



Unearthing Constraints Experienced by Teacher Unions in Improving the Learning Environment in Schools in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The study unearths constraints experienced by teachers' unions in promoting a peaceful learning environment in selected schools of Lusaka, district, Zambia. A case study design was employed on a target population that comprised participants from primary and secondary schools and teacher unions. Expert purposive sampling technique was applied to sample 28 participants from teacher union officials in Lusaka District. Data generated was through interviews and Document Review which was analyzed using themes. Emergent findings revealed that the teachers' unions faces a myriad of challenges such as inadequate resources, limited knowledge and skills, inaccessible leadership and inadequate financial support in their quest to contribute to a peaceful school environment. Thus, it is recommended among others that, Unions should consider building capacity on resource mobilization and optimal resource utilization, as well as enhancement of mutual consultations with the Ministry of Education and teachers to discuss matters relating to how they can contribute towards raising the standards of learning environment in schools.

Keywords: Teacher Unions; Peaceful Learning Environment; Education; Schools; Lusaka; Zambia

INTRODUCTION

In Zambia just like elsewhere, teacher unions play a major role in education policy making. This has been primarily through their effect on the professionalization of the teaching force and their policy advocacy. Through publications, courses, and leadership opportunities, unions likely have positively contributed to instruction and teachers' sense of purpose. Through policy advocacy, unions have informed governments of crucial local knowledge, have contributed towards research, and established mechanisms of collaboration [1]. However, there is a need for more research on the role of public sector teachers' unions towards learning in public schools. As such, much has appeared in the literature about this polarizing topic. The public

domain is the sector where most teachers work, where teachers' unions are strongest, and where learners are most disadvantaged.

On one hand, policymakers have criticized teachers' unions as hindrances to quality-enhancing change due to union policy preferences and strike activity. On the other hand, teachers' unions argue that they have played an important positive role in education. Specialists have fallen on both sides [2]. In the public debate on education, these two points of view have been exaggerated and politicized. In academic terms, the conclusion that unions play just one role is highly suspect [3]. In this study the researcher endeavors to explore the contribution teachers' unions have played in education particularly in Zambia with reference to learning environment in schools. This study refrains from making causal arguments and instead aim to show that there have been instances where unions have positively affected the quality of education through two mechanisms: by contributing to professionalization (the development of teacher skills) [4]; and by advocating for educational improvements [5].

Statement of the Problem

Teacher unions and the contracts that result from teacher unions' bargaining are thought to have strong implications for education policy at all levels of government [6]. Although there is much speculation and discussion of the role of teacher unions in education and policy, little is known about the contribution of teacher unions towards creating a peaceful learning environment in schools. Various studies [7]; [8]; [9] report that questions of teacher unions' impact on learning outcomes are largely unanswered. This is also noted by [10] who contends that what is clear is that teacher' unions do impact the teacher welfare by raising teachers' salaries and conditions of service as a whole, and their effect on learning outcomes in schools is not known. Although teacher unions and their collective bargaining agreements may differ in important ways, understanding how teacher unions impact learning environment is important, given that this study reveal that so little is known about the contribution of teachers' unions in creating a peaceful learning environment in schools. Hence, understanding the contribution of teacher unions on improvement of learning environment in schools is important in its own right. The purpose of the study was to unearth constraints experienced by teachers' unions in promoting a peaceful learning environment in selected schools in Lusaka, District.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework discusses a theory that guided this study. The study was guided by Basic Human Needs theory of conflict management advance by [11]. This theory helped the researcher in exploring the contribution of Teachers' Unions in promoting peaceful learning environment in schools. [11] in his Basic Human Needs theory of conflict management proposed that humans need a number of essentials to survive and thrive. If these needs are denied, they strive to attain them by any means necessary. According to Burton, human needs are in born and are a part of the basic make-up of every human being as the elemental requirements for human development, as such; they are both universal and trans-historical, relevant to every community at every point in human history.

The appropriateness of [11] Basic Human Needs Theory of conflict management in this study sits on information that schools in Zambia have leaders who are divided into groups. These groups are: School administrators; Teacher Union leaders; Teachers and Parent Teachers

Committees, who each has the need to protect their identities and security while involved in an activity of promoting peaceful learning environment in school. Burton argued that failure to satisfy identities and security by leaders in schools would lead to dysfunctional development, frustration and protracted conflicts hence affecting the peaceful learning environment in schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Constraints faced by Teachers Unions

According to [12] in a study conducted in Argentina on “The economic effects of unions in Latin America: Teachers’ unions and education in Argentina” examine the impact of teachers’ unions on various education outcomes in Argentina, the findings revealed that school days lost to strikes negatively impacted student performance on the 1997 and 1999 national assessments; teacher tenure, a major union demand, has a positive effect on student achievement but increases absenteeism; union strength is weakly associated with smaller class sizes; and where teachers’ unions are legally recognized, a higher share of the provincial education budget goes toward wages.

[13] conducted a study on “The Effect of Teachers’ Unions on Student Achievement in the Short Run: Evidence from Wisconsin’s Act 10 E”. This study examines the short-run impact of a weakening of teachers’ unions on student achievement. Exploiting plausibly exogenous variation in the timing of exposure to Act 10 due to differences in the expiration dates of pre-existing collective bargaining agreements across school districts, found that the law reduced average test scores on the state’s standardized exam by approximately 20% of a standard deviation. The also study explores plausible mechanisms behind the observed decline in achievement, and presents evidence that the law led to a significant increase in teacher turnover and a large reduction in teacher salaries. Some studies bear out this opposition. For example, there is evidence that in the U.S., there is an inverse relationship between incentive schemes and strong teachers’ unions. In their analyses of performance pay variation across the U.S., [14] and [15] conclude that districts with stronger unions, as measured by having a collective bargaining agreement, are less likely to have merit pay. Conversely, there is some evidence that unions are open to incentive schemes.

[16] in a study “The Effect of Teachers’ Unions on Educational Outcomes Simon”. Using panel data from 1960 to 1990 established that unionization has no effect on student outcomes. While they may change the sources of revenue, teachers’ unions do not affect school budgets. Similarly, instrumental variable estimation using changes in state-level collective bargaining law finds non-positive effects of unionization on school inputs. Consequently, a study conducted by [17] on “Alternative Discourses of Teacher Professionalism of Union Active Teachers and Teacher Unions” revealed that a triad of influences on the professionalism discourses of union-active teachers: engagement in teacher associations, the larger policy environment, and teacher agency. More specifically, participants’ inner drive to affect change, coupled with the capacity building experiences gained through their teacher association, saw many participants enacting and espousing discourses that positioned teachers as learners, leaders, advocates, and autonomous experts. In this way the study illustrates the power of teachers and their unions to alter the balance between democratic discourses which position teachers as advocates, agents, and policy actors; and neoliberal portrayals of teachers as the objects of educational reforms.

[8] considered a topic “Are teachers’ unions really to blame? The study examined the relationships between CBA strength and district spending on multiple areas and district-level student performance in California. The findings revealed that districts with more restrictive contracts have higher spending overall, but that this spending appears not to be driven by greater compensation for teachers but by greater expenditures on administrators’ compensation and instruction-related spending. Although districts with stronger CBAs spend more overall and, on these categories, they spend less on books and supplies and on school board related expenditures.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Case study design was ideal for this study as it allowed an insight investigation and focus on the specific case (the contribution of Teacher unions in promoting peaceful learning environment in schools) and understand it in detail. Consequently, a case study design provided the researcher with a contextual understanding of the current study. Because of its qualitative aspect, a case study offered the researcher a more in-depth understanding of the contribution of teacher unions in promoting peaceful learning environment in schools based on the experiences from the participants.

Study Population

A population is a group of individuals, objects or items from which samples are drawn for measurement [18]. The population for this study comprised all national teacher union officials of Zambia National Union of Teachers; The Secondary School Teacher’s Union of Zambia; Basic Education Teachers Union of Zambia; Professional Teachers Union of Zambia; sampled teachers and selected teacher union leaders at school level in primary and secondary schools in Lusaka District.

Sample Size

[19] argues that a sample of a research should be truly representative of population characteristics without any bias so that it may result in valid and reliable conclusions. The sample size for the current study comprised 20 participants as follows:

SN	Target Group	Sample (Officials Head Quarter)	Sampled in Schools
A	ZNUT	3	2 teachers X 2 schools = 4
B	SESTUZ	3	2 teachers X 2 schools = 4
C	BETUZ	3	2 teachers X 2 schools = 4
D	PROTUZ	3	2 teachers X 2 schools = 4
Total		12	16

Sampling Procedure

The researcher selected the sample 28 participants from the population of teacher union national leadership and four-member teacher unionists in schools who were or are in the national leadership of teacher unions, given that in Lusaka, social dialogue in education and consultation between the Ministry of Education and teacher unions are centralized.

Using purposive sampling, the researcher was enabled to rely on the knowledge and experience of teacher unionists, in order to purposefully identify the key participants from each

of the teacher union secretariats: National Zambia National Union of Teachers (ZNUT); Secondary School Teacher's Union of Zambia (SESTUZ); Basic Education Teachers Union of Zambia (BETUZ); and Professional Teachers Union of Zambia (PROTUZ) who constituted the interview sample.

Data Generation Instruments

To achieve triangulation in data collection methods and instruments, the researcher combined interviews, focus group discussion and document review in data collection process.

Semi-Structured Interview and Telephone Interview

The researcher used semi-structured interviews, as one of the data collection tools for the study. According to [20] semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to engage in conversation with participants through more down-to-earth questions, while the participants are also allowed to express themselves freely on their experiences. One to one interview method was used to collect data from the teacher union leadership on the basis that qualitative inquiry usually produces in-depth data. It is from this description that the researcher was able to understand participants' experiences on the contributions of teacher unions in the improvement of learning environment in schools. The premise for using semi-structured interview was to get in-depth understanding of the national teacher unions' officials experiences, views and opinions on contribution of teacher unions in promoting peaceful learning environment in schools.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The researcher conducted four focus group interviews with four representatives of teacher unions per session in selected schools in Lusaka. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to follow up with three-member teacher unionists, and seek further explanations, especially on, the contributions of teacher unions in the improvement of learning environment in schools.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The researcher employed document review for systematic evaluation of the documents that was deemed to provide evidence to the study findings. The document that the researcher analyzed included; minutes of teacher union meetings, teacher union congress reports and resolutions, proceeding reports of some consultative conferences and meetings convened during the education reforms, written submissions of teacher unions, and newspaper articles and books, especially on education and educational reforms.

Data Generation Procedure

Before conducting the interviews, permission was from the District Education Board Secretary and head teachers of the sampled schools and teacher union secretariats. The researcher made prior arrangements with the participants on time and dates for conducted interviews and focus group discussions respectively. The national teacher union officials and teachers were subjected to interviews at separate convenient times and dates.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis began with a transcription of all the interviews. The researcher transcribed the interviews listened to all the recorded interviews, following them against each transcript. The purpose was to ensure that the transcriptions were properly done, and to make any

corrections and additions. The researcher listened to the recordings several times, and also read the transcripts several times. The researcher did this for two reasons, firstly, to make all the necessary corrections and editorial changes, so that the ideas were coherently represented. Secondly, to begin to make sense of the interviews as a whole, and to identify emerging ideas to be developed into the themes of the study. The researcher entered the transcripts after corrections, and used the thematic analysis to code the data. Thematic analysis is a research technique for making qualitative data replicable and valid inferences from the meaningful matter to the contexts of their use [28]. The coded data were then sorted and organized in themes.

DATA QUALITY ASSURANCE

In this study, objectivity fails because naturalistic inquiries employ the human and their values as an instrument. In response, [21] propose the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to address trustworthiness and quality in naturalistic inquiry. Hence trustworthiness employed to ensure consistent with naturalistic inquiry for data quality.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conducting the study, the researcher was aware of my position in relation to ethical issues. The researcher also disclosed and explained the purpose of the research and the ethical requirements of the University of Zambia, both in the invitation letters to the participants, and before the start of each interview. The clearance for conducting research on the current study was obtained from the University of Zambia. Permission to reach out sampled schools was obtained from District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) for Lusaka district.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Constraints Faced by Teachers Unions and Learning Environment in Schools.

The study revealed some challenges that unions faced in the provision of workers' education. These are discussed under the following sub themes;

Lack of Resources

The study revealed that teacher unions had constraints with financial resources. The participants from national teacher unions' secretariats indicated that the teacher unions' organization depended on funding from the members monthly subscriptions. The teacher union organizations cited lack of resources as one of the challenges they faced in the provision of workers' education. The resources lacked included educational materials, time and money. One official from teacher union secretariat said that:

'A financial resource is very important in running every Programme. We fail to play some of our roles because of lack of finances. For example, to conduct worker education using the media we need to pay, to visit out our members we need fuel so when funding delays even our programmes also delays or come to a standstill'

Literature reveals that whilst teacher unions in Africa are faced with challenges in providing supportive working environment, the situation in Western countries is quite different. The argument has been that, effective teacher union representation highly motivates teachers when their working environment has well infrastructures, health and safe to operate in. [22]revealed, teacher unions in the United States of America seriously fight for supportive working

environment for its members and this seriously influences how they view their work and how it affects students.

LIMITED SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

The teacher union leaders at school level indicated that limited knowledge and skills was another constraint that surrounded the teacher unions. They indicated that limited knowledge and skills was a problem because most of the information was not trickled down to union leadership in lower structures in handling union matters and no clear knowledge on guidelines and roles of leadership in lower structures. From the response from participant from union leadership in schools, the study established that there was poor information flow from the top organs. One member from the leadership at school level commented that:

There is no difference between us and their rest of the members in school because information does not reach us we just hear things happening from the higher structures

When information flow is poor, it translates into lack of adequate knowledge and culminates into ignorance. impacted on the calibre of leadership needed in the unions to drive their vision regarding education. The study reveals that good communication between teacher unions and schools was important to feed policy on education reforms matters for ensuring improved learning environment. Just like [23] observes that stakeholder input to education policy processes presupposes that the participants have the knowledge, skills and interest to engage effectively in policy debates.

INACCESSIBLE LEADERSHIP

The study established that members faced problems in accessing services from their union because of the inaccessible nature of their union national and local representatives. Some participants revealed that they did not know the names of their union officials while others claimed that they did not know the physical address of their local union branch. These challenges were mostly revealed by Union '3' members. This can be attributed to the young age of the Union '3' which means that the union has not adequately covered the entire nation. One of the national teacher union officials commented that:

We have a strong opposing from our members that we are not accessible to them because we don't reach out to them and many complain that they don't even know the union leadership at national, province and district.

The study findings indicate that the teacher unions at school, district, province and national secretariat levels have de-linked themselves from the general membership. The study revealed that some teachers did not know their teacher union leadership; the teacher union leadership did not visit to check on the welfare and livelihood of the general membership; there was minimal contact between the union leadership and their general membership; if the national leaders was fair and equitable enough they would have procured vehicles for district teacher union leadership to easy movement to visit the general membership in schools; provincial and national teacher union leadership are very greedy and selfish. This is contrary to [24] who describes the roles of local union representatives as to regularly communicate with members, advice members, assist teachers resolve issues, promote needs and interests of teachers in schools, ensure all members are in benefit, and ensure that members are aware of work rights and legal assistance.

The study revealed that meetings between teacher members and union representatives at the school level are not held regularly. This is contrary to the studies by [25] who indicate that meetings between teachers and unions are important as they focus on updates and finding out teacher's grievances. Also, the finding is contrary to [26] who also observed meetings between teachers and union representatives, channels teacher's different views and grievances and places them before management, as it is impossible for management to view their grievances. Meetings are important events, which must be held regularly by local unions and teacher members, so that they are updated on new developments taking place in the ministry of education and teachers are also given a forum to bring out their views and grievances. In line with the finding, [27] advises that failure to organize meetings by local union representatives with teachers reflects lack of seriousness and commitment on the part of union representatives. From the findings of the study, there is an indication of inconsistency in holding of meetings between the teachers and local unions.

Minimal Financial Support

The Unionists interviewed from teacher unions said that there was minimal financial support for the expenditure on teacher union organizations from government, Civil Society Organizations and Donors. Document review on financial support showed that the teacher unions depended entirely on the funds from teacher members' subscription for their operations. The study found that lack of financial support and aid was a constraint on the part of teacher unions to implement programs and intervention in over 10,000 schools dotted around the country. One unionist commented that:

'We have over 10,000 schools dotted around the country that require support. Government and its corporate partners with a lot of aid fail to provide the needed support to improve school environment because schools were too many. Looking at that background, do you expect a teacher union who depends on member subscriptions manage to provide support to improve school environment without the support of government?'

The findings show that failure to play some of the roles by teacher union is because of lack of finances. Consequently, the state of affairs has led to failure to conduct worker education using the media and visit out to members. Poor information flow from the top organs to the rest of the members in school was a problem because of inaccessible leadership. Lack of corporate support and aid was a constraint on the part of teacher unions to implement programs and intervention target the improvement of learning environment in schools as observed by [28], [29], [30].

In the midst of all the challenges, this study established that teacher unions have a crucial role to play with regard to educational programmes, policies and reforms [31], [32], [33], [34]. In fact, the unions are responsible for the coordination of their members and there is no educational policy that can succeed without sufficient consultation with the teacher, who is the person who deals directly with the daily encounters of the classroom situation. The study reveals that teacher unions were well resourced, owing to the fact that they receive subscription fees from their members. As a result, they are a structured and organized labour force and can play a meaningful role in the formulation and implementation of policies focusing on the educational sector. In contrast, the findings reveal that [35], [36] also observed, splinter unionism does not strengthen unions, because the unions engage with each other in competition for members

instead of concentrating on addressing the plight of teachers. Therefore, the creation of too many teacher unions could be attributed to greediness, selfishness and vanity by some individuals.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Given a myriad of constraints such as lack of finances, poor information flow, detached leadership to membership among others faced by teacher unions in their quest to contribute to improved teachers and learners learning environment in schools, teachers' expectations are not adequately met. It is clear that, when information flow is poor, it translates into inadequate knowledge and this culminates into ignorance which ultimately inhibits productivity. Consequently, failure to fulfil membership expectation by teacher unions appear to have led to an emergent opinion among members to view teacher unions as not representing their interest during contractual bargaining, a state of affairs teacher unions needed to improve upon. The state of affairs could lead to dysfunctional development, frustration and protracted conflicts hence affecting the peaceful learning environment in schools.

Recommendations

- i. The unions should consider building membership capacity on resource mobilization and optimal utilization to contribute to improved learning environment in schools.
- ii. Unions should also organize activities which may help to improve learning environment in schools, such as awards for the best performing teachers and schools.
- iii. The teacher unions should enhance mutual consultations with the Ministry of Education and teachers to discuss matters relating to how they can contribute towards raising the standards of learning environment in schools.
- iv. Teacher unions should continue providing guidance to its membership on how workers' welfare could be improved in schools.

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