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THE IMPACT OF TEACHER TRADE UNIONISM ON QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

One of the main challenges in education today in South Africa is the provision of quality public education. In the debates about quality education, teachers are singled out as an important element to provide such education. This raises problems. On the one hand, teachers have become highly unionized workers and their activism exerts a significant influence and pressure on the quality of education delivered in schools. On the other hand, parents expect teachers to show commitment, willingness, preparedness and determination to perform their duties but not for teachers to sacrifice learners' quality education through union activities. This article presents the qualitative phase of the Sequential Explanatory Design strategy that was conducted in studying the impact of teacher trade unionism on the provision of quality public education, across three districts of education in the North West Province, Mpumalanga Province and Gauteng province respectively. The findings reveal that the demand for quality public education has put more pressure on teachers, who are expected to be committed to teaching despite the poor working conditions prevailing in schools. We concluded that teacher trade unionism will rise and that quality education will remain a pipe dream unless the working conditions are improved.

Keywords: Teacher Trade Unionism, quality public education, employment relations, working conditions.

INTRODUCTION

The provision of quality education is one of the main instruments for fostering human capabilities and overall freedoms so that individuals can lead the kind of lives they have reason to value. Education is also essential in building democratic values, improving human development and contributing to economic growth (Sen, 1999). Therefore, when an educational system is not performing well, the consequences are dire.

Quality education rests, by and large, on educators who stand at the edge of education provision by being in daily contact with the learners. Verbiest (2006) points out that education and learning take place in the classroom, where the educator is relatively autonomous. What the educator achieves in the classroom has a telling effect on the quality of education in general.

The quest for the provision of quality education in South Africa as one of the most important "public goods" of a democratic society was heralded by the White Paper on

Education and Training (DoE, 1995) and the Policy Framework for Quality Assurance in South Africa (DoE, 1998). In post-1994 South Africa, the South African Schools Act (SA, 1996) and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) changed the education scene, as educators were required to engage learners in meaningful learning activities suitable for a diverse learner population and implement and assess learner outcomes (Du Plessis, Conley & Du Plessis, 2007).

Rationale: The teaching profession in South Africa, as in many developed and developing countries, has become highly unionized, and that school-sector labour relations are characterized by multi-unionism and a high degree of inter-union rivalry. Teachers have become highly unionized workers and their trade unions exert a significant influence on the shaping and implementation of education policies in schools. Collective bargaining has become the bread-and-butter activity of teachers unions and the foundation of their survival and prosperity as organizations (Moe, 2011).

Campaigns for better conditions of service seem to be enjoying higher priority from the teachers' unions as

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more energy and resources are put on this responsibility, at the expense of other critical responsibilities such as professional development and teacher learner support programs. The level of teacher professionalism and the delivery of quality education in our schools is degrading day by day as teachers are absent from school, do not go to classes and their dress code leaves much to be desired, to mention just a few.

The traditional version of industrial unionism that assumes that a division exists between labour and management still reign supreme. According to this model, the union pursues 'the economic and day-to-day work concerns of the employees', while management establishes policy and makes operational decisions' (Koppich and Kerchner 1996).

In contrast to industrial unionism is the concept of 'professional unionism' required 'to balance teachers' legitimate self-interests with the larger interests of teaching as an occupation and education as an institution' (Kerchner & Kaufman, 1993). The basic tenets of emerging professional unionism have been stipulated by Koppich (1993) as comprising joint custody of reform, union management collaboration, and concern for the public interest.

Joint custody of reform entails an acceptance on the part of both management and union of shared responsibility for the change process. Union management collaboration refers to the main impetus propelling negotiations from the adversarial to the cooperative attempt to resolve mutually identified educational issues. Concern for the public interest involves recognition by the union of the impact of its actions in securing conditions for its members and its public responsibility for the welfare of education, or balancing public good with teacher self-interest (Koppich, 1993).

PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

A preliminary literature review shows that South Africa has a long history of teacher unionism, at an organizational level, the face of teacher unions has changed considerably, reflecting the changed socio-political landscape of South Africa in the 1990s (Govender, 2004). More importantly, given the changing nature of the state, teacher-state relations have changed. Overall, South African teacher unions currently enjoy a much closer relationship with government than they did before 1994.

Teacher unions are represented in joint policy-making forums such as the Education Labour Relations Council

(ELRC), the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC). They also have two representatives each in the Department of Education (DoE) who are employed to ensure collaboration and sharing of ideas, specifically with regard to curriculum and its implementation (Govender, 2004).

The analysis of the traditional labour relationship revealed that the power of an employer is best matched by a combination of workers who, by collective action, obtain concessions which would not otherwise have been granted and, in doing so; attempt to improve their position, both at the workplace and in society as a whole. It is this collective organization which forms the basis of trade unionism.

There are, admittedly, numerous informal ways in which employees or groups of employees can express perceptions and interests conflicting with those of management or resist controls imposed by management, but their resistance becomes all the more effective once they have established or joined some type of formal organization and appointed an effectual spokesman (Bendix, 1996).

Teachers are an important element of any education system and therefore the nature of their work is an important area of study. Heystek and Lethoko (2001a:222) point out that one of the main goals in education today in South Africa is to strive for the provision of quality public education, with the net result of improving examination results in the matriculation (school leaving) examination and the general standard of education. Smith and Schalekamp (1997) refer to this culture of learning and teaching as the attitude of teachers and learners towards learning and teaching.

Quality education means the commitment, willingness, preparedness and determination of teachers to perform their duties whereas for learners' quality education means their commitment, preparedness and determination to learn and to be taught (Lukhwani, 1995:5). Chisholm and Vally (199:2) also refer to quality education as "those school going habits and values which characterize both teachers and learners, these refer to regular attendance, punctuality and acceptance of authority". The question about teaching as a profession is important for the restoration of quality education (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001:223).

Heystek and Lethoko (2001:224) again point out that to address this situation; a development towards

professional unionism is a possible solution. According to Kerchner and Kaufman (1995), professional unionism is when the teachers and management work together, it is no longer “they versus us”, but “we”. Joint committees, peer review training and development are characteristics of this professional unionism.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

Trade Unionism in perspective: Trade unionism deals essentially with people who, because of their mutual involvement in a work situation, have been placed in a specific relationship with one another. The relationship formed is a human one and as such, will contain elements common to all other relationships such as friendship, marriage, business partnership, social, religious and political liaison (Bendix, 2001). Like all other relationships, the labour relationship will be nurtured by the mutuality of interest, reciprocity of support, understanding, trust, facilitative communication, shared goals and shared values; and that it will falter should one or more of these qualities be absent. The labour relationship is also multi-layered and dynamic, such change being dependent on the evolving status, needs, attitudes and perceptions of the parties concerned (Bendix, 2001).

An important factor in understanding teacher-state relations is teachers’ conceptions of the ideologies of professionalism and unionism (Govender, 2004). The traditional view, which juxtaposes these ideologies, has been the subject of much criticism, particularly since the early 1980s (Ginsburg, Meyenn & Miller, 1980). More recently, an approach emphasizing collaboration rather than confrontation, and advocating the complementarities of both professionalism and unionism, has emerged. Notions of ‘new realism’ and ‘professional unionism’ exemplify this approach (Torres, Cho, Kachur. Loyo, Mollis, Nagao & Thompson, 2000).

The notion of ‘new realism’ emphasizes improving services to members, regaining professional status and leadership in the educational debate and developing a long term vision for educational reform. In like vein, professional unionism, while retaining the traditional features of unionism and professionalism, goes further and recognizes the need for teacher unions to address issues of school productivity and efficiency as well as mechanisms for performance management, discipline and dealing with incompetence (Torres et al, 2000).

Moe (2011) argues that teachers unions have more influence on the public schools than any other group.

Their influence takes two forms. First, they shape the schools from the bottom up, through collective bargaining activities that are so broad in scope that virtually every aspect of the schools is somehow affected. Second, they shape the schools from the top down, through political activities that give them unrivalled influence over the laws and regulations imposed on public education by government. In combining bottom-up and top-down influence, and in combining them as potently as they do, teachers unions are unique among educational actors—and absolutely central to an understanding of America’s public schools. Unions are dedicated to protecting the jobs of all their members. The rules they insist upon, as a result, make it virtually impossible for the educational authorities to get rid of even the most poorly performing teachers, not to mention those that are merely mediocre. More fundamentally, they resist efforts to even measure teacher performance—through tests of teacher competence, for instance, or through assessments of classroom effectiveness (including how much students are learning). In the eyes of unions, performance evaluations create uncertainty for their members, force members to compete with one another, and put too much discretion in the hands of principals (Moe, 2011). It is Moe’s (2011) assertion that unions put the best public face on the positions they take in collective bargaining, arguing that what is good for teachers is good for kids and that they are just fighting for quality public schools. It is pretty obvious that many aspects of union influence (not all) have negative consequences for learners and schools. How can it be socially beneficial that schools can’t get rid of bad teachers? Or that teachers can’t be tested for competence? Or that teachers can’t be evaluated on the basis of how much their students learn? Or that principals are so heavily constrained that they can’t exercise leadership of their own schools?

Research strategy: This qualitative study was conducted by means of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with Teachers, Heads of Departments in schools, Principals and District Officials selected across Moretele District in the North West Province, Nkangala District in Mpumalanga and Tshwane North District in Gauteng respectively. The selection of participants was done through the use of purposive sampling technique. A benefit of conducting face-to-face interviews is that it enables the researcher to gain participants’ cooperation

by establishing a relationship with them, which therefore facilitates the production of high response rates. Measor (1985: 57) maintains that it is important to build a cordial relationship with the participants because the quality of data is enhanced when there is an element of trust. Establishing such relationships enabled the researcher to gain more information and generate more data than the data collected during the first phase of the study (quantitative component).

A set of predetermined open-ended questions on an interview schedule was developed to guide the researcher during the interviews. All respondents were asked the same questions as they appear in the interview schedule. These questions were selected from the results that emerged during the analysis of the quantitative data gathered through the questionnaires.

Questions which were selected are those in which respondents extremely agreed or disagreed with the statements as they were presented in the questionnaires. Participants were guided and encouraged during the interviews to share their experiences and views regarding the impact of teacher trade unions on quality public education. The following questions were asked:

- How do teachers show their commitment towards providing quality public education?
- Is the environment in which teachers work conducive for providing quality public education?
- How do unions help to create an environment that is conducive to providing quality public education?
- Why teachers think that unions have a strong influence on the department's programs and policies.
- Why unions give high priority to professionalism and professional development?
- Do unions respect learners' time as a means of assisting them to achieve academically?

Description of Sample and Participants: For the purpose of this study participants were selected by means of applying a purposive sampling technique. My choice was informed by the explanations of Gall, Gall and Borg (1996) and Welman and Kruger (1999) that such sampling is used when the researcher wants to select only those cases from which he or she can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the study.

Respondents in the interviews were selected from those who participated in phase one of the study by completing the questionnaire. Explanatory mixed methods designs require that same respondent be used in both data collection processes (Maree, 2012).

A total of thirteen (13) participants were selected across the three districts mentioned above. The information on the description of participants was extracted from the demographic data which formed section A of the interview schedule. The average teaching experience of the participants is 23 years. All the participants have got an Honours Degree as their minimum qualification and the highest qualification amongst the participants is a PhD degree in Comparative Education. Some participants are still pursuing their studies in different education related fields, these educational backgrounds add to the credibility of their opinions on educational issues.

Data analysis approach: For this study, content analysis as data analysis strategy was employed. Content analysis is a process of looking at data from different angles with a view to identifying keys in the text that would help to understand and interpret the raw data (Maree, 2012). Patton (2002) also points out that, qualitative researchers have an obligation to monitor and report the analytic procedures they use in their work. This means that they must observe their own processes, and analyse and report on the analytical process.

In formulating questions for the interview schedule, the researchers looked for statements in the questionnaire findings which respondents highly agreed or disagreed with and translated them into interview questions to further probe the reasons behind such responses.

FINDINGS

These findings are based on both the literature study and the empirical research that was conducted. Direct quotations have been used to substantiate certain findings. These quotations are typed in italics in this article. Data analysis of the interview transcripts yielded the following results:

Perceptions of respondents on teachers' commitment towards providing quality public education: Majority of the respondents corroborated the findings that were yielded in the questionnaires and they further provided ways on how teachers show this commitment. They indicated that most of the teachers attend workshops even during weekends and school

holidays that are organized by the department in order to improve their teaching skills.

Respondents further indicated that some teachers show their commitment by teaching learners during weekends, conducting morning and afternoon classes and going to class on time and well prepared. One school principal had this to say:

"... Teachers at both primary and secondary schools hold extra classes with learners in order to improve the quality of education in our schools. We also witness some even going to school on Saturdays without being paid and just for the sake of the children. That in itself shows commitment from teachers".

Weekends and holidays are regarded as teachers' private time. So to see teachers sacrificing their private to be developed in order to be better teachers without any reward is actually a sign of commitment towards the provision of quality education by teachers. All these efforts are done in order to help learners to perform better during the end of the year final examinations. Some meet with the parents of the learners who are not doing well in class to advise them on how to help their children at home so that they could improve.

Respondents had, however, in the same breath acknowledged that while the majority of teachers are doing their best to provide our learners with quality teaching and learning, there are also some who are doing just the opposite of that. One district official had this to say:

"... We have schools that are consistently producing 100% pass at the end of the year in Matric. When you look at such schools you will see discipline and commitment on the side of the teachers. But there are then some of the schools that will be producing 40% and less at the end of the year. When you look at management of the school there is no commitment, discipline and sense of urgency. Where there is no discipline you cannot expect good results".

Perceptions of respondents on suitability of the schooling environment for teachers to provide quality education: Respondents in the study disagreed that the environment in which teachers work is conducive to providing quality public education. Majority of the respondents during the interviews corroborated this finding by also indicating that most of the environment in which teachers are working is indeed not conducive for providing quality public

education. Lack of adequate recourses in most school was mentioned as the main obstacle that makes quality teaching and learning to be very difficult in most schools. Most schools in rural and some in township schools are still having dilapidated classes. The department is currently replacing brick classrooms with container classrooms. These classrooms are noisy which affects concentration by learners in other classes where there is a teacher. The learner ratio in class was also cited as another obstacle. A high number of learners in classrooms affects teaching and learning as teachers are unable to provide individual attention to struggling learners. One teacher raised this complaint:

"No the environment is not conducive at all. In our school we teach in mobile containers. When it is hot they become hot and when it is cold they also become cold and that affects proper teaching and learning. The number of learners in class is too high and that prevent teachers from moving around the class as there is no space making the teacher to stay at the front all the time."

Teachers' working conditions affect their ability to provide quality education. Many aspects of school life and educational policy go into teachers' perceptions of their employment. As mentioned above, the condition of infrastructure, availability of textbooks and learning materials and class sizes all influence the teacher's experience as an educator (Postlewaithe,1998).

Well-managed schools and classrooms contribute to educational quality. Students, teachers and administrators should agree upon school and classroom rules and policies, and these should be clear and understandable. Order, constructive discipline and reinforcement of positive behaviour communicate a seriousness of purpose to learners (Craig, Kraft & du Plessis, 1998).

Perceptions of respondents on the help of unions towards creating an environment that is conducive to providing quality public education: Most of the respondents in the interviews indicated that they do not see how unions are helping in creating an environment conducive to providing quality education. What most respondents mentioned is that unions are only interested in protecting their members against any form of danger that might come from the authorities. Their view is that it should be the department that does since they have enough resources to hire additional teachers and to buy

required teaching and learning material missing in some schools. One deputy principal had this to say:

"The main aim and role of unions in schools is to provide labour peace, to support all stake holders in schools for peace to prevail so that quality teaching and learning can take place and to intervene where there are problems. However what we see unions doing in our schools is just the opposite. Most schools in our district are divided across union affiliation; we have the so called SADTU and NAPTOSA schools. This practice turns to forget that learners have no unions and when we teach them we need to do that without union considerations. For as long as union officials continue to promote this unhealthy practice, quality teaching and learning will forever be compromised."

Some respondents further indicated that the bad image that unions create some of our schools has parents worried about the quality of teaching which their children get those schools. One teacher had this to say:

"My neighbour asked me to recommend to her a primary school in our neighbourhood where she could enrol her child who was to start school. She indicated beforehand that she does not want a SADTU school. I then asked her what she meant by SADTU school. Her answer was that there is a popular believe amongst parents that schools that have SADTU members do not do their work accordingly because they spent most of their time attending meetings during contact time and there are also strong possibilities that they might go on strike at any time as a result of that the education of children from those schools is compromised."

Parents tend to see academic achievement as closely related to the opportunity for social promotion and employment. They tend to attach more importance to educational outcomes as a measure of school quality than students, teachers or principals (Gaziel, 1996). Just as parents seek favourable outcomes, such as academic achievement and eventual employment, they seek to avoid outcomes they view as negative. Parents who view education unfavourably cite the following potential outcomes: children do not respect their parents, school leavers consider themselves superior to their fellow villagers, school leavers become delinquents, girls object to the traditional rules governing marriage, and school girls do not master the required domestic duties (Bergmann, 1996).

Perceptions of respondents on unions' strong

influence on the department's programs and policies: Majority of the respondents indicated that unions use their numerical advantage to intimidate and force the department to accept unions' policy proposals and programs that are geared at benefiting educators most of the time. Programs and policy proposals from the department which unions perceive to be having the potential of threatening the status quo or disadvantaging educators - even if how good and world class those policies and programs can be - are criticized vehemently by union officials.

Threads of embarking on an industrial action against such policies are even canvassed in order to discourage the department from implementing them. Respondents also indicated that such tactics by unions do work favourably for them more often than not. One respondent had this to say:

"... So in the formulation of policies unions will in no doubt exact their influence so that whatever policies are adopted they are in line with what most of educators or members will enjoy...department is helpless and frustrated by unions when their proposals are rejected and those of unions receiving support...IQMS the biggest union SADTU does not support it and they are doing everything in their power to make it fail. This frustrates the department as there is nothing that they can do as SADTU is aligned to the ruling ANC party".

Some respondents feel that the deployment of cadres by the majority union SADTU into key senior strategic positions of the department in all levels is another reason that makes unions to exact their influence on the determination of programs and policies of the department. The people who are representing the employer at the ELRC and Provincial Chambers are senior office bearers of the majority union SADTU. Respondents are of the view that even though they are now wearing the employer's cap, loyalty to the union that put them into those positions will always take a Centre stage, as a result making them to be more sympathetic to the unions' course as opposed to the department's wishes and aspiration with regard to how the education system is to be run. One respondent had this to say in this regard:

"It is true that unions have a strong influence in the department's...because they have power over most of these officials in the department and these officials on issues that are hot and having the potential of

straining relationships, are afraid to speak out their own voices as they fear that they would be removed from their positions because most of them got there through SADTU's recommendations and not on merit. So, defying SADTU when now you are an official would be like biting the hand that feeds you".

Some respondents think that this influence is as a result of the power of persuasion applied by unions as they bargain either in the ELRC or Provincial Chambers of the department of education. A forum like ELRC is where unions exact their influence on how things should be done rather than just agreeing with the department's proposals. One respondent had these to say:

"I also agree, for the policies to have a thumbs up, they must be discussed in the ELRC with unions first because they are the representatives of members and they should first satisfy themselves that what is to be given to members has the backing of unions. If unions do not support a policy proposal... that policy will also never get the backing of teachers, hence the feeling by teachers that unions are influential when coming to these issues".

Perceptions of respondents on unions' prioritization of professionalism and professional development programs for quality public education: Majority of the respondents during the interviews seemed to disagree with the findings of the questionnaire on the prioritization of professionalism and professional development by unions. According to them, unions are mostly concerned with fringe benefits as against professionalism. They also indicated that they are not aware of the existence of such programs in their unions and if they are there they have never reached the areas where they are employed. They also indicated that most of the time such programs are organised by the department and some NGOs and not from the unions. One respondent had this to say:

"I really do not agree that professionalism and professional development are highly prioritized in unions, not unless if you talk about white unions like SAOU. From my observation our black unions, SADTU to be more specific, are more on benefits than professionalism. They are there to fight with management in schools which leads to instability rather than promoting professionalism".

Some respondents, however, did agree with the statement. Their view is based on the fact that teaching as a profession requires a high level of professionalism

and also requires teachers as practitioners of the profession to be constantly developed in as far as improving their professional ethics in order to mitigate the constantly changing teaching and learning environment. They see unions as being better placed to handle this challenge since teachers are their affiliates and they pay more attention to them better than they would do to any authoritative voice. One respondent said:

"I think it is because if there are chaos in schools as a result of unprofessional behavior of teachers, unions are the ones to be blamed for such disorder as teachers belong to them, so it is therefore important for them to promote and prioritize professional conduct amongst teachers to protect their image and for quality teaching and learning to take place".

Bascia (2000) emphasizes that despite the common belief that unions are more concerned with the salary, compensation and benefits of its members than with their growth in the profession in order to deliver quality education, teacher unions should working more and more to change this perspective. Bascia (2000) furthermore stresses that teacher unions' professional development strategies should focus on helping teachers to respond to policy demands which are aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning, especially when these demands have been given by policy-makers who do not offer specific technical explanations or support to implement them.

Perceptions of respondents on unions' respect of learners' time as a means of assisting them to achieve academically: Majority of the respondents during the interviews indicated that unions do not respect learners' time because they call their meetings during contact time thus disrupting the teaching and learning momentum. The quality of a school and the quality of teaching of the individual teacher is higher in schools that are able to make more efficient use of the available time of its teachers and its pupils (Verwimp, 1999). One respondent had this to say:

"... for example the union I belong to has called a march tomorrow which will last the whole day and learners are not coming to school and that will mean that learners are going to lose on valuable time. Fewer efforts are made to cover the lost time".

Fuller (1999) argues that to achieve academically, children must attend school consistently. A child's exposure to curriculum — his or her 'opportunity to

learn' — significantly influences achievement, and exposure to curriculum comes from being in school and teachers' constant presence in the classroom represents the starting point. Learning occurs when teachers engage students in instructional activities, rather than attending to administrative or other non-instructional processes (Fuller, 1999).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Within schools and classrooms, a welcoming and non-discriminatory climate is critical to creating a quality learning environment. The above state of affairs as a result of teacher unions' influence in the education system will undoubtedly have an effect on the quality of education that is offered in our public schools.

Quality public education depends entirely on the commitment of teachers. Teachers' working conditions affect their ability to provide quality education. Many aspects of school life and educational policy go into teachers' perceptions of their employment. As mentioned above, the condition of infrastructure, availability of textbooks and learning materials and class sizes all influence the teacher's experience as an educator (Postlewaithe, 1998).

The findings in the study showed that there are still teachers who show commitment in their work. This commitment is shown when teachers attend workshops during weekends and also during school holidays. Weekends and holidays are regarded as teachers' private time. So to see teachers sacrificing their private time to be developed in order to be better teachers without any reward is actually a sign of commitment towards the provision of quality education by teachers.

Effective teachers are highly committed and care about their students and need supportive working conditions to maintain these positive attitudes (Craig, Kraft, & du Plessis, 1998).

Teacher trade unions do exert a profound influence in the running of the countries education system. This influence can be seen as both positive on the one hand and negative on the other. It is positive in the sense that unions are still holding firm to their traditional role and a key responsibility of fighting for the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of their members.

This high percentage of union membership (according to the findings) is motivated by the need to consolidate the working class power during the interaction with education authorities on matters affecting the well-being of members. Teachers become committed and effective

in the execution of their work when they work under conducive working conditions in order to maintain their positive attitude (Craig, Kraft, & du Plessis, 1998).

The influence is also negative in that the key expectations of the clients (parents, children and society at large), of a highly rated and indispensable service and ethos to others (interests of the client come first) by teachers is compromised (Heystek & Lethoko 2001). The fact that more often than not union activities, like general meetings, are still being organized during contact time is an indictment on the unions in that; They are seen to be more concerned about their interests than promoting efficiency and effective teaching and learning environments in schools that would allow for dissemination of a quality public education. Since such tendencies are seen to be interfering with the school programs and they will have (in the long run) a negative outcome on the quality of education dispensed in public schools.

The negative influence can also be characterized by unions' lack of interest in disciplining members who behave unprofessionally. This creates the perception amongst; the parents, interest groups in education and society at large, that unions do promote and condone unprofessionalism in schools. Parents tend to see academic achievement as closely related to the opportunity for social promotion and employment. They tend to attach more importance to educational outcomes as a measure of school quality than students, teachers or principals (Gaziel, 1996). 1996).

Teacher trade unions need to review their strategies and their role in the way they seek to exact their influence so that they can become relevant with the international trends on the role of that unions play in this day and age. Failure to heed the call will see our public education system being high jacked by unions which seek to fulfil their narrow socioeconomic and political interests at the expense of the previously disadvantaged black children who have pinned their hopes only on the public education system in order to get out of poverty they find themselves consumed in.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, it can be concluded that despite union activism and the challenge of lack of resources, in their own perspective, some teachers feel committed to teaching and the improvement of learners' performance. They believe that the quality of education is affected by poor working conditions and poverty pervading the

education system. So, no teacher should be blamed for the poor quality of education. They put the blame squarely on the education system. However, other teachers generally disagree with this assertion. Those who disagree perceive unions as working against professionalism and the quality of education.

It can also be concluded that teacher unions the education system is captured by powerful unions who dictate to the Department what should happen in the schools. The Department cannot introduce any policy or programme without the approval of the unions. To weaken itself the Department has employed union officials in key positions of the schooling system such as principals, and district officials who are sympathetic to unions. No union member can be punished for slacking on the job. Thus, children's education held to ransom by the influence the unions have on the Department and the government.

Finally, it can also be concluded that in the eyes of the public, unions are perceived as organizations who selfishly focus on their members' fringe benefits than the education of children. To the public unions have abdicated their responsibilities, and thereby sacrificed the quality of education and pay scant attention to teachers' professionalism. Unions are seen as contributing to the increasing chaos in schools by disrupting classes with meetings and strikes.

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