

Literacy and Labour relations in Secondary Schools: Lessons from School Portfolios

(Conference ID: CFP/808/2018)

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Abstract

The study explores revelations of synergy between literacy proficiency and labour relations of officers at two secondary schools in Zambia. Drawing a clear-cut line between issues bordering on school administration and on teachers' conditions of service and work is not easy. School Managers are faced with the daunting and challenging task of handling labour relations in high schools. Often times, officers become ineffectual dealing with such matters. The research study used a descriptive case study design. Participants were sampled using random sampling method. Data was collected through interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and was analysed qualitatively. The study establishes that school managers through school administration work hand-in-hand with unions at the school and depicts how school administration adequately deals with labour relations problems in schools. Findings help school managers and school administrators patch their administrations and timely find alternatives to situation that are seemingly problematic.

Keywords— *Secondary School; Administration; labour relations; Literacy*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study examines labour relations at two secondary schools in Mongu District, Western Province of Zambia. While administrators in school district central offices oversee public schools under their jurisdiction, school managers manage their individual schools by ensuring that policies are implemented and favourable labour relations are maintained. To a greater extent, school managers link the running of schools with the expertise of trade union representatives with the three-man union committees in schools. The cordial relations between the two parties create a healthy working environment for teachers and other ancillary workers. Thus ultimately in the long run creating a good and conducive working environment. One question that arises is: *does literacy play a role in the attainment of labour relations? If not, why? If it does, to what extent does it?*

Labour relations have been in existence from time immemorial in Zambia. The 21st century has seen the growth of unions in various job industries, especially the teaching industry. Meanwhile, the mother-body of all unions in

the country still remains the Zambia Congress of Trade Union (ZCTU). In Zambia, the Ministry of Labour oversees all labour matters through the Industrial and Labour Relations Court (ILRC) and sets the tempo.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Drawing a clear-cut line between issues that border on literacy proficiency and how they interweave with school administration of teachers' conditions of service and work is a challenge. School Managers are faced with the challenging task of handling labour relations in secondary schools. Many times, they become ineffectual dealing with such matters. It is against this background that the research study sought to assess the labour relations at two secondary schools in Mongu District, Western Province of Zambia.

III. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research were to:

1. Explore labour relations at the two secondary schools sampled.
2. Establish how school managements relate with unions at the school.
3. Describe literacy traits that promote or hinder labour relations at the two secondary schools.
4. Establish whether school managements resolve labour problems in liaison with the unions at the schools.

IV. RATIONALE

The study is important as it provides important information regarding labour relations at secondary school.

In addition, this information is vital to stakeholders in the education sector. It will lead

policy makers to consider revising and strengthening the already existing norms regarding labour relations in secondary schools.

Furthermore, findings immensely enrich the social science store of information, valuable to teachers, non teaching staff in school, educators and stakeholders.

The research will further help school managers and school administrators to patch their administrations find alternatives to situations that are problematic in timely fashion. In the long run, this will help create a less restrictive teaching-learning environment in schools.

V. METHODOLOGY

The following section details the methodology adopted by the study.

A. *Research Design*

The research study used a descriptive case study design. This research design was chosen based on the following reasons:-

1. It enabled the researcher to explain the existing labour relations at the two secondary schools.
2. In addition, it afforded the researchers an opportunity to exhaustively establish views of teachers on the literacy and labour relations at the schools.

The study mainly used the qualitative approach of data collection and analysis. To a lesser extent, the quantitative research approach was used too. The qualitative method was used because it helped describe labour relations at the two secondary schools.

Qualitative research methodology was used because it allowed for the interpretation of

realities faced at the two secondary schools regarding the school administrations' view of literacy and labour relations.

B. Population

The target population of the study comprised all teachers at Kanyonyo and Kambule Secondary Schools. Both schools are situated in Mongu District, in the heart of Western Province. Kambule Secondary School is along Mumbwa road, on the way to Western Province. The school is situated right along Mongu Lusaka road opposite the Zambia Army Barracks. Kanyonyo Secondary School is located about 2 kilometres from the town centre (Central Business District).

C. Sampling

Sampling Size: The target sample, obtained even-handedly from the two schools, was sixty (60): 30 male teachers, and 30 female teachers. Gender sensitivity was considered when selecting respondents. Four (4) administrators were sampled too, that is the head teacher (school manager) and the deputy head teacher. In addition, four (4) union representatives were sampled.

Sampling Procedure: Teachers were sampled randomly using random sampling method. They were sampled by obtaining a register from the school administration. By and large, the rotary mode of sampling was employed to select the respondents. Names of teachers were written on small pieces of paper, then later squeeze and put them in a cardbox and shaken well, thereafter an independent person picked a name at a time from the cardbox.

D. Data Collection Tools

The research broadly relied on the use of a self-administered questionnaires, and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) to collect data.

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect information from teachers because they were able to read and write easily. Furthermore, collecting data from the teachers using questionnaires made it easier to gather information as questionnaires allowed teachers the rarest opportunity to participate in the study even as they attend to their daily busy schedules.

Focused Group Discussion held with teachers consisted of five to ten teachers per group. FGDs enabled the researchers to collect unbiased information from teachers through discussion.

E. Data Processing, Presentation and Analysis

After collecting information from the field, the data was processed manually. The researchers checked for completeness of the questionnaires and accuracy of responses obtained from the Focused Group Discussions, and questionnaires. The coding of the data followed the exercise of processing data. This involved assigning numerical codes to represent specific responses from the respondents.

The study used qualitative and quantitative tools for data presentation and analysis. In quantitative analysis the contention was based on numbers and on systematic, statistical relationships between numbers.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Description of Participants & Research setting

Kanyonyo and Kambule Secondary Schools are in the heart of Mongu Town, with Kanyonyo being closer to the central business district (CBD). Both are surrounded by suburbs that are

influential and have demographically mixed economic status levels. Being a provincial centre of Western Province, Mongu is a busy market hub booming with activities. The mainstay of the populace includes fishing, farming (cassava, maize, sorghum, millet, rice and cashew nuts to mention a few). The working class also engage in businesses of their choice to raise funds and supplement their monthly wages. This in itself constitutes entrepreneurship on their part. According to teachers and school administrators, it is this engagement that spans a series of labour relation issues with their superiors, the school administrators.

B. Contextual role of literacy in labour matters

Two types of literacies seem to be at play here, *functional literacy and critical literacy*. This is crucial in understanding labour matters in institutions of learning. On one hand, literacy can be said to be the possessing of the skill of learning how to read and write so as to be employed (functional literacy); on the other hand, literacy can emancipate an individual thereby empowering him/her to promote individual, community and national development, and make them rise against inequalities of current labour conditions (critical literacy).

Both school administrators and unionists who participated in the study revealed that inability to read (school) situations and read policy documents surrounding operations of and that govern school administration and management often led the community to meddle in teachers' and school affairs.

C. Unionism in Schools vs Labour Relations

According to school administrators interviewed, school employees are represented by unions who undertake the following duties:

- Investigate labour relations problems and coordinate with departments involved for solutions to the issues.
- Participate in researching and analyzing the appropriate salary ranges and/ or wage scales
- Participate in administering all labour management arrangements
- May serve as a spokesperson for the school during labour negotiations
- Counsel management on the rights and responsibilities of management, and employees; advises and consult on problems, demands, and use of interest.
- May serve as designee for high level administrators in hearing employee grievances
- Collect, compile and document information on past current and future trends, issues, and demands of teachers.

The rise in the number of labour relation issues in schools leaves much to be desired. Despite the well-outlined roles played by unionists in schools, their members still commit a series of offences. The Bureau of National Affairs (1985) contend that in a fast-changing world where unions are constantly recruiting members and sensitizing them of the significance of being unionised, there is need for managers to review the legal ground rules governing what management can and cannot do during representation campaign.

D. The role of a School Administrators in labour relations at a secondary school

Labour relations at secondary school impact various areas of the school. The ultimate goal of a teacher is to effectively teach and enable

pupils obtain high grades. Discussion of school setup relations hinges on the teaching environment and the teachers themselves.

School Administrators at this level are professionals responsible for supervising the staff and activities of the labour relations office/departments. They serve as chief spokespersons in labour relations negotiations and are responsible for conducting labour relations research and counselling. They prepare/initiate correspondence and are responsible for the maintenance of records pertaining to labour relations matters.

As a labour relations officer, a school administrator strives to strike a balance between all the unions in a school (NUPPEZ, BETUZ, SESTUZ, ZNUT). Such a labour relation officer typically:

- Supervises professional, paraprofessional, and clerical staffs' counsel's subordinates directly or through subordinates' supervisors: plans, assigns, and reviews work assignments, evaluates job performance, and recommends personnel actions.
- Analyzes submissions of union proposals
- Administer and/or interprets labour management agreements
- Investigates labour relations problems, including jurisdiction disputes, coordinates with the department involved to reach resolutions.
- Collects, compiles and documents information on past current and future trends, issues, and demands of teachers and other workers.

E. (Non)Interference of the community (PTA) in School Matters

Teachers who participated in the study bemoaned the community's (PTA) non-involvement in critical labour matters involving teachers when needed, unless the matter affected them or was of concern to them. Teachers (from both schools sampled in this study) observed the following:

When we (teachers) complain of about a school administrator and suspect him of practicing witchcraft, the community would not intervene as long as they do not think so. Yet, when they suspect a school administrator of practicing witchcraft, they want us (teachers) to support them and oust the person out of the school.

When one of us (teachers) is accused of having defiled a learner, the community, who may have actually engineered and fuelled the problem (by sending the girl-child deliberately to the teacher), would not want to get involved but merely say 'the defiler must go'. We get victimised and our unions, who are just interested in our money desert us too. These are labour-related matters that we suffer from in schools.

Communities see teachers as potential husbands to their children. If we marry other people they revolt and victimise us. Our school administrators become helpless and tongue-tied...to them the community is supreme.

F. Indiscipline among Teachers and Learners

Unanimously, all participants outlined the following to be the embracing causes of indiscipline among teachers, learners and

school administrators at the institutions of learning studied:-

- Antagonism with school rules, policy guidelines, and deliberate school procedures
- Acrimony (negative attitude) Lack of cooperation
- Lack of motivation, frustration and stress
- Problems relating to assigned areas of responsibility within the school and by district and or provincial administration
- Personality issues (with fellow workmates; family; learners)
- Love affairs (with pupils and workmates)
- Problems relating to areas of authority and those in authority
- Too many credits (Loans; Among workmates; Among Learners, especially in boarding schools – when learners bring money to teachers for safekeeping)

Commenting on indiscipline in schools and teachers end up in conflicts in institutions of learning, Bauleni (2005:119) notes that “many school managers or administrators spend up to a quarter of their official time in institutions dealing with conflict resolutions.”

G. Inflexibility of School Administrators

The majority of teachers interviewed blamed school administrators for being inflexible and disrespecting their labour rights. According to the teachers, administrators are rigid and for example; administrators deny teachers permission to go to residential school, for those pursuing further studies.

H. Drug, Alcohol and Substance Abuse

All school administrators and teachers interviewed bemoaned the rise in number of teachers abusing drugs and alcoholic beverages. This leads to violation of labour relations and rights; and consequently, into insubordination, fighting, gambling, failure to use safety devices, carelessness (talk, dressing), sexual harassment and sexual abuse (having sexual relations with pupils). School administrators submitted that since these infractions represent a clear violation of an organisation’s acceptable standards of behaviour, corrective action should be taken immediately. Denczo and Robbins (2003) observe that arriving at work or consuming alcoholic beverages on the job is an age-old problem.

Findings reveal that many institutions of learning now consider alcoholism a treatable illness and have established programmes to cure alcoholic employees. School administrators observed that the menace had nothing to do with literacy, but more with labour relations. Teachers are educated (literate) but still over-indulge and end up with labour relations issues. What is worse is that many teachers are increasingly abusing drugs and alcoholic beverages off the job, and there has been a carryover (of drug abuse and alcohol) onto the job.

I. Discipline in School

The regulation of teachers and other workers’ code of conduct and manner of operation is paramount to the wholesome running of a school and constitutes discipline. According to the school administrators interviewed, for the most part, school employees discipline themselves; they conform to what is considered to be proper behaviour because they believe it is the right thing to do.

Once they are made aware of what is expected of them, and assuming they find those standards or rules to be reasonable, they seek to meet those expectations (Decenzo and Robbins, 2003:479).

According to teachers and administrators, not all the employees will accept the responsibility of self-discipline. School administrators contend that there are some employees for whom motivation concepts are not enough to elicit the accepted norms of responsible employee behaviour. These employees will require some degree of extrinsic disciplinary action, an action that is labelled as against their labour relations and rights. This extrinsic action is frequently labelled punishment. It is this need to impose extrinsic disciplinary action that is detrimental to the wholesome development of any institution and said to be against labour relations.

J. Conflicts

Findings indicate that conflicts among members of staff are inevitable in any institution. According to all the school administrators and teachers interviewed, these conflicts emanate from objects, allocation of resources, responsibilities or any other aspect of institutional life that requires a choice or decision to make progress. Bauleni (2005:118) contends that conflicts can be experienced either between heads of departments of some school, between institutions or between individuals. They also revealed that no matter how small or big the problem is, there is a way of solving it, an instrumental catalyst to the smooth running of any institution. The majority of union representatives further observed that unresolved conflicts can retard the progress of the institution.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion:

The research study brought to light pertinent issues regarding labour relations at the two secondary schools. The findings plainly showed how the school managers through school administration work hand-in-hand with unions at the school. Furthermore, the study result clearly explained how the school administration adequately deals with labour relations problems at the school. The cordial relationship between the school and the unions is yet another area of the research that cannot be over-estimated. School Managers should be encouraged to consistently work in harmony with unions.

Recommendations:

1. Teacher union representatives at schools must invest in their members and sensitise them heavily on code of conduct and teacher professionalism.
- 2.

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