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Teacher Unions, Schools and Success: Opportunities and Contradictions

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Abstract. Teacher unionisation is among the under-researched themes in South Africa. The few teacher union studies focus on the notoriety of teacher unions' activities, especially the impact of teacher strikes. Studies frequently demonstrate how teacher unions disturb education with a tendency to make schools ungovernable. In fact, in many studies, results have shown that strong union activity undermines school effectiveness. Additionally, these studies people revealed how various role-players such as parents, communities and district officials have maintained that effective teacher unions are the missing link to successful leadership as well as meaningful teaching and learning. This case study examined the potentially positive role of unions in two historically black schools in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. In both schools the principals were active members of two of the most powerful teacher unions in South Africa. At the time of the study, one principal was an office bearer in the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) whilst the other was aligned with the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA). The paradox in both schools was that, despite the strong unionism, the union and school management collaboration appeared to bolster learner success, teaching and school principals' effectiveness. The conclusions demonstrate that strong teacher unions are pivotal in building self-fulfilled teachers, the management of diversity and high levels of learner achievement. Finally, the school leaders proved that, with meaningful cooperation among role-players including teacher unions, underperforming schools have the potential to thrive.

Keywords: cooperation; effective schools; learner achievement; teacher maturity; township schools

1. Introduction

The few studies which have been conducted on teacher unions in South Africa illustrate the ways in which teacher strikes thwart school programmes as well as their negative impact on learner achievement (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001; Mafisa, 2017; Msila, 2014, 2021; Wills, 2020). In fact, some literature has shown how schools lose the culture of learning and teaching because of the involvement of teacher unions in education (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001; Mafisa, 2017). Wills

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(2020) examines a disruption hypothesis that learner progress is lost as a direct consequence of teacher bargaining and strike action in South Africa. In 2007 there was a general public servants' strike and many schools were affected. Wills (2020) spells out a disruption hypothesis which claims that during the 2007 public strike, learning in schools suffered. The effects of the strike were also more pronounced in the poorest schools (Wills, 2020). Teacher unions were heavily criticised by many for neglecting education, especially in historically black schools or township schools where schools stopped functioning as a result of the broad "chalk-down" strike (Wills, 2017). Globally there have been constant criticisms levelled at teacher unions for various issues which include placing their interests above those of learners, neglecting quality education and promoting mediocrity by protecting incompetent members (Ghosn & Akkary, 2020; Ring, 2020). Ring (2020) wrote about ways in which American teacher unions undermine their profession by supporting several anomalies. Among these are ways in which teacher unions "elect their own bosses, negotiate inefficient work rules, have insatiable need for more public funds, and protect incompetent members". In South Africa there are several teacher unions; these include the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), the South African Teachers' Union (SATU) and the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU). Of these, SADTU has been linked to teacher militancy (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001; Sibiyi, 2017). The latter is no surprise considering the role SADTU played during the struggle for political liberation in South Africa. It is argued that years after the freedom from apartheid policies, SADTU continues to be a militant organisation. Other unions, including SATU and NAPTOSA, are more linked with professionalism than militancy. Sibiyi (2017, pp. iv-v) contended the following:

Therefore, SADTU had a dual role to fulfil. The formation of SADTU led to a division within teacher unions that existed then, because of the divergent ideologies that SADTU and they held. Some of them believed in teacher professionalism, while others subscribed to better working conditions and teacher professional development. On the other hand, SADTU kept the militant approach and political affiliation. These two characteristics of SADTU are causing a great concern among stakeholders. This has led to SADTU, through media reports, being blamed for the collapse of education especially in black schools located in townships and rural areas.

Nevertheless, although much literature globally links teacher unionism with negativity and education paralysis, there are a few positive aspects and identified potential benefits of teacher unions (Gaille, 2017; Mafisa, 2017; Msila, 2014). Msila (2014, 2021) found that, when unions cooperate meaningfully with other stakeholders at a school, there are bound to be positive outcomes linked to teaching and learning. Gaille (2017) listed the following few advantages that justify the existence of teacher unions: firstly, they protect teachers from political changes; secondly, highly unionised schools tend to perform better; and thirdly, unionised teachers tend to have a voice. Some researchers have argued that when teachers' unions collaborate with other stakeholders in South Africa, especially with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), they are likely to work towards positive goals instead of being adversaries (Mafisa, 2017; Msila, 2014).

The need to recognise these common positive goals is critical so that teacher union members are not perceived as charlatans who frequently disrupt school programmes through teacher strike participation.

This case study explores what happens when teacher unions collaborate with other stakeholders, including school managers, communities and members from different unions other than their own in selected schools. Of critical importance here was to establish whether teacher unions can promote teaching and learning in schools.

The questions posed were the following:

- Can strong teacher unions lead to effectiveness in historically disadvantaged schools?
- How will unions help build quality schools?

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to theorise what may happen when teacher unions collaborate with other role-players within a school setting. The study sought to understand critically whether shared vision is possible in the presence of teacher unions and what happens when this prevails.

In order to achieve this aim, data was collected to analyse the following objectives:

1. To identify ways in which teacher unions in a school can work with other stakeholders to engender empowerment, resulting in teacher growth;
2. To investigate how teacher growth and strong unions would lead to quality schools;
3. To examine whether strong unions can ensure learner success in a school; and
4. To determine whether the presence or absence of strong teacher union site committees in schools can hamper the work of school management teams and general school progress.

2. Brief Literature Review

Pont et al. (2008) argued that in some countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Hungary there are separate unions for principals and teachers. This is necessitated by the strained relationships that usually characterise school leaders and their teachers when it comes to union activities. Furthermore, Pont et al. (2008, p.176) shed light on Sweden as follows:

“In Sweden, for example, there is an ideological cleft between the two types of representative bodies. The teaching union holds that teachers and school leaders should belong to the same union as they see the educational sector as a single unit with homogenous interests. On the other hand, the school leaders’ union argues that school leadership is a separate profession with separate interests and should therefore be represented in an organisation on its own. Setting up separate principals’ unions is a step towards the development of the profession as separate from the teaching profession.”

Nevertheless, some may argue that the separation of school leaders from their teachers may increase adversarial relationships (Deep Dive, 2016; Msila, 2014). However, others may concur with the different objectives that

necessitate the separation. This can work if it does not defeat the purposes of teacher empowerment. Ahrari et al. (2021) utilised a teacher empowerment model as they stress the need for teacher cooperation where teachers should encourage one another to be confident in their skills and knowledge. Ahrai et al. (2021) underscore six aspects of teacher empowerment which they have adapted from Short and Rinehart (1992). The six aspects are the following:

1. Status: For motivation to take place, teachers would like to be appreciated and respected in a way that recognises their proficiency.
2. Impact: Teachers who have this (status) support the vision of the school as they make a difference in their classrooms in terms of learner achievement.
3. Professional growth: Professional growth ensures that teachers always develop professionally.
4. Decision making: The ability to make decisions can strengthen teachers' job satisfaction.
5. Self-efficacy: Schools need teachers who are self-efficacious if school improvement attempts are to bear fruit. As teachers become professionally mature, their competencies are increased.
6. Autonomy: As teachers grow professionally, they would like to gain independence by making professional decisions related to their job.

In post-apartheid schools, transformation and restructuring have been based on teacher empowerment. Arguably, in an environment where teacher activism and politics loom large, district officials should think of working with teacher unions in order to play a role in empowering teachers. Msila's (2021) study demonstrates why effective districts will support and enhance cooperation between teacher unions and school managers. It is through positive and involved teacher unions that districts can achieve the shared vision of implementing quality education. Contrary to some negative views on teacher unions, recent research shows that unions have the potential to transform education and schooling for the better (Education International, 2017; ETUCE, 2016; Msila, 2021). ETUCE (2016) contends that teacher unions, in addition to improving the conditions of employment and terms of employment, can promote the professional freedom of teachers as well as ensuring that they play a role in formulating education policies. Furthermore, according to ETUCE (2016), teacher unions can play an empowering role, including the improvement of the teachers' work and meeting their professional development needs.

Msila (2014) also conducted a study in which he found that in schools where teacher unionism is strong, their politics can be used for the uplifting of the school as peers promote social dialogue impacting on parental and community participation in school programmes. History has shown how pivotal unions' participation is in the transformation of the new curriculum from apartheid education to the present education system in South Africa. SADTU and NAPTOSA played a critical role in the discussions relating to post-apartheid education. In this way the unions can be seen as being empowering as they join the role players who push for social transformation.

The ETDP-SETA Skills Plan 2020-2021 highlighted the role of trade unions in the promotion of the skills and development of their members. As employers themselves, the trade unions also have a significant role in developing the skills of their employees. The ETDP-SETA (2020) report pointed out that the aims of trade unions are no longer confined to wage negotiations and facilitating collective action such as strikes; they also focus on the empowerment of their members through skills development. According to the South African Council for Educators (SACE) (2020), teachers have various rights, including further professional development. Teachers are also allowed to attend in-service education courses prescribed by the Department of Education and agreed upon by the relevant teacher unions. The SACE (2020) handbook expatiated that teachers must be empowered and made aware of their rights. Additionally, teachers need to be motivated and encouraged to be passionate about teaching and learning. This handbook also emphasised collaboration amongst stakeholders, stating that parents should cooperate with educators as they engage in school activities. These include empowering communities to combat ills such as violence and bullying in schools and communities. This meticulous guidance provides unions with the potential to build professional maturity among teachers. Eberts (2007) stated that parent-teacher organisations should play a role in changing the role of teacher unions as we know them. He posed questions as to how unions can play a collaborative and supportive role that would hone the professionalism of teachers, acknowledging the need for common goals and joint responsibility among teachers.

Msila (2021) opined about the role that can be played by unions in bringing about the professional maturity that all teachers need. He argued that teachers who have reached professional maturity will be able to work with school management teams, thereby leading to a school's success. The question is "What role can unions play to engender professional teacher maturity?" Effective unions will work with conscientious school leaders to build teacher maturity as unions share a vision and leadership with other role-players at a school. Teacher maturity can only be attained when teachers become learners; hence teacher unions are among the role-players that need to be part of the teachers' journey in terms of that learning if schools are to succeed. Globally there have been efforts by teacher unions to play critical roles in bargaining for teachers as well as improving the quality of teaching in schools. This means that professionally developed teachers will be able to teach for success. Moreover, research has also shown that teacher unionisation can lead to positive educational outcomes with improved pass rates (Guthrey, 2018; Msila, 2014).

However, Guthrey (2018) contended that the presence of unions in districts brings many complexities and that there is no conclusive evidence that unions can increase the learners' success. Lott and Kenny (2013) found that learners in districts where the teacher unions are strong fared worse in mathematics and reading than learners in districts where there were weak teacher unions. Ordway (2019) argued that there are suppositions that teacher unions are a bad influence in education because they shield bad teachers who disadvantage learners through their underperformance in classrooms. However, Vachon and

Ma (2015) as well as Deldago (2021) maintained that teacher unions do not always impact negatively on education because in the United States, districts with strong teacher unions received more money as teachers used their voice. Moreover, Vachon and Ma (2015) stated that teachers can bargain for success that would also impact on learner achievement. As teachers influence policy, they gain attention from legislators and this may impact positively upon learner achievement.

Some experts perceive teacher unions in Canada as necessary agents of change that societies need for social justice (Pringle, 2010; Rottman, 2008). However, as seen in the literature sources mentioned above, there are always contradicting accounts when it comes to teacher unions. Heystek and Lethoko (2001) postulated that unions in South Africa should organise activities to understand codes of conduct and why teaching should be an essential service. Additionally, Heystek and Lethoko contended that teacher unions should plan activities that will help restore the culture of learning and teaching in schools. Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) asserted that when unions, teachers and administrators see value in collaboration, teaching will be more effective and professionally executed. School-level union-management partnerships and teacher collaboration can have a significant impact on learner achievement (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014). Brunner et al. (2020) also highlighted what Delgado (2021) emphasised, namely that in strong union districts there is greater expenditure which tends to enhance learners' achievement in schools.

Farley (2010) cited Weingarten who concurred with this when she stated that American states that have numerous unionised teachers tend to lead in learner success. In South Africa it is the collaboration of all stakeholders that would produce quality education and success of schools (Msila, 2014). The Education International (2020) reported on a seminar on *The Future of the Teaching Profession in Africa*. This seminar was attended by eight African states and included unions. A consensus document was adopted which affirmed that governments and teacher unions should work in partnerships to advance the teaching profession and the quality of education, especially in times of crisis (Education International, 2020). However, research shows that teacher unions' industrial strikes in South Africa are likely to have a negative impact on impoverished schools. During the public service strike in 2007, many poor schools were impacted negatively as many teachers did not attend school and later there was a lack of voluntary time to catch up with the syllabus (Wills, 2017). Wills (2020, p.344) pointed out that the 2007 general strike was not as negative in historically white schools where unions did not support the chalk-down approach: "by contrast, in the poorer three quintiles of schools where participation in the strike was widespread, militant and longer in duration, strike activity appears to be detrimental to learning."

3. Research Methodology

This case study was conducted in two high schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The two schools were selected through purposeful sampling. Both are characterised by having strong teacher unions as well as committed

school governing bodies (SGBs). Purposeful sampling is concerned with providing a sample of information-rich participants (Struwig & Stead, 2004). In addition to knowledge and experience, the sample must be willing and able “to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner” (Palinkas et al., 2016, p. 2). The sample consisted of six participants and the three participants from each school were comprised of the school principal, a teacher union site committee member and an SGB member (a parent). Both Apricot High School (School 1) and Apple High School (School 2) were represented by chairpersons of the SGBs. Each of the six participants was first interviewed individually. On average, each interview lasted for approximately 65 minutes. After the completion of individual interviews, a focus group interview which included all the six participants was conducted. In addition, to these interviews, two meetings were observed, one from each school, focusing on professional development training at Apricot and a seminar at Apple.

Dilshad and Latif (2013) pointed out that compared to other research techniques, focus groups may yield shared understanding when conducted well. They can also be worthwhile when the researcher knows less about the participants and the fact that participants express their thoughts and perceptions in their own words (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). In the current study, focus group interviews were used as a form of triangulation. Data analysis of the focus group interview was done after the transcription of audiotapes. The analysis was carried out immediately after the interview session. The focus was on the actual words of the participants as well as paraphrasing what they said (Anderson, 1990). After the analysis each participant was given this summary to read through as this step was vital to ensure that they had not been misquoted.

What was critical about the focus group was their exceptional knowledge of teacher unions and their role in education. The sample composition was also crucial - three women and three men; this ensured that there was less gender bias. Whilst there were commonalities in the discussions, the focus group helped reveal other new aspects of divergences on the topic than the researcher had previously realised (Gundumogula, 2020). “Focus groups have a high chance to catch and consider the people’s feelings, views beliefs and responses while collecting the data” (Gundumogula, 2020, p.301).

After the data gathering, thematic analysis normally used for qualitative data was conducted. By searching across the data, repeated patterns were identified. As in much qualitative data, it was also possible to interpret data whilst simultaneously selecting codes and drawing themes. The analysis was facilitated by following one method of analysing qualitative data which included familiarising, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, naming of themes and then writing down the findings. In qualitative research data analysis refers to searching for meaning in interview transcripts, observation notes and other non-textual materials. The notes from individual interviews, the focus group interviews as well as the observations of meetings were critical in the study. In

analysing the data, the following six steps as highlighted by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) were followed:

Step 1: Becoming familiar with the data: Reading the transcripts of what the participants said;

Step 2: Generating initial codes: Coding helped in reducing chunks of data;

Step 3: Searching for themes: Significant statements about unions and school failure and success were identified;

Step 4: Reviewing themes: The preliminary themes drawn were modified;

Step 5: Defining themes: Identifying what each theme is about and what each says about unions, including their advantages and disadvantages;

Step 6: Writing up: Write about the findings as teased out from the previous steps.

The two schools in the study are both historically black schools situated in townships. These refer to apartheid-created historically black areas. More than two decades after apartheid ended, there are still some schools where the legacy of the apartheid policy looms large. There are no laboratories or libraries and the schools serve impoverished black families in historically black areas. This was less than a year before Apricot High School appointed a new school principal whilst Apple has had their principal for a period of four years. Unlike Apricot, Apple is a 'better performing' school and is among the schools preferred by many working-class families who voluntarily migrate their children to such schools within the township. In this sense better performing schools refers to schools where there is a satisfactory attainment of learner achievement as well as teachers who are guided by the vision and mission of the school. In South Africa high schools are usually gauged by analysing their grade 12 results. Grade 12 is a final school class before commencing an undergraduate career at higher education institutions. Apple has been attaining around a 75% pass rate in grade 12 results for the past two years whereas Apricot historically achieved a pass percentage in the 30s, although it has improved slightly in the previous two years by attaining a 40% and 46% pass rate.

4. Findings

The study showed how the two principals who both supported teacher unions in their schools did not lose sight of the core business of the schools; instead, union involvement enhanced the performance. Both schools demonstrated that committed teacher unions will prioritise the dreams of the communities and families of their children. The Apricot High School principal had arrived at a conflict-ridden school ten months before. She pointed out that many of the conflicts were caused by teacher unionism where SADTU members would always oppose NAPTOSA members and vice-versa. During conversations with the previous principal who had since retired, he informed her how teacher unions stalled progress in the school as "they fought for the terrain". She also pointed out that she had been informed by her staff that the previous principal's time and attention were always occupied by union clashes in the school. Apparently, the union site committees would hold union meetings during school hours, or some members of staff would leave school early to attend union engagements. While she was not a very active union member, she supported

unions and frequently gave them opportunities to empower one another in curriculum and teacher leadership matters. She pointed out the following:

"In my school our teams have ensured that teacher unions give us opportunities to grow as teacher leaders. I have always maintained that intent teacher unions can help the school by professionally developing all teachers. We all know that unions are about labour issues of teachers, but effective unions will also help teachers strive for school success."

The school governing body (SGB) chairperson supported the principal as they stated that when the new principal arrived, she brought together all the school's role-players. The chairperson declared the following:

"For the first time we work closely with all role-players and this includes learner council as well as teacher union site committees. As parent governors we did not understand union programmes especially when they deter learners' progress in classrooms. Our new principal though has forged links between us and unions. The union leadership now informs us beforehand on their programmes of action rather than take us by surprise. Indeed, as parents we are happy."

The principal maintained that she was satisfied with the cooperation from staff, especially the union members who have committed to turn over a new leaf and work closely with all the other role-players. After several workshops run by school management, the teachers also found that conflicts between unions are detrimental to educational outcomes and negative to school success. Two external organisations were invited to run workshops that revealed ways of dealing with intractable conflicts. However, according to the chairperson of the SGB, the previous principal of the school had viewed the unions as adversaries to school management teams. Nevertheless, the chairperson also attributed the general failure of the school to union presence. The chairperson of the SGB claimed the following:

"Mr M was always suspicious of teacher unions in the school, including his own. To him they were the reason why there was less progress. To him the school management was struggling because unions wanted to stamp their feet down and usurp power. He used to say when referring to unions, "It is us and them; we do not want to be them, and they do not want to be us". The unions and management were always at loggerheads."

The new principal endeavoured to mend this broken relationship of mistrust and suspicion. She stated that in her very first meetings with the school's role-players, her most interesting and productive meeting was with the two dominant teacher unions at the school. She said she was "bowled [over] by the brilliant ideas" that the teachers had.

The Apple High School principal had been at the helm of the school for four years. In all that time he had been an active SADTU member and two years previously had been secretary of his branch. He pointed out that he had never had problems in the school regarding aspects of leadership because he frequently shared leadership among his staff. He also pointed out that it was his

philosophy that without strong teacher unions, schools will not have professionally matured teachers and, in turn, learner achievement could not be attained. He also affirmed that when unions are strong, teachers are able to learn from one another. Apple's principal maintained the following:

"I always tell colleagues from other schools that at this age if management is to work, it needs to work closely with unions. Positive unions are critical, and I have been able to inculcate that spirit which makes the school workable. Labour unions in school can be effective without being divisive."

As in the case of the Apricot High School principal, the principal of Apple had learnt to include union leadership in his leadership training. Furthermore, at Apple the principal had the teachers run what he called *professional development meetings* once a month. In these meetings the teachers discussed school improvement initiatives with the support of the union site committees. What was remarkable in both schools was that the union members differed among themselves as well. However, the school managers in both schools promoted the debates and, whilst not all the meetings ended amicably, the level of professionalism was always maintained. At Apricot the principal used the concept *professional maturity* to bring all the staff members together. The two teachers and the SGB members concurred that teacher unity is forged by the spirit of good unionism which, in turn, leads to school success. The SGB member at Apricot also pointed out that in the ten months since the principal's arrival, learner success was improving in the various grades and teacher solidarity was increasing. At Apple the learner achievement had been improving gradually over the past three years and the participants contended that the unions' involvement was among the reasons for the attainment of educational outcomes. The participants also maintained that schools need teacher unions that are goal directed, strong and visionary. Both SGB chairpersons stated that they witnessed the gradual transformation in their schools as supported by teacher union site committees. The Apricot teacher declared:

"I have never seen the unity in working together, especially between unions and school managers. It is a new culture for all of us because we were used to that climate of us and them. Things are different now. There are still many differences among teachers, but the principal has shown the staff ways of professionally dealing with these differences. She always explains, "I may differ with many people, but it does not mean I am looking at them as foes." She is not an adversary of unions but uses them positively to build the school closely with school management."

In both schools the building of strong unions was critical to the schools' success. Furthermore, the unions served an important function of empowering others. Seminars and relevant community programmes were facilitated by the union site committee members whose roles were strongly supported by the school principals. The Apple principal stated that he has worked closely with the unions and the cooperation has made his work as a school principal more manageable. The Apple principal added the following:

“There are so many times that I differ with the union leaders and staff at school and I tell them when I think they are wrong. They also call me to order when they believe that I am on the wrong. In our meetings there is a lot of rigor, but it is rigor with respect and professionalism. We always tell ourselves that our egos are less important, and we are here to build the future of our learners. I believe in strong unions, for me they are the basis of strong schools. Unions need to empower, build and teach. In fact, that should be a slogan throughout; unions should facilitate the actual teaching of one another. As they fight for teacher rights, they should be conscious of other struggles as well.”

The participants highlighted a few concepts that were part of their development as professionals, namely empowerment, cooperation and learner achievement. All the participants agreed with both principals when they reiterated that teacher unions can help enhance teacher quality and the quality of learning. The Apple principal opined the following:

“In all my years as a teacher, I have maintained that if teacher unions cannot empower for teacher quality and learners’ success they might as well regard themselves as running short of what they should be doing. Intent teacher union site committees in schools will help school leaders in several things including creating more teacher leaders and mentors.”

The Apricot principal added to this by pointing out the following:

“We cannot talk about empowerment without talking about cooperation. Empowerment ensures that we work as a collective. Working as a collective is what should make us learn from one another and that is good for our learners in classrooms. I have never seen any reason that teacher unions could not lead the struggles for effective education. We need to have teacher unions that will always support school success.”

All the participants agreed that educational reforms would not be fully realised when teacher unions do not work with other role-players. Participants from both schools acknowledged the importance of unions working with all the role-players, including the communities around the school. The school meetings are a source of sharing common vision, peer support and success. The school principals maintain that reforms cannot be sustained without union committee involvement. Below, the findings are discussed under three headings that were identified after teasing out the themes identified in the findings:

- Unions as empowering groups;
- School management and cooperation; and
- Strong unions and school success.

5. Discussion of the Findings

Unions as empowerment groups

The two schools in the study openly embraced the teacher unions as part of the reform agenda and as critical partners in guiding the school towards meaningful transformation. Moreover, in both schools the principals were aware of the unions’ negative reputation in communities; nevertheless, they maintained that no school effectiveness would be achieved without the involvement of teacher

unions. Therefore, they perceived unions as stakeholders that need to be empowered so that they could, in turn, empower the school community. The unions' strength emanates from the fact that large numbers of teachers in the district are members. Kennedy-Macfoy and Fyles (2020) argued that when teacher unions are in control, schools can become safer for everyone. Furthermore, these authors state that unions are well placed to mobilise teachers to achieve shared goals and a common vision. In both schools the participants trusted the unions as empowering bodies. Some elements from the teacher empowerment model were revealed as participants spoke about how they tended to embrace professional growth, self-efficacy and their desire to be the best teachers. The workshops coordinated by the teacher union site committees generated more commitment from the teachers. The teachers found the union presence both empowering and engaging.

Strong unions can be the source of innovation and teacher leadership. Many schools fail because teachers do not receive peer support from others while peer support was the pillar of strength in the two schools under study. The union presence emphasised peer support. Special meetings led by union site committees were meant to empower teachers and motivate other role-players such as parents. Education International (2017) related how teacher unions in Pakistan work in empowering teachers. Additionally, it was found that empowered teachers are innovative, while empowerment means learners benefit because they achieve success. These are qualities that were evident in this study.

Empowerment should be a key factor among all conscientious teacher unions. Besides the labour issues, the most important mission for committed teacher unions is to support members in providing quality education. Linked to quality education is the teacher unions' promotion of social dialogue which includes parents and communities. The unions at Apple prioritised their community engagement projects, facilitating knowledge regarding human rights and developing resourceful parents who work closely with their children for success at school. At Apricot one union's initiatives included a garden project as well as advocacy on gender and violence. In the garden project the teachers would harvest from the school garden and divide the vegetables among indigent parents and community members. Many community members worked in the garden whenever requested to do so. The garden project also initiated interest in starting gardens for self-sustenance in the poverty-stricken area. Many families were beginning to live off their gardens.

From these experiences, teacher unions' influence can spread beyond bargaining. Yet, as the principal of Apple stated, "Only empowered teachers can empower others". Therefore, in their attempts to transform the curriculum and change education, district officials need to work closely with progressive teacher unions. Furthermore, when unions lead, they teach one another and in this way the nation grows. School reforms will only be as strong as the involvement of teacher unions. In times of diversity in schools, teacher unions should lead in the struggle for equity, social justice and human rights. The operative word for

school management and teacher unions is 'cooperate'; unions should always cooperate with all role-players in schools.

School management and cooperation

Ahrai et al. (2021) related how, in some countries, principals have different unions from those of the teachers. Indeed, they raise plausible arguments based on sound rationale. However, in this study the participants concurred that cooperation between school managers and teacher unions is critical for engendering school success which includes learner achievement. When teacher union site committees share the school vision in their schools, they also share the schools' goals and mission. Msila's (2021) study illustrates the value of cooperation between teacher unions and school managers in South African schools. Msila also pointed out that, in the face of intractable conflicts and power wrangles, teachers can hardly share common goals while school managers will not thrive. When union members regard school managers as partners in school programmes, however, they are more likely to cooperate rather than compete for power.

Moreover, as the participants in the study indicated, many school management teams do not function well because of conflicts that frequently arise between union members and school managers. The participants at Apricot illustrated this point as they described the confrontational nature of the previous principal's engagement with the teacher unions in the school. Rubinstein and McCarthy's (2014) research illustrates how teacher unions and management partnerships improve schools as they raise the levels of learner achievement. This might not be easy to attain in schools as power wrangles can divide unions and school managers. However, in this study Apple High School proves that the ideal in any school should be cooperation between teacher unions and managers. Rubinstein and McCarthy (2014) found communication to be critical when it comes to cooperation between school managers and union members at school level. Communication not only improves learner performance; when it is extensive it can also lead to collaboration, curriculum development, learning about instructional practices and giving or receiving mentoring (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014).

In this study the participants were encouraged to build the schools together when they could see the results of collaboration and communication. The principals also highlighted that when all teachers become part of the processes of communication in the school, they start believing that they are part of the strategy and change in that school. Union members like to be part of transformation in the various aspects of the school, from curriculum development and instruction to the improvement of teachers' conditions of work. School success depends much on collaboration while conflicts defeat the purpose of shared leadership and common goals in a school. A school climate where there is little or no relationship between unions and school management is negative as highlighted by the participants at Apricot when referring to the past. This cooperation in a school leads to innovation in problem solving (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2014). Cooperation among all the schools' stakeholders

is the secret for success in running working schools. This communication can easily be facilitated by school managers and strong teacher unions who continually search for school success.

Strong unions and school success

The participants reiterated that schools will be deemed good if quality teaching and learning occur and if there is learner success. This needs conscientious teachers who have their learners' needs at heart. Strong unions will instil this in their members as those did in this study. The cooperation discussed above leads to strong school management teams and strong teachers, which both translate into learner achievement. However, teacher unions have always been blamed for school failure because learners are relegated to the margins as teachers fight for their rights. Eberts (2007) postulated that for a few years teacher unions were perceived as bodies that have captured schools to prioritise their own needs rather than those of the learners. As Eberts (2007, p.176) succinctly stated, "Many critics of unions believe that collective bargaining has created a tangled web of rules that keep public schools from being able to respond to the changing needs of students and that the bargaining process has influenced public education more than any other factor."

The study's findings in line with previous studies show that there is a relationship between strong teacher unions and the learners' positive educational outcomes (Guthery, 2018; Msila, 2014). However, in South Africa there is a paucity of research that examines the connection between strong unions and educational outcomes. In fact, as seen in the literature section, teacher unions are frequently blamed for several failures, including a drop in quality education, especially in historically black schools. Nevertheless, this study revealed that the schools' performance was improved although the participants state that unions can do more to enhance this. It was also shown that the lack of cooperation is the missing link where unions are weak. Meaningful cooperation leads to strong teacher unions and enables the teachers to become loyal to colleagues, to the school and to the learners.

Several studies outside South Africa have shown that strong unions can lead to positive educational outcomes and learner achievement (Delgado, 2021; Vachon & Ma, 2015). In the current study, the school managers ensured that the union members experienced self-fulfilment. Vachon and Ma (2015, p. 411) contended that "when teachers achieve self-actualisation, their work fulfils a broader human need - beyond mere remuneration - and their commitment to self-improvement and student achievement increase." In this study the union site committee members supported the concept of being meaningfully involved in teams that guide the school. Frequently unions are ostracised because people believe that the members are not interested in school transformation but only in bargaining for their members' rights and privileges. The principals demonstrated that there is much potential in working closely with union members in schools that plan for success.

Eberts (2007) pointed out that teacher unions have a significant role to play in public education. Eberts further contended that collective bargaining agreements lead to the delivery of effective education, and unions end up positively affecting learner achievement and the provision of quality education. In the current study teachers maintained that they were part of the change that was happening in classrooms. The fight for human rights and social justice is possible when teachers highlight the plight of their learners as they negotiate their rights through collective bargaining. This study demonstrates that teacher unions need not be perpetual adversaries with the school's role-players but can be part of successful schools that value learner achievement. The results of this case study also demonstrate that anyone who contemplates school success cannot keep the role-players outside any initiatives and these include the teacher unions as well. The principals' arguments hold true when they say the unions' successes are tied to effective public schools and these translate to learner achievement and successful educational outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that strong teacher unions can bring about the necessary effectiveness to schools. School effectiveness includes the high expectations that role-players have about schools, namely promoting learner achievement. Conscientious teacher unions fulfil the role of inculcating commitment that leads to success among the teaching staff. Yet strong unions will survive only if there are strong ties of cooperation amongst all role-players. School managers who sincerely believe in the potential of union site committees in their schools can create a sense of purpose that would engender a spirit of cooperation. This case study demonstrates that when union site committees in schools share the vision with the school leaders, they can form teams that embrace the type of quality that leads to the schools' success. Among others, successful schools include learner achievement, quality education, teacher leadership and cooperation. School management teams and SGBs ought to be at the forefront in facilitating the involvement of positive teacher unions. Critical, innovative and active teacher unions are vital to school management teams that want to establish well-functioning schools.

This case study was critical in understanding the unique nature of the two schools and the practice of the two principals. Given the inadequacy of research in teacher unionism in South Africa, more large-scale quantitative studies or collections of school survey data are needed to understand the role of unions in not only school management but also in cultivating quality education. The literature reviewed in this report indicated that there is significant potential in teacher unions which see themselves as being instrumental in meaningful transformation, even in the case of public schools serving those families living in poverty.

7. References

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