

Chapter 7

How do we explain the changed roles of teacher unions in Namibia post-independence?

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I offer three main arguments with respect to the roles of teacher unions. Firstly, the roles of the unions in pre-independence Namibia were shaped by the interplay and contestations of middle-class interests and national liberation. Secondly, the unions, immediately post-independence, were influenced and shaped by broader political and social contextual factors, as they continue to be in today's Namibia. Thirdly, I suggest that the conceptual framework of strategic unionism, as used in this study, can explain the roles of teacher unions in both pre- and immediate post-independence Namibia, but is inadequate to explain their current roles. Against this background, I offer an expansion of the conceptual framework to accommodate the post-independence contextual factors. These include the emergence of a new political culture, and the contestations between class interests and unionism. I suggest that strategic unionism, which developed during the transition to democracy, needs to be extended to the post-independence period, as the context of transition may have changed post-independence.

7.2 Contestations of middle-class interests and national liberation on the roles of teacher unions

In this study, I found that the contestations of middle-class interests and national liberation influenced and shaped the roles of teacher unions in pre-independence Namibia. The dominant political and social features before independence were, on the one hand, the fight for national liberation, and on the other, attempts by the South African government to maintain the existing political system and social status quo. Against this background, the roles of teacher unions in pre-independence Namibia were located in the contested political and social environment of either supporting national liberation or advancing personal middle-class interests and aspirations. Supporting the South African government was akin to pursuing middle-class interests.

The middle-class stratum enjoyed privileges, such as high salaries and housing subsidies. The objective of creating a middle class in pre-independence Namibia was to oppose national liberation.

In the conflicting objectives of the political environment, progressive teacher unions contested the prevailing political and educational systems. Their purpose was to bring about fundamental change. Towards the end of the 1980s, these unions began, at first covertly and then openly, to identify themselves with national liberation. While not all the teachers and teacher unions openly supported national liberation, some straddled the political and education system, and opposed apartheid from within the system. Soudien (2002) suggests that teachers and teacher unions can oppose a system in which they work through what he defines as “strategic resistance”. This refers to a situation where individuals choose to subvert the system from within. Teacher unions and teachers in pre-independence Namibia used this kind of strategic resistance to fight the apartheid system.

I suggest that progressive teacher unions supported national liberation for two main reasons. Firstly, it was to contribute to the speedy independence of Namibia by joining forces with other progressive forces fighting for national liberation. Secondly, it aimed to bring about a new education system by advocating for radical change in education, once independence had been gained. The education reform agenda of these unions included democratization of education and the introduction of a relevant national education system. The unions expected the new education system to address the needs and aspirations of all the Namibian people, in contrast to the prevailed system in pre-independence Namibia.

Against the above explanation, I posit that the politics of national liberation shaped the roles of progressive teacher unions in pre-independence Namibia. My argument is premised on two points. Firstly, the role of progressive teachers was defined by the expectations of the forces of national liberation, and thereafter transformation of the education system. Secondly, the progressive unions, as Steven argued in chapter four of this study, realized that fundamental change could not take place in the context of the pre-independence reformist framework, hence the support for national liberation to bring about radical change in education.

The progressive teacher unions which supported national liberation were opposed and counteracted by other teacher unions. The agenda of the progressive unions was to unite all the teachers in Namibia in a national teachers' union. The other unions counteracted this idea by establishing the Federation of Teachers' Associations of South West Africa/Namibia. The purpose of the Federation was to bring all the teacher unions under one umbrella. I suggest that this was a reflection of the contestation in the political arena between national liberation and the maintenance of the prevailing political and education system. The contestation did not originate only with the teacher unions. Those unions which opposed national liberation were aided by the government. The South African government aided the unions which opposed liberation, by deliberately promoting the middle-class interests of teachers in Namibia before independence, as I will illustrate shortly. My research found that the South African government in the 1970s and 1980s initiated schemes to promote middle-class interests. Secondly, Ellis (1984) suggests that it was the government which promoted the establishment of the Federation of Teachers' Associations of South West Africa/Namibia, specifically to oppose initiatives to establish progressive national teacher unions.

Tapscott (2001) notes that black teachers and nurses were paid salaries and housing benefits that were on a par with their white counterparts. This was not the case with all other employees. The purpose of promoting a black middle-class was, firstly, to promote elitism, and to form a hedge between national liberation and the middle-class stratum. Secondly, as Ellis (1984) suggests, it forced some teachers to play the roles of agents of the apartheid state in the fight against national liberation and the liberation movement, SWAPO. Thirdly, it was to prepare the middle-class stratum to oppose radical transformation in post-independence Namibia (Ellis, 1984; Cohen, 1994; Tapscott, 2001).

It is possible, therefore, that the interests of national liberation and the South African government to mobilize teachers to identify themselves with either national liberation or middle-class interests were informed by the potential roles of teachers and teacher unions to advance their conflicting interests. Teachers, by virtue of their position, could influence society to support or oppose a cause. Depending on their location,

teacher unions before independence became entangled in the interests either of national liberation or the South African government.

The existing literature on teacher unions, reviewed in chapter four, does not speak to contestations of middle-class interests and national liberation. As I argued, it treats teacher unions as homogeneous, and assumes that they act in the same manner in all contexts. My research brings out the conflict between middle-class interests and national liberation, and how this shaped the roles of teacher unions. Against this background, I suggest that the roles of the unions can only be fully understood and explained, if the contestations of middle-class interests and national liberation are taken into account. I assert that the contestations shaped and influenced the roles of teacher unions in Namibia.

7.3 Contextual factors and the roles of teacher unions

I will make two main arguments in this section. The first is that the immediate context post-independence created favourable conditions for teacher union participation and dialogue in education. Secondly, I argue that, despite the favourable conditions for union participation, the post-independence environment in Namibia also introduced a new political culture and new middle-class formations. These shaped, and continue to shape, the roles of teacher unions in Namibia.

I have shown that the teacher unions changed from adversarial labour relations and co-optation to the middle-class stratum, which conditioned their roles in Namibia before independence, to participation and dialogue in education after independence. I argue that these changed roles were the result of independence and the new democratic dispensation, and of the ideologies of partnership and participation introduced by the new government. The new democratic dispensation created institutional frameworks and modalities to facilitate teacher union participation and dialogue in education. National liberation was premised on democratization and participation, and these ideologies found reflection in government policies after independence. In chapter five, I showed how the Namibian Constitution offers opportunities for teacher unions in Namibia to share in policy development, and to influence public policies. It is against this background that the ideology of the new government, compared to the pre-

independence government, encouraged participation in the decision-making processes.

Secondly, I suggest that there is a relationship between the broader political context, including the power wielded by government, and the roles of teacher unions. In the case of immediate post-independence Namibia, the broader political and social contextual factors of negotiated political settlement, the principles of consensus, and the policy of national reconciliation and unity influenced an inclusive and participatory approach to education. It should be noted that the incoming government in 1990 did not have all the expertise and experience to manage a national education system. The need to pool all the available skills and experiences in constructing a unified education system informed the inclusive and participatory approach to education. Against this background, it is arguable that the contextual factors of democratization and unity defined and shaped the roles of teacher unions in the period immediately after independence. Democratization opened up spaces for teacher union participation and social dialogue in education.

I concluded from my research that the immediate post-independence roles of teacher unions of participation and involvement in the institutional frameworks and modalities have undergone changes. Teacher unions in Namibia today are not involved in education in the way they were during the period of the educational reforms. There are different explanations for the current lack of teacher union participation in the institutional frameworks and modalities for dialogue in education. Firstly, independence, in addition to ushering in favourable conditions for union participation, also introduced new cultures which limited the roles of the unions. Here, I will discuss two of the new cultures to illustrate how they constrained the roles of teacher unions in post-independence Namibia.

The first is the culture of political hierarchy. I argue that a new culture of political hierarchy emerged after independence. This culture was based on the practice of the leadership of the party or government taking decisions, and the “followers” implementing the decisions. I argue that this new culture demobilizes teacher unions in so far as taking internal independent union decisions. Teacher unions in today’s Namibia, particularly those affiliated to the ruling party, are entangled in undefined party-government-teacher union relationships, and these relationships limit the extent

to which the unions can advance their own interests outside political parties and the sphere of government influence.

Undefined post-independence party-government-teacher union relationships complicate the roles of teacher unions in the context of a new political culture, which expects the unions to follow the decisions of the party or government. It also undermines the trade union principles of internal democracy, mandate and accountability to the membership. Against this background, the unions become followers, rather than active participants in the institutional frameworks and modalities of union participation and dialogue in education. They become followers of government and subject to political party dictates.

I submit that the new political culture and its underlying hierarchical distinction between the leadership and followers offers one explanation of why teacher unions currently are not involved in education, as compared to the phase of the educational reforms. The new political culture not only influences and shapes the roles of teacher unions; it also shapes the mindset of staff members in the Ministry of Education to avoid involving teacher unions in education policymaking. Staff members in the Ministry of Education assume that the Ministry alone is responsible for making decisions, which others have to implement.

The formation of a new middle-class is another post-independence phenomenon in Namibia. The middle-class elite, as Tapscott (2001) observes, is detached from the world of poverty. They focus on materialism and wealth accumulation. The tendency in the broader society to ascend to the stratum of the middle-class elite finds reflection in the current leadership of the teacher unions. The middle-class interests and aspirations of the union leaders have two implications for the unions. Firstly, the leaders tend to focus on political issues which advance their personal ambitions in the party political structures or in government. This focus on the political parties, instead of on unionism, facilitates their rise into the middle-class stratum. Secondly, the union leaders ignore the promotion of professional aspects of teacher unionism.

7.4 Professionalism and the role of teacher unions

I make two points in this section. Firstly, the roles of teacher unions in the contested political environment go beyond professional roles, and include political issues which the unions drive. Secondly, teacher unions in Namibia once had a vision of radical change in both the internal organization of the unions and the education system. They were involved in both unionism and professionalism.

The formation of national teacher unions in Namibia was driven by the teacher unions, firstly, to challenge the prevailing political environment of fragmentation, and secondly, to bring about change in the internal organization of the unions. The unions drove the agenda of national unity and their relocation from the ethnic space that had defined their identities before independence. The formation of teacher unions in the Namibian context enabled progressive teachers to play roles beyond those of traditional unionism. These roles included the dismantling of ethnic fragmentation in education and in the unions. The progressive teachers drove the agenda of national, non-racial and non-ethnic unions and education system.

As in the case of the confrontation of middle-class interests and national liberation, so was the national union agenda opposed by some teacher unions. The contestation was underlined by the definition of teachers as professionals, and by opposition to the alignment of the unions with the working class. It is therefore, arguable that the roles of teacher unions in Namibia were driven by both trade unionism and professionalism.

In immediate post-independence Namibia, teacher unions began to drive their strategic educational issues. They advanced professional issues in the institutional frameworks of the education reforms. Their purpose was to bring about fundamental change in education. The strategic issues for radical change that the progressive unions advanced were; the introduction of English as the medium of instruction, equality and equity in education, and school integration and democratization of education.

I suggest that the roles of teacher unions in Namibia, and the issues that they promoted, were defined by the political context. Before independence, they focused more on unionism, and on organizing teachers into national teachers' unions. With the

advent of independence, particularly in the immediate post-independence period, the unions pursued issues of professionalism to bring about fundamental change in education. The separation between professionalism and unionism is not inevitable, as teacher unions can combine the two to advance their interests. Teachers and some teacher unions in pre-independence Namibia, for example, advanced the formation of national teacher unions and at the same time advocated for a unified education system.

7.5 Expanding the conceptual framework of strategic unionism

I will make two main arguments in this section. Firstly, I suggest that strategic unionism can explain the roles of teacher unions in the context of pre- and immediate post-independence Namibia, but is inadequate to explain the current roles of the unions. Secondly, against this background, I suggest that strategic unionism should be expanded to take into account the post-independence contextual factors which influence and shape the unions' roles.

Strategic unionism, as described by Von Holdt (1994), Barber (1996) and Murray and Wood (1997), and used in this study as the conceptual framework, is premised on trade unions, including teacher unions, developing a strategic vision and response to contextual factors. The vision and response are short-and long-term labour-driven processes of strategic and radical change, the commitment to building alliances, and the formation of coalitions in dealing with contextual issues.

According to Von Holdt (1994), cited in Murray and Wood (1997), strategic unionism in South Africa developed as a response to the challenges posed by the transition from apartheid to democracy. The principles of strategic unionism were also developed, because of the inadequacies of the theory of trade unions as social movements to explain the roles of independent trade unions during the transition to democracy in South Africa.

According to Murray and Wood (1997), the strategic vision of trade unions, including progressive teacher unions in pre-independence Namibia, extended beyond the traditional roles of unions in the workplace to the sphere of national liberation. The vision and roles of teacher unions immediately after independence expanded from

concentrating only on unionism to focusing on professionalism. The unions, as I showed in chapter four, embraced the post-independence educational reforms. It was for this reason that they were represented in the institutional frameworks and modalities created to facilitate their participation in the reforms. The purpose of their participation was to influence the reforms, and to bring about radical change in the education system after independence. Given this background, I suggest that strategic unionism, as expounded by Von Holdt (1994), Barber (1996) and Murray and Wood (1997), can explain the roles of teacher unions both in the context of the pre- and immediate post-independence Namibia.

Strategic unionism suggests a vision of a labour-driven process of radical strategic change that I did not find in the current roles of teacher unions in Namibia. The situation in Namibia today, as Jenny observed, is that “the Ministry of Education tends to wait until unions raise issues, then the Ministry is caught off guard in panic,” signalling the current absence of strategic unionism in Namibia. This view is reinforced with the observation of another interviewee that teacher unions in Namibia currently “have completely lost direction.”

Teacher unions and other trade unions in Namibia today are driven by political and personal ambitions. The post-independence context, as Tapscott (2001) observed, created scope for the rapid formation of a new middle-class. What emerges from the results of this study is the existence of a new hierarchical political culture, new middle-class formations, and undefined party-government-teacher union relationships, instead of a labour-driven process of radical change. I argue that, just as the struggle for national liberation and middle-class interests in pre-independence Namibia shaped the roles of teacher unions, so the post-independence context of the formation of a new middle-class and a new political culture have had profound effects on the current roles of teacher unions. As Bendix (1998:75) suggests, “industrial relations systems are reflections of the socio-political system, and division in the socio-political system found reflection in the industrial relations system.”

The current roles of teacher unions in Namibia are shaped by the new middle-class interests and aspirations. Unionists currently access middle-class interests through their advancements in political parties, and subsequent appointment in government structures and the private sector. As a result, the values and principles of service to the

union, education and solidarity are dissolving. Increasingly, as I explained in chapter six, leadership in teacher unions is seen as a stepping-stone for personal aspirations and ambitions, and for access to the new middle-class. This suggests that the broader post-independence factors in Namibia of new middle-class formations, hierarchical political culture and undefined party-government-teacher union relationships have reached deep in the roles of teacher unions. Secondly, the post-independence contextual factors of class formations and a new political culture are currently shaping the unions to conform to the broader political and social contexts. The expected roles of teacher unions, those of conformity to political parties and governments, are very different from their pre- and immediate post-independence roles.

I hold that strategic unionism cannot explain the roles of teacher unions in Namibia against the backdrop of changed political conditions. Nor can it explain the current roles of teacher unions against the backdrop of the emergent middle-class and the new political culture. It is not yet clear what trade union theory or theories will emerge to accommodate the post-independence contextual factors which influence and shape the roles of teacher unions. This suggests that a further implication of this study could be the expansion of strategic unionism to take into account the post-independence contextual factors or to generate a new theory altogether, one which would explain the changed roles of the unions within the broader political and social context. Specifically, the contestations of class interests and unionism make the strategic aspirations of unionism hazy. In addition, political aspirations further complicate the unionist agenda, rendering strategic unionism an incomplete theoretical stance.

7.6 Other areas of interest

The results of the study reveal other areas of interest. I did not address these areas, as they were not part of the research questions. Further research on teacher unions might consider investigating some of these areas of interest. They include:

- The shifting roles of teacher unions and implications for industrial relations policies and practice.
- The roles of teacher unions through the lenses of gender and race.

These are some of the questions that came to mind as I was going through the journey of conducting this study. I suggest that the shifting roles of teacher unions require new approaches to industrial relations policies and practice. It is against this background that further studies on these unions could look into how their shifting roles shape industrial relations policies and practice in different contexts. Examining the influence of the shifting roles of teacher unions on industrial relations might help governments to develop more pro-active and coherent, but flexible industrial relations policies.

In the literature review chapter, I highlighted an observation in the 2009 ILO and UNESCO report of the Committee of Experts on “the Application of the Recommendations Concerning the Status of the Teaching Personnel” that there is generally a lack of dialogue and consultations between governments and teacher unions. The problem in Namibia is not the absence of structures and mechanisms for social dialogue in education, but rather that of improving the effectiveness of the existing structures and mechanisms, so that the Ministry is not “caught off guard”, as Jenny expressed it.

The second question came to my mind, because I realized when writing the methodology chapter that my sample did not take gender and race into account. I suggest further research to look at the history of the Namibian teacher unions through race and gender lenses, as these perspectives might offer different explanations for the shifting roles of the unions.

7.7 Conclusion

I believe that this study, although a case study of the roles played by teacher unions in pre- and post-independence Namibia, is significant. It contributes to our understanding of the shifting roles of the unions, particularly the influence of the conflicting interests of middle-class aspirations and national liberation. Teacher unions are generally treated in existing literature as focusing either on professionalism or on trade unionism. This study demonstrates that they could simultaneously play both unionist and professional roles, and that context determines the roles they would play. It has also shown that, in the context of immediate post-independence Namibia, representation and participation of the unions in the institutional frameworks and modalities of the education reforms were key priority activities. Finally, I have argued that strategic unionism may be extended through the conscious accommodation of contextual political and social conditions. In the Namibian case, these would be the political aspirations that unionists hold, as well as the desire for middle-class comforts.