

*Afir a protracted strike by trs reporter aproches top politician to shed lite if solution is in site.*

*\*Politician: Ndaimbova tr. Chi tr hachibhadhari izvo ndinonyatsozviziva. In fact ndizvo zvakachiregera!*

*\*The SMS actually contained the politician's name.*

#### ***Edited version***

*After a protracted industrial action by teachers a reporter approaches a top politician to shed light if there is a solution in sight.*

*Politician: I was once a teacher. The profession is unrewarding-that I know for a fact. In fact that is why I quit!*

The SMS was circulated in response to a wave of industrial actions prevalent in Zimbabwe especially in 2007 and 2008 especially involving those in the teaching profession. When industrial actions take place those who would have withdrawn their labour and those directly affected anxiously besiege newspaper stands, radio and television sets to get the latest on the impasse. The SMS artist exploits this anxiety to good effect. The reporter approaches the politician to provide some information on what has been or is being done in an effort to resolve the stalemate. Instead the politician rubs salt in the wound by declaring that the teaching profession is inherently a low-paying one an utterance which suggests that those who are in it should not expect more than peanuts for their pay.

The SMS may also be seen as an indictment on the powers that be that have



let the profession lose its lustre because of insensitivity to the educators' plight. If the profession is, or is perceived as, unrewarding it is because of policies which are instituted which result in this perception. The woes bedeviling those in the profession as well as the negative perception emanate from society and society should repair the battered image of the teacher through responsible politicians. The gallivanting of the ex-teacher now turned politician from one job to another reflects on his mercenary attitude. To make matters worse he is performing dismally in his newfound but better paying profession judging from the quality of response he gives to the reporter.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has found that phone text messages pertaining to the teaching profession in Zimbabwe, short as their medium allows for, are so loaded with meaning that they require principles of literary criticism if their full meaning is to be appreciated and unraveled. They are also products of great writing expertise and ingenuity that scratch exactly where it itches and portray the lost lustre of the teaching profession with graphic exactness, economy, beauty of form and structure. Authorities would do well to take heed and adopt whatever steps it will require to mend the broken dignity of the teaching profession. In particular, remuneration teachers get needs to be permanently on the agenda so that the profession gets due seemliness.

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## Appendix

The following SMSs, which also touch on the subject of the erosion of the teaching profession and were gathered together with over one hundred others on a variety of subjects and were analysed by the same authors in *The Anatomy and Soul of S.M.Ss: A Study of Selected Messages as a New Form of Literature* in *Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education* Vol. 14 Issue 2, 2008 are brought here for the benefit of the readers.

### 1. Snatching morsels from mouths of babes

#### **Original version**

*A grd 1 ppl is seen by hed crying uncontrollably durng brek aftr mising hr sandwiches. The hed asks hr to provide nams of suspects fo furthr investigation to wich litle gal responds: 'Nditicha chete, hapana umwe asina mari muclass medu!'*

#### **Edited Version**

*A grade 1 pupil is seen by the head crying uncontrollably during break after missing her sandwiches. The head asks her to provide names of suspects for further investigation to which little girl responds: 'Nditicha chete, hapana umwe asina mari muclass medu!' [It's definitely our teacher. Nobody else is penniless in our class!]*

### 2. The visually handicapped beggar's bemusement

#### **Original version**

*Bofu rakakwira mubhazi rikaimba. Rikasvika kubackseat richingoimba. Rikadzokazve richingoimba. Asi hapana akakanda mari muchindiro. Rikati, 'Hezvo! Asi bhazi rino rizere maticha?'*

#### **Edited Version**

*A visually handicapped beggar got onto a bus and began singing (so as to ask for alms). The beggar sang all the way to the backseat. He/she retraced his/her steps, still in song. Nobody offered any cash. Surprised he/she asked: 'Could this be a busload of teachers?'*

### **3. The Unbelievable Z.E.S.A. bill (ZESA stands for Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority)**

#### **Original version**

*A child picks a paper @ e gat & rushes to e mothr excitedly shouting: 'Mama ,magets auya akazochipa mwedzi uno!e bil happens to b an abandoned tr's payslip.*

#### **Edited Version**

*A child picks a paper at the gate and rushes to the mother excitedly shouting: 'Mama ,magets auya akazochipa mwedzi uno!'(Mom,the electricity bill is so low this month!The 'bill' turns out to be a teacher's abandoned payslip!*

### **4. The boisterous Vendor**

#### **Original version**

*Reporter: Ambuya zvekutengese murivo namdomasi zvamunoita zvine chimuko here?*

*Vendor: Chaizvo M'kwasha! Ndinotoriritira mhuri ndichitosara nechange inotokwana kuhoresa mateacher matatu!*

#### **Edited version**

*Reporter: Ambuya, [literally means Mother-in-law, an honorary term reserved for elderly women], does any benefit accrue from your vegetable and tomato-selling venture?*

*Vendor: Indeed, M'kwasha! (literally means Son-in-law honorary term used here to show respect). I get enough for the upkeep of my family and remain with extra cash sufficient to pay for three teachers' salaries.*

### **5. Shock of the year**

#### **Original version**

*Ifil sorry for u. What I hrd about u is sad & hazviiti.  
Evyrone is talking about it & it hurts me as a friend.  
Is it tru that u r stil a tr?*

#### **Edited version**

*I feel very sorry for you. What I heard about you is sad and hazviiti.  
Everyone is talking about it and it hurts me as a friend Is it true that you are a still a teacher?*

*(hazviiti means'unbelievably ridiculous/terrible)*

*\*Titles were added to the text messages by the authors, they were not originally part of the SMSs.*



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