# Exploring Working Relationships between Union Representatives and School Management Teams in the Rural Public Schools of South Africa: Implications for School Management

**Madoda Cekiso[1] and Vuyokazi Maqhubela[2]**

*University of Fort Hare, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, East London, South Africa*
*E-mail: [1]<mcekiso@ufh.ac.za>, [2]<vuy.maqhubela@gmail.com>*

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**ABSTRACT** The present study seeks to explore the working relationship between members of school management teams (SMT) and union representatives in four rural public junior secondary schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The study was conducted through a qualitative research methodology, which entailed the use of a case study design in four selected junior secondary schools. This was done through the use of focus group interviews. Two sets of questions were posed to two interview schedules whereupon participants were required to provide responses. Eleven SMT members and 7 union representatives took part in the study. Separate focus group interviews were conducted according to SMT groups and union representative groups in each school. The findings highlighted the role that SMT members and union representatives played jointly or separately in ensuring the smooth running of their school, as well as in addressing tensions between staff and management and amongst the staff members to enhance effective work in each school. The findings include issues of bias amongst SMT members against some union representatives or members of their unions; the role of the SMT members in consultation processes towards improving working relationship with union members on matters of mutual interest. The study also showed that there was a need for managers of schools and union representatives to know, interpret, understand and implement labor-related legislations in the same way to ensure consistency and stability in their schools. Recommendations to improve the relationship between the school management teams and the union representatives were made.

## INTRODUCTION

The end of apartheid in South Africa saw a radical change impacting on all aspects of life. This has been the order of the day during the past decade or two in South Africa and will probably continue for years to come (Swanepoel 2008). The education system could not escape these changes. To respond to these changes a new education system was developed in compliance with the constitutional dispensation that was introduced in1994. At the heart of the new education system was the transformation of schools from traditionally non-democratic structures to modern democratic institutions (Mosoge and Van der Westhuizen 1997). Further, Mosoge and Van der Westhuizen stated that a call to transform schools has culminated in the decentralization of decision-making powers from national, provincial, district to school.

The South African School's Act (Act 84 of 1996) presents principals, teachers, parents and learners with the responsibility and power to work co-operatively as a team in the manage-ment of schools. The present study focuses on the relationship between the School Management Teams (SMTs) and the teachers' unions as partners towards the improvement of the process of learning and teaching. A study with such afocusis important for it is likely to benefit school managers, policy makers and teacher union structures and provides clarity on what both teacher unions and SMTs expect from one another. In addition, findings from this study would contribute towards providing information that SMTs and teacher unions could use to improve planning, decision making, problem solving and the ways teachers interact with the SMTs. Despite the importance of and debate on the possible influence of teacher unions on teachers and schools, very limited empirical research has examined the relationship between teacher unions and SMTs (Zang 2009; Musore 2009).

Teacher unions have been at the forefront of media reports, educational policy debates and public school reforms (Zang 2009). It is worth taking note of Moe (2006) and Johnson and Donaldson's (2006) assertion that teacher unions

have a bearing on most aspects of public education, teachers, students, school operation and educational policies. The role of teacher unions has been perceived differently by different studies. According to Robinson and Mc Carthy (2010), in America, the debate about teacher unions has often been seen as the problem, not part of the solution. They further state that what is missing is a discussion, from a systems perspective on the problem of public school reform that looks at the way schools are organized and the way decisions are made. In addition, Nelson et al. (1996) point out that in America, the conservatives' attack on public education in general and teachers' unions in particular has grown more heated. Public schools and teachers' unions are held culpable for declining test scores and failing to prepare students for the workforce. In South Africa teacher unions have also received criticism. The Minister in the presidency Trevor Manual launched a blistering attack on some teacher unions that destabilize the education system and pursue their own interests. He stated that "some teacher unions have become part of the problems that are bedeviling the education system" (Mail and Guardian 25 February 2010). This implies that teacher unions are perceived by some sources in different contexts as having both a positive and negative impact on the school management.

Mutasa (2007) pointed out that the change to democracy in South Africa in 1994 brought with it many changes in various spheres of life. To respond to these changes, the Department of Education realized that a set of guidelines were needed within the school system to guide school managers as employer representatives and teachers in schools as employees of government in the establishment and proper working conditions. The set of guidelines were developed and are contained in the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996, Employment of Educators Act, No. 76 of 1998, the Labor Relations Act No. 66 of 1996, National Education Act No. 27 of 1996 and other related acts. These acts and their provisions created a new national school system to improve the quality of education for all on an equal basis.

They further charged schools with the responsibility to provide the high quality of teaching and learning and establish a human rights culture and conducive working conditions based on democratic principles, participatory and col-

laborative partnership and trust between management and teachers. According to Alvarado (2003) in Goodland (2003) collaboration is important and not an end in itself, but a means of dealing productively with tension. Engagement of employees in the workplace offers an opportunity to provide collaborative workplace that gives both employees and management a greater voice in improving operations and working conditions (Masters et al. 2010). Currall (1992) points out that the degree of interpersonal trust is a significant determinant of the quality of work relationships between administrator and teacher representatives.

There are many factors that lead to deterioration of relationship between employers or managers and employees in the workplace. Some of these factors include lack of transparency, unclear roles given to employees and unclear guidance, poor channel and unprofessional approaches by managers to employees or vice versa (De Beer et al. 2001). Conflicts that exist in the school are seen as manifestation of poor human resource management policies or interpersonal clashes such as personality conflicts, both of which can and should be managed away (Budd and Bhave 2008). Roussow and Zager (1989: 138) are of the view that administrator-teacher collaboration is difficult for the following reasons:

s administrators tend to see reform programs as an infringement on their managerial prerogative
s administrators tend to perceive teachers as experts in their day-to-day jobs, incapable of contributing to improvement of a school as a whole
s both administrators and teacher union members tend to believe that the other party will use education reform programs to advance partisan interests
s teachers assume that increased involvement in school governance is no more than the latest management fad used by administrators to extract more work for the same pay. This implies that the administrators and teachers see different risks in reform programs.

The literature has shown that sometimes tensions exist between the School Management Teams and the teacher unions. Wanjohil (2010) explored that tension could be caused by discrimination based on gender, race and religion if not immediately corrected by the employer when

employees complain through established channels. Inability to empower the staff in important decision-making processes is likely to escalate to a situation where decisions are seen to be the principal's and they dissociate themselves from school activities adopting passive ways, like silence, withdrawal or hostile body languages as suggested by Taylor and Wilson (1997) in McEwan (2005).

The results of a study conducted in Namibia by Musore (2009) on whether the existence of teacher unions in schools was a blessing or curse, indicated several benefits for the school. The following benefits were observed: teacher unions advance the democratic participation of stakeholders, provide feedback to the school principal on how staff members experience his or her leadership and offers advice on labor-related matters. However, the results of the Namibian study also revealed that the existence of unions in schools had several negative effects on schooling. For example, union activities can disrupt school programs; the study found that in some schools neither union representatives nor school principals understood their own or each other's roles; and consequently the union members and management were often in conflict. Similarly the current study seeks to establish whether the nature of the relationship between the SMTs and teacher unions has any bearing on the school management by both parties. The purpose of this article therefore is to address the following research questions:

- s  What is the nature of the relationship between the SMTs and union representatives?
- s  What are the factors that contribute to the relationship between the SMTs and union representatives?
- s  What is the role played by each of the two parties towards this relationship?

**Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between union representatives and School Management Teams with regard to school management. In other words, the study was conducted because of the need for the researchers to understand how the two structures function on daily basis, as the researchers noted both informally and through various reports that many schools did not run smoothly as a

result of various tensions existing between management teams and labor union representatives in such schools. The researchers aimed to understand the causes of such tensions and identify possible solutions that would lead to the normalization of the schools. This problem made the researchers to be interested in finding out what type of relationship existed between school managers on one hand and union representatives on the other.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers used qualitative methodology in the study by collecting data, analyzing and discussing the ensuing findings. This methodology was used becauseit is generally used in studies with an open ended outcome without prior expectations. Qualitative researchers develop hypotheses and theoretical expectations that are based on their interpretations of what they observe (Johnson and Christensen 2008: 388). The researchers preferred to use this method of research as they were interested in getting a deeper understanding of the working relationship between school managers and union representatives in four selected schools. They found it suitable for this purpose as it is based on verbal narratives and observations rather than numbers (McMillan 2008: 11). The research participants were afforded the opportunity to provide their views verbally through focus group interviews. A case study of four junior secondary schools was conducted to understand and interpret the relationships of the members of the two structures.

### Data Collection

The data came from 11 SMT members and 7 union representatives in the four selected schools of Tsolo Education District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. A purposive sample was used to select theparticipants in selected schools. Data collection took place from February to June 2011. Two interview schedules covering similar questions and content, but tailored according to whether they were SMT members or union representatives, was developed on the basis of a set of structured questions, which allowed the researchers to probe for further information. The questions were based on a number of sub-themes about the day to

day working relationship between school management teams and union representatives in the four junior secondary schools. Interview sessions were held twice in each school (one with SMT members and the other with union representatives). The interviewdeliberations were recorded on a voice recorder with the permission of the respondents and without interrupting the discussions. During the interviews the researchers also used memos to record some of the responses and terms used by the participants or interpretations made by the researchers (Christensen and Johnson 2008).

## Data Analysis

Appropriate qualitative strategies were used to analyze the data collected through focus group interviews. Analysis of data conducted during the process of data collection and identification of patterns formed the basis of data analysis in this regard (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). Data analysis required the reduction and interpretation of the voluminous amount of information of data collected. In order to achieve this, the researchers used *a priori* coding by identifying categories that go together and searched for relationships and patterns in order to develop a holistic picture (Johnson and Christensen 2008). The researchers also used *a priori*codes to identify themes that were used as the basis for the designing of the data collection instruments prior to the use of the interview schedules described above. The nature of data analysis evolved directly from the study design (Mouton 1996: 161) even though the themes were pre-identified. The process entailed the presentation of data, which was followed by the analysis of responses per question posed to SMT members and immediately followed by an analysis of the responses. A similar approach was followed with regard to union representatives.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study's findings displayed that it is necessary to involve stake-holders in organizational structures. Specifically, it is necessary to involve union representatives in the management decisions regarding the progress of the school. This can also improve the working relations with regard to the management and the teacher body. Subsequently,

this might lead to promoting effectiveness of programs at school. One of the school managers agreed with this when she said that union members helped them by bringing information as they were also members of unions.

## Attendance of Union Meetings by Union Members During School Hours

The study revealed several findings regarding the issues affecting the type of relationship existing between management and union representatives. The major source of conflict wasrelated to the attendance of union meetings by union members during school hours. Thestudy revealed that in the schools where conflict was reported to have taken place between SMT members and union representatives, the problems were primarily caused by situations where union representatives wanted to attend union meetings during school hours. While it seemed there had been no problems in some schools regarding this matter, union representatives in other schools were initially denied the opportunity to attend such meetings during working hours. Members of respective management teams in the latter schools seemed to have been strict with their union representatives. This practice tended to create friction between members of the two structures as members of the unions felt unfairly treated. According to Anstey (1990:75), management and laborunions have one option in a world market, and that is to restructure the bargaining process in order to be mutually productive and to develop the day-to-day relationship necessary. They can work together if they can come to a point of accepting each other. This finding also stresses the idea of working together and finding common ground.

## Instituting Regular Common Meetings Initiated by Both Structures

One of the findings pointed to the need for management and union representatives to have regular meetings together, in order to identify and iron out issues of mutual interest and differences. In some schools it was discovered that such meetings helped to avoid some of the potential conflict between the two structures. The SMT members and the union representatives agreed that meetings to resolve differences were initiated by any of the two structures. One SMT

member in one of the schools stated that,*"If it's them (union representatives) who realize that there is a problem they will come or they will invite us to a meeting for a discussion. If it's us who realize that there is a problem we call them."*

There was, however, a complaint from some of the union representatives in one of the schools that they felt ignored by SMT members when they realized the existence of a problem and tried to initiate meetings with management. It was in this particular school where most of the union representatives' complaints against management were noted. These union members voiced out dissatisfaction with the way meetings were initiated at their school as one of them stated that: *"If it's us they see it as too trivial when we want to initiate the meetings"*.

It was noted that in this particular school there was no mutual communication and initiation of proper communication channels between the two parties. However, as Masters et al. (2010) point out, recognizing engagement with employees through their union representatives is essential to the organizational health upon which effective performance is predicted.

## Factors Contributing to Causes of Conflict as Perceived by Management

In general, SMT members of the four schools identified some factors which they perceived could, and do contribute to conflict between management and union representatives. They include personal matters, perceptions of some union members about individual SMT members, union members with their own interests or businesses and attendance of union representatives at their own meetings. According to SMT members, there were several factors that contributed to the existence of conflict between management and union representatives. Such factors, leading to causes of conflict range from some union representatives who had grudges against some of the SMT members. Some managers believed that some of the grudges harbored by some union members were as a result of bitterness against some of the management members who had been promoted. Some union representatives, allegedly, regarded some of those appointments as questionable and not above board; some of the union representatives believed that they were the ones

who qualified for appointment to the post in question. Other factors were viewed as being based on natural and spontaneous dislike of a person without any tangible reason(s), or based purely on social matters which emanated from outside the school environment.

Causes of tension are normally the result of what Tannenbaum and Schmit (1958) in Rogers (2002: 21) described as 'Boss-centered leadership', where superiors make decisions and simply announce them, as opposed to 'Subordinate-centered leadership', where subordinates are permitted to function and take decisions within the limits defined by the superiors. Such common factors that contribute to the negative impact on the relationship between union representatives and management, include, no space to express one's views, hiring and firing tendencies, nepotism related to appointments lack of transparency by management, dictatorial tendencies, favoritism, and lack of information.

This finding is supported by Venter (2003) when he stated that tensions, if not promptly addressed, may develop into an adverse effect on an organization. Schools as organizations may equally be affected by this negative relationship and its impact. Employment laws, rules and regulations protect workers when conflict arises with the employers. In an ideal situation these rules define the relations between workers and their superiors. The major source of conflict, in the view of Venter (2003), in the labor relationship arena, stems from an inherent divergence of roles. In addition, Gill (2006) found that management and union representatives were sometimes unable to see a problem from both perspectives; this from time to time, may lead to misunderstandings, distrust and suspicions.

## Lack of Equal Treatment of the Members of Different Unions in the Same School

Some union representatives complained of a lack of equal treatment of their particular members as a result of affiliation to different unions in the same schools. Though this was not a general practice in the four schools, where the practice existed in a particular school or schools, the complaint was based on management favoring one union over the other. The favorable union was dubbed a *"sweetheart union"* during the interviews. Some of the reasons given were that one union was more vocal and active than another

and also that members of the SMT were mostly also members of that particular activeunion. The major indication of how active and vocal the favored union was, was that its members regularly brought the latest news about increments and other related matters, such as also informing the SMT members in advance about imminent strikes and possible labor-driven disruptions. On the other hand, the members of the *"not-so-sweetheart union"* were mostly unable to access management in order to be able to share views with them of some of the developments outside their schools given by their own unions.

## Collaborative Relationship Between SMT Members and Union Representatives in Relation to the Development of Their Schools

Another important finding was a general commitment between the SMT and union representatives to work together for the betterment of the education and lives of the learners and the communities around them. Both parties viewed collaboration between themselves as an important ingredient for the promotion of togetherness and to achieve more in the creation and sustenance of a conducive and productive working relationship that enhances learning. According to Anstey (1990: 75), management and labour have one option in a world market, and that is to restructure the bargaining process so as to be mutually productive and to develop the day-to-day relationship necessary (2.14: 25).

Collaboration and mutual trust between union representatives and members of management were also found by Ntshangase (2001) in his study in the Vryheid district of KwaZulu-Natal. He noted that involvement of the unions becomes contestable when some of the normal day-to-day activities in schools, such as when the filling of promotional posts are carried out. Each union wants its member to "win." However, Masters et al. (2010: 2) point out that the impact of engagement between managers and unions is contingent on several factors which include the commitment of top management and union leaders to the process; the extent to which partnerships or forums receive the proper amount of training in interest-based problem solving; the pursuit of cooperative labor-management relations in the collective bargaining process while pursuing engagement; the recognition of the legitimacy of both parties; and a measurable focus on solving real problems in a pre-decision fashion.

## Both SMT Members and Union Representatives View EachOther as Important in Assisting in the Running of Their Schools

All the SMT members regarded union representatives as having a meaningful role to play in the running of schools. They pointed out that union representatives provide them with the necessary information on how to work and deal with union members who fail to carry out their duties. It was also revealed that union representatives provide management with codes of conduct and disciplinary procedures from the unions on how to deal with their members if they are "out of line." Such provisions may otherwise not be readily available to management under ordinary circumstances if they are not provided by union representatives. As a result, union representatives become important sources of information and assistance both, directly, or indirectly, to managers of the schools where they are site stewards or union representatives.

Union representatives, in addition, regard themselves as reservoirs of information on labor-related issues as they regularly advise members of the SMT on matters related to the handling of labor disputes between management and members of their unions. They indicated that they were from time to time able to diffuse potentially-explosive disputes by pre-empting them and providing valuable solutions before they occurred. In a study conducted by Gill (2006) regarding the establishment of effective partnerships between school principals and union representatives, she recorded findings which included the importance of involving stakeholders in the organizational structures as collaborative partners in schools; this assisted in collaborative communication. She further discovered that management commitment was widely regarded as an important ingredient in effective participative management, particularly when it included union members.

## Implications for School Management

The findings of this study are likely to be an eye opener for both SMT members and union

representatives with regard to the areas of conflict and how such conflict could be resolved. The findings of the study revealed that tensions can be addressed through transparency among the management and involvement of the union representatives in decision making. Managers and union members need to commit on working-out strategies and *modus operandi* which will empower everyone to know when, why and how to pull together in an organization. Subsequently, the positive relationship between the two teams is necessary for the smooth running of the school. It is important for both SMT members and union representatives to have a proposed programand agenda for their meetings in order to address various issues affecting their working relationships. Union members may sometimes invite the union officials at branch, regional or even national levels, to present labor-related lectures or talks or symposia to clarify some of the inconstancies or misrepresentations of labor-related practices. The visit by union officials is likely to benefit both SMT members and union members as they all operate under the umbrella of the same union but only separated by ranks. Members of each team should be able to share ideas and information through transparent reports in order to empower each other so as to continue making meaningful contributions to ensuring an effective and collaborative effort in making their work easy and productive at all times. This does not necessarily mean that union representatives should usurp managerial powers and responsibilities or overshadow management on management-related responsibilities. Managers should be allowed to continue undertaking their roles and responsibilities as accounting officers in schools or organizations without undue interference by union representatives.

Managers should not be left without being checked or advised by union representatives, who should also have a stake in the running and functioning of their schools, as they have a constituency to protect (their members) and need to ensure fair treatment in line with the South African Constitution and other labor policies. Collegial models of leadership, such as transformational and participative models (Bush 2003: 76-78) call for democratic and collegial practices to be considered and used if leaders or managers wish to succeed in organizational and school environments. Similarly, the findings of this study reveal the importance of trust and collaborative work between the SMT members and union members. This is likely to promote good relationship which will eventually pave way to effective school management by both teams.

## CONCLUSION

The study has revealed that when workers are dissatisfied with their job and employment conditions, they believe that unionizing can be helpful in the improvement of the conditions under which they work. It is hoped that this study will encourage cooperation and collaboration among the SMT members and union representatives which will reduce tension in many schools. Tensions can be addressed through transparency among the management teams and involvement of union representatives in decision making. School managers are critical in establishing a supportive climate and promoting collaboration as well as accommodating every member of the organization's ideas, so as to feel considered and recognized.

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