Exploring Teacher Mass Resignation and Early Retirement from Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

The reasons influencing teachers to resign or take early retirements are said to be vast and intertwined. This paper investigates the reasons for mass teacher resignations and early retirements in South Africa. Three circuits were purposively selected. This paper found that the majority of teachers who resigned or opted for early retirements were motivated by pressure of work due to increased workload, low teacher salaries, lack of security and safety and indebtedness of teachers and lack of incentives which demoralise teachers. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the employer should improve conditions of service.

Keywords: Teacher Resignations and Early Retirements, Poverty, Workload, Salaries, Staff Turn-Over.

INTRODUCTION

One of the operational targets of the South African education system is to campaign, amongst stakeholders of education, for a system that makes schools work by improving quality and standards (Nemukula, 2002). Based on this target, Minister Kader Asmal, in 2000 designed a policy document targeting teacher, learner, principals and other stakeholders discipline through what came to be known as “Tirisano”, loosely translated “Working together to build a South African education and training system for the twenty-first century” (Nemukula, 2002). Minister Kader Asmal was of the opinion that through the “Tirisano” campaign advocated for by what his department named Culture of Learning, Teaching and Services (COLTS) campaign, South Africa would be able to transform its ailing education system from its apartheid-era design of racial inequality to a democratic education system which would fulfil the mandate of the new democratic Constitution of the Republic. However, all these targets seem to be under serious threat as a result of new developments within the education system – especially the issue of mass resignations and early retirements of teachers, mostly from the 2014.

Of late, South Africa has been battling with mass resignation and early retirement of teachers from public education system to an extent of it becoming a crisis. However, teacher resignations and early retirements have been problematic for education policy planners, and all those who are involved in the dispensation of education to the public in most regions around the world for decades. For example, Xaba (2003) reported that resignation and early retirement of teachers in countries such as Gambia and Zimbabwe for example have dramatically increased in the past two decades. Larger economies such as Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, New Zealand and the United States of America are also facing critical shortages of teachers as a result of mass exit of teachers from the teaching profession (Xaba, 2003). In fact, in South Africa, teacher early retirements and resignations from public service and education system have been legendary for years. For example, Diko and Letseka (2009) found that approximately 156 teachers resigned from the North West Department of Education in 2007 alone. Various studies (Diko and Letseka, 2009; Lumadi, 2014; Steyn et al., 2011; Van Scheers and Wiid, 2011) reported that like the rest of the world, the South African education system is also critically facing massive shortage of teachers – especially in crucial subjects such as mathematics and science mainly as a result of resignations and early retirement of teachers from the teaching profession. Researchers such as Van Scheer and Wiid (2011) in addition, postulate that there are various intertwined factors contributing to high teacher resignations and early retirements.
turnover – especially in South Africa. Chief amongst the factors for high turnover and shortage of teachers is opined by the various studies as being teacher resignations and early retirement from the education system. This paper therefore focuses on some of those factors in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Retention of staff – especially those with much needed skills, experience and expertise is regarded as the most crucial human resource practice objective of a healthy organisation and employment system because the quality and relevance of the employment system largely depends on such retainments (Chabaya et al., 2014). This assertion is further corroborated by Mdindela (2009) who retorted that every employment environment needs a reliable and consistent source of labour in order to realise organisational objectives. Contrary to these assertions, instead, government employment is currently under massive strain, both in the developing and developed economies. All over the world – in countries such as Australia, Canada, Gambia, The United Kingdom and South Africa for example, in every sector of government service, valuable and highly skilled personnel is lost to resignations and early retirements from government service for various reasons. Currently, in South Africa for example, there has been massive exits of civil servants from public service – and this trend is most intense especially in education (Makondo, 2014; Steyn et al. 2014) where large numbers of teachers are leaving the system. Practising teachers mostly enter the profession for the love of it, and the fact that teaching affords them an opportunity to make contribution in society (Van Scheers and Wiid, 2011). However, reality of issues on the floor – in schools and within the education system in general provides what seems to be contrary to expectations – and teachers develop dissatisfactions, and therefore leave the system sooner than it is expected. Dissatisfaction is a powerful labour discouragement factor because once the employee develops dissatisfaction; it manifests itself through increased absenteeism from work (Appiah-Agyekum et al., 2013. However, teacher challenges are not only a South African challenge.

Makondo (2014), for example, reported that elsewhere in Africa, Gambia for instance, the Gambian education system is currently battling mass exodus of teachers who are resigning from government service to seek other avenues elsewhere in what Muteswa and Ortleppe (2011) calls “war for talent” because it is the battle between two employers who are competing for the skills of the employee. In the Gambia, the Gambian Teachers’ Union opine that teachers were faced with poor conditions of service, grossly underpaid with limited benefits in terms of allowances, assistance on housing and promotion amongst others (Makondo, 2014). In South Africa for example, Strydom et al. (2012) argued that “... due to problems currently experienced by teachers at main stream schools, such as work pressure and minimal support and restructuring of the education system, their job satisfaction has reached an all-time low” Low morale amongst teachers might contribute to excessive turnovers (Van Scheers and Wiid, 2011).

To understand the new developments taking place in the education system in South Africa with regard teacher resignations and early retirements, there has to be an understanding that teaching as a profession is like any other career. The profession of teaching is affected by all the factors that affect organisational systems and operation just as in other professional environments. Teachers also face employee recruitment and retention challenges enforced amongst others by excessive workloads, employee disillusionment and frustration, lack of career opportunities and growth prospects, unrealistic expectations by the demanding work environment – especially the employer and dissatisfaction of employees for example (Chabaya et al., 2014). With regard teacher resignations and early retirements, there are several reasons cited by various studies (De Wet, 2010; Louw et al., 2011; Makondo, 2014; Steyn et al., 2014; Steyn et al., 2011; Strydom et al., 2012) as being the causes – especially in South Africa. However, factors of current teacher resignations and early retirements remain largely illusive. This paper therefore fills that gap by investigating the reasons and factors for the mass resignations and early retirements of teachers from the education system – with focus on the Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo Province.

2. Methodology
2.1 Study design, Sample size and sampling techniques

2.1.1 Study design

This paper was designed to provide qualitative-
quantitative data. However, in the main, the paper was more qualitative than it was quantitative. Open-ended questions were administered through a questionnaire to the respondents to source for primary data while a few questions were also employed to source for quantitative data through a closed-ended questionnaire.

2.1.2 Sample size

The study was undertaken in the Vhembe District municipality, however, from three circuits of education. Vhembe District is the north-most region of South Africa into Zimbabwe in the north from Limpopo Province (Mudau, 2014). The three circuits are Nzhelele East Circuit, Nzhelele West Circuit and Soutpansberg North Circuit. The selection of this circuits were motivated by, amongst others, proximity of the circuits to the study enumerators in order to minimise on the costs of the study. The three circuits were purposively selected. The purposive selection was to, in the main, achieve the desired particular objective of this study. There were four stakeholders to provide data for this study; (1) resigned or early retired teachers (2) principals of the schools where the respondent teachers taught before resignations and retirement (3) circuit managers, and (4) representatives of teacher unions.

2.1.3 Sampling techniques

A record of teachers who had resigned or taken early retirement was compiled from the information provided by the circuit managers of the three circuits targeted for this study. Considering the limitations of this study with regard access of respondent teachers, only 32 teachers were targeted for primary data collection (n=32). It transpired during the processes of the study that it was difficult to reach the targeted 32 teachers because some of them had already scattered all over the country for various reasons - and therefore mainly untraceable or unreachable. Therefore, only 14 respondent teachers were purposively selected from the list (n=14). The selected teacher respondents were telephonically contacted to set initial meetings and interview dates. The fourteen respondent teachers were selected respectively from Nzhelele East Circuit (3), Nzhelele West Circuit (8) and Soutpansberg North Circuit (3). Fourteen principals were also purposively selected from a list comprising the resigned and retired teachers. In other words, each resigned or retired teacher was paired with his/her school principal. The selection of the respective teacher meant that the corresponding principal was also automatically selected for interviews. Only two circuit managers were interviewed. The initial idea was to interview all the circuit managers of the three circuits considering the size of this component, but one circuit manager could not be available for interviews due to some personal commitments outside work. There are two dominant teacher unions in the region – especially in the three circuits; the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and the Professional Teachers Union (PEU). Locating the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) was much easier than the Professional Teachers Union (PEU) because the former had offices in the Dzanani town which were accessible at any given moment. Contacts were made with the Chairperson of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) through the office of the union administrator. An appointment was secured for initial contacts and setting of dates for interviews. It was also anticipated that it could become imperative to obtain views from the senior structures of the teacher union. Through existing contacts between the researcher and the Regional office of the union, an interview was secured with the General Secretary of the Vhembe Region of SADTU, and data was collected.

2.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

Mdindela (2009) illustrated four theoretical underpinnings influencing staff turnover in an organisation, the properties of which are appropriate and relevant to assisting the objectives of this paper (table 1). Table 1 shows four factors playing a major role in staff turnover. These are, (1) individual factors, (2) job factors, (3) organisational factors and, (4) environmental factors. This framework allows this paper to analyse its key focus points of analysis, which are as indicated in table 1, under “focus variable for this paper”
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mdindela Theoretical factors</th>
<th>Focus Variable for this paper</th>
<th>Brief description of the measured variable</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age of the respondent resigner</td>
<td>Chronological number of years lived by the respondent teacher since date of birth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>If married or not</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household Size</td>
<td>Number of persons in respondent's household</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of dependants</td>
<td>Number of persons who are socio-economically dependent on the respondent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Motivated or otherwise</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial stability</td>
<td>Financially stable or not, and if has other loan incomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjects taught</td>
<td>If the teacher teaches subject(s) qualified to teach, and if enjoy or not enjoy the subject</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work load</td>
<td>Number of periods taught in a Week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Number of years accumulated in teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>Level of qualification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remuneration</td>
<td>Whether teacher is satisfied or not satisfied with remuneration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>Any bullying by stakeholders – especially learners, and how such get addressed by employer, and unions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Organisational Factors</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture of the school</td>
<td>Whether the teacher is familiar with the culture of the school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation and morale</td>
<td>If the teacher is motivated, or has high morale</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reward and appreciation</td>
<td>Any rewards for performance?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Any existing conflicts and if they are satisfactorily addressed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>The role of school-based leadership</td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Environmental Factors</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>If any in-service assistance exists</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion opportunities</td>
<td>Whether promotion has fair strategy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support and Development</td>
<td>Whether the Department is supportive of teachers in terms of expected targets</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Future prospects</td>
<td>Chances of career development and growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Policy matters</td>
<td>Whether the rumoured new pension issues have had influence on the resignation or early retirement of the teacher from the education system</td>
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The second theoretical underpinning regards the proposal of O'Donnel (2014) who opined that prevention, reaction and rebuilding of systems could be an effective strategy to build and develop systems. The interviews with circuit managers, principals and union leaders were designed to respond to this framework.

2.3 Data analysis techniques

There were two kinds of data collected for this paper. First, was the quantitative data collected from the respondent teachers. The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis in frequencies and percentages. The qualitative data from all the respondents were coded according to pre-determined themes and sub-themes for analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Operational factors of the education system influencing teacher resignations and retirements from public service

3.1.1 Workload

The results of this paper revealed that abnormal and excessive workload was one of the major contributors of teacher resignations and early retirement in the Vhembe District. This result is consistent with findings recorded earlier in other studies. Heavy workload has been cited as one of the major causes of teacher fatigue and turnover in some schools elsewhere in South Africa in general (Van Schleeer and Wiid, 2011). For example, one of the respondents indicated that he was teaching eight (8) subjects in different grades when he decided to resign. This teacher revealed that it was impossible to cope with the workload considering that he had also, apart from teaching, do strenuous administrative work, for example, marking of scripts, completion of CASS mark sheets and attending teacher workshops in between. With age catching up, the pressure and stress were unbearable, and subsequently this teacher decided to leave the education system. In his own words, the teacher said, it did not look like we were anywhere near a resolution, not even a compromise to resolve teacher challenges. Despite numerous attempts by teacher unions to address the abnormal working conditions of teachers with education authorities, nothing came forth for years...for years. I decided to leave the department than to continue in this stressful atmosphere. Have you noticed that, there are more and more teachers sinking into alcoholism of late? Teachers are victims of their work environment – they are stressed and depressed...very, and they drink from morning to sunset to console themselves.

This result is corroborated by the policy proposal statement of the document “Teachers for the Future; Meeting Teacher Shortages to achieve Education for all” of 2005 in which it was opined that “teachers should be released from administrative tasks and other activities that increase their workload and distract their attention” (Department of Education 202, 2005). One respondent teacher also added “it is that clerical part of the job making things worse. Classroom work might be fine, but the strenuous non-classroom work is killing the morale of teachers” To teach eight subjects is already an abnormality for both the teacher and the learner. It challenges performance and productivity.

While consensus amongst researchers and policymakers suggest that one other factor contributing to poor school performance in terms of learner performance and output has to do with lack of proper managerial and leadership skills amongst principals as school managers in South Africa (Mathibe, 2007), however, for this paper, some school principals who participated in this study however expanded this factor to abnormal workload school principals face on the day to day of managing and leading the schools. The majority of principals contended that abnormal workload than managerial and leadership skills were in fact problematic – especially amongst smaller schools where teachers would teach so many subjects in various grades. In smaller schools, teachers have on average at least six to seven subjects they teach whereas in larger schools, it was possible to find a teacher having to teach only one subject but to a larger group of learners. For instance, a participant principal of a smaller school taught five subjects in different grades. This principal revealed that he had to, in addition, and in between teaching periods, do heavy and strenuous administrative and school management work. There are times he would also spend away from class and management work attending principals’ meetings and so forth as called by the department from time to time. For this principal to balance classroom work and management...
requirements at the school demands some extra time outside the normal working hours prescribed by the department. This principal revealed that he normally does administrative and management work after hours, so that he finds time to teach the learners whenever that opportunity availed itself. Also, he has to find time to mark his learners’ assessments, compile mark sheets and also submit, on set due dates, such mark sheets and learners portfolio of evidence to moderators. This principal has to teach because the school is under-staffed, and, in addition, he also teaches to lessen the workload on the teachers who are already overloaded. This principal also revealed that his allocated Head of Department (HOD) also teaches at least five subjects in five different grades. The implication is that the Head of Department (HOD) is effectively withdrawn from governance and management responsibilities in order to do classroom teaching. With both the Head of Department (HOD) and the principal, being the main members of school management teams (SMTs) in terms of the South African School Act provision - having had been tactically withdrawn from management and governance issues of the school, the expected product is definitely crisis and chaos of management and governance of the school. In fact, this view is corroborated by Motseke (2013) who argued that “ineffective school administration leads to a chaotic school environment”. According to Matshe (2014) “Governance [of a school] refers to the act of governing a school to ensure that the school fulfils its functions of providing a relevant, quality service to the learners and the community in which the school is situated.” There are several studies (Motseke, 2013) which opined that lack of proper management and governance in some schools in South Africa could be the cause of poor performance and productivity of schools. The scenario reflected in this paper, in this regard, points to a school system open to such risk. Evidently, this provides prima facie evidence that the South African school system has degenerated into “crisis”, “national disaster”, “inefficient”, “ineffective” and also “in tatters” - to such an extent that approximately between 60-80% of the schools were declared as being ailing or dysfunctional (Letseka et al., 2012).

Most critically, in this paper, is the postulation made by some principals that the majority of the teachers – including the principals who teach were in most cases not trained in the particular subjects they teach. One principal participant in the study put it this way “You learn with the learners...it is indeed a crisis”. Further probing revealed that the Department of Education employed the so-called enrolment-based staff placement; which does not consider the school curriculum but size of the learner enrolment in the particular school when allocating teaching posts. The implication is that, fewer teachers have to be teaching a small number of learners but large number of subjects. The submission of most principals in the participant schools were that the department should instead employ staff allocation based on curriculum composition and needs and the size of the enrolment of learners of the school. Evidently, quality of the education system as a whole is compromised. For instance, principals spend most of their time outside management competence of their appointments. This means that certain managerial areas affecting the running of the school received less attention, and this might negatively impact on the overall output of the particular school – especially with regard pass rates and quality of the learners produced. The results of this paper contradicts the rule of thumb which opines that “the rationales for school governance is that it will improve decision making about teaching and learning, resulting in the effective use of resources, and contributing to more effective practices and outcomes.” as argued by Onderi and Makori (2013).

In addition, in the case of the South African school system, the fact that school managers spend much of their time outside management work compromises the provisions of the Tirisano campaign – especially the Project 2 target on school leadership and management. Project 2 of Tirisano sought “to ensure that all schools should have management teams that demonstrate a commitment to the development of a school culture that engenders and promotes quality; to promote a common vision and quality learning and teaching; to set high standards and expectations for learners and educators; and to create a climate that is conducive to learning and the professional growth of educators” (Steyn, 2013). Furthermore, considering the results of this paper, opines that, the fact that much of classroom teaching work is being done by teachers less trained in the particular fields suggests that quality might be under serious compromise.
In fact, it has been submitted in various studies (Lumadi, 2014; Mudau, 2014) that the majority of teachers in South African schools—especially in mathematics and physical science amongst others—lack proper subject knowledge in the subject they teach.

3.1.2 Poor remuneration and incentives

The majority of teachers in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa who resigned from the Department of Education during the period covering the time reference of this paper postulated that one critical factor pushing teachers out of the system through resignations and early retirements has to do with low salaries of teachers. According to Van Der Berg and Burger (n.d), “despite higher educational attainment relative to non-teachers in the labour market” in South Africa, teachers are perceived as the least paid professionals and public service workers in the country. In fact, “there are strong feelings among South African teachers that their remuneration is substantially lower than what is available in non-teachers professions and that the current salary structure provides very little incentive to perform as a teacher” (Van Der Berg and Burger, n.d). However, Van Der Berg and Burger (n.d), in their own research work finds to the contrary, with regard teacher salary in South Africa. The contrast is opined in the postulation they posited, hinting thus “teachers fell increasingly into the economic elite amongst employed individuals in South Africa” and furthermore, “if the unemployed were added to the picture, teachers rose to the very top of the income distribution” Following this assertion, which opines teachers as being part of the better paid compared to the rest of the employed public in various sectors of the economy, and the results of this paper as revealed earlier, this paper therefore sought to establish the reasons which could be influencing the mass resignations and early retirements of teachers from the education department in the manner in which it is happening. Amongst others, the majority of teachers interviewed for the purpose of this paper revealed that they resigned due to indebtedness—in order to settle some of their debts. The issue of the new pension regulations as proposed by government is just a trigger of the resignations and early retirements but not the main cause. With regard to debts, the majority of teachers owed a number of informal money lenders thousands of rands—and the only way out is resignations and/or early retirement in order to access some cash from the pension fund to settle the debts.

For the purpose of this paper, nine of the fourteen respondent teachers (64.3%) revealed that because of poor salary, and lack of additional income creation opportunities for teachers, there are teachers within their area who are known moonlighters in various sectors of the local economy to generate additional income—no matter how little the additional income might be. For instance, this paper traced at least six teachers who moonlight in the local funeral industry as pallbearers, hearse drivers, mortuary managers, and/or funeral business marketing. These teachers collect corpses from hospitals to the mortuaries, clean and pack them—and deliver them on the day of the burial. Some teachers hire out their vehicles to the funeral homes to assist in the transportation of corpses or relatives of the bereaved during funerals and burials. Some of these teachers have been in this business for over ten years. Apart from moonlighting in the funeral industry, some teachers are heavily involved in the so-called *matshonise* business; that is, informal money lending. Some teachers borrow money from these institutions— and often, become heavily indebted to these institutions that from what they earn, they remain with nothing to take home. The majority of the teachers concede that their salaries were small and inadequate to meet petty household needs, and in addition, disproportionate from their work output. Teachers are financially stressed in the system that even if they could get out of the system through resignations and/or early retirements, some teachers felt it would still be much better than when they remain with the system. One respondent remarked

I worked for those people ...I mean the Department of Education for 24 years and my last annual salary was still 240 000 or so, per annum...after 24 years I cannot show anybody anything. Poor working, poor old, and poor dead...that is what it means to be a teacher in South Africa. Are those who remained with the system until retirement manage to get out of poverty? My friend, we live with them every day, they are still poor. The lump sum they receive when going for retirement, they use it to settle debts and also build a house and buy a small car for
the first time. They earn a small amount monthly until they died. No, I want to earn my life today...not when I have died.

This result is supported by Scheers and Wiid (2011) who reported that, as a matter of emergency, teachers might not be made to be content with what they have but efforts should therefore be made to improve the salaries and other incentives for teachers. Five respondents also revealed that where incentives existed in the form of promotional positions, the existing vacant positions would be fraudulently and corruptly reserved for those teachers who were either senior in the dominant union movement of the area; be it the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) or Professional Educators Union (PEU) or they have connections within the leadership structures of such formations.

On further probing, it emerged that one of the teachers who had resigned from the system was short-listed and interviewed for Head of Department (HOD) position at another school outside where he was teaching. However, because the principal of the school where he was interviewed for the position was a friend of his current principal – with whom he had continuous professional differences, the would-be-new principal was made to deviate the appointment for another teacher. In other words, the promotion system is open for abuse, and only those teachers with favour from the bosses would be appointed to positions ahead of the rest. In fact, this result is in collaboration with the findings reported by Zengele (2013) who posited that in countries such as Mexico for example, promotions would favour key union members in clandestine political deployment just like during the 1966 Mexico post-elections where some teachers were promoted into senior positions for having assisted the ruling party to win political elections. The anarchy, intimidation and nepotism are facilitated – in the main by teacher unions, and to a certain extent, collaborative political operations of the deployment politics of the ruling party. In the case of this paper, in one of the sub-regions of the Vhembe District, it was revealed that more than half of the eight member teachers union leadership members – which is called the Branch Executive Committee (BEC) have become principals during their term of office in the BEC. This practice might also contribute to low morale amongst those teachers who feel excluded from the incentive package (Van Scheers and Wiid, 2011), and therefore create a paralysis of the education system when for example, incompetent personnel is appointed into positions for political reasons. It is unfortunate that this seems to be the route in the current system in South Africa in general and Vhembe District in particular. In other words, teacher promotion in some areas of South Africa has been Mexicanised in a promotion system similar to the Mexico system of 1966 (Zengele, 2013).

3.1.3 School violence – especially those caused by learner ill-discipline

There is lack of safety in most schools in South Africa (Van Scheers and Wiid, 2011) because of collapsed authority and learner discipline – and this eroded the culture of learning and teaching in most schools in the country (Nemukula, 2002). The results of this paper revealed that some of the respondent teachers thought school violence and learner ill-discipline were critical factors of disruption of teaching and learning within their schools, and South African school system as a whole, as had been the case for decades. This assertion is corroborated by Mudau (2014) who found that learner ill-discipline had been a negative factor against school performance in the Vhembe District – especially in the subject of physical science. Nemukula (2002) had found that unruly, aggressive, disobedient and rude learners towards teachers – and parents in some cases would cost the South African school system immensely in terms of performance and output. For the purpose of this paper, the majority of the respondent teachers cited school violence, lack of teacher safety and learner ill-discipline as some of the reasons for their resignations because they felt emotionally and psychologically traumatised – some to a point of depression. Some of the respondents asserted that bullying of teachers by learners has become rife while lack of cooperation by learners makes classroom work of the teacher more strenuous. Some teachers opined that it was evident that some learners were not interested in obtaining education to a point of developing disruptive tendencies. Most critically is that teachers also obtained little assistance from parents to improve learner discipline in schools (Mudau, 2014) therefore effectively removing the adage of teachers operating in loco parentis of the learners (Mashau et al., 2008). Mashau et al.
(2008) further recommended establishment of learner support service to normalise escalating behavioural challenges facing learners in South African schools. Manifestation of negative behaviour amongst learners has been reported by McBeath (2012) in Australia where learners seemed not to be ready to learn outside coercive processes of corporal punishment for example, self-interest and natural desire without being compelled to do so. These factors expose teachers to frequent and prolonged hostile taunts which are abusive, humiliating, offensive, intimidating, insulting, undermining and malicious. These taunts become more frustrating to the teacher – especially where no parental involvement is even weaker in the education of the child (Mudau, 2014).

The results of this paper are consistent with the findings reported by De Wet and Jacobs (2013) who cited that bullying of teachers by learners in South African schools affected between 38.2% and 83.8% while between 22.1% and 26.8% of the teachers had experienced these tendencies more regularly and continuously in a given academic calendar year. The teacher is defenceless because of restrictive systems of the education policy which prohibit a teacher from applying corporal punishment on misbehaving children. South Africa, alongside Japan, Kenya, New Zealand, Russia, the Philippines and Costa Rica amongst others have abolished corporal punishment from their education systems, with France, Czech Republic and some parts of North America having retained corporal punishment in their school systems (McBeath, 2012). Respondent teachers opined that removal of corporal punishment from the school system – especially in South Africa was done prematurely before their learners would be thoroughly educated to become ready for such kind of freedom. Frustrating the teacher further is the fact that some some parents, instead of reprimanding their children on bad behaviour on teachers, and other learners, openly defend their children. In such cases, principals and School Governing Bodies also become powerless because of restrictive policy provisions which only provide for the Head of Department (HOD) to be the only one with punitive measures on errant learners – and in fact, only up to suspension of the learner for a few weeks from class. Faced with mounting classroom based professional pressure, the teacher is also exposed to persistent ill-discipline of the learner he/she has to continue to teach. The teacher is expected to produce results which are expected by the demanding society at large in an in-conducive teaching-learning environment without an alternative to assist him/her out of the situation. Under these conditions, the teacher - with a bruised professional esteem and personal identity fails to sustain the enthusiasm, expectations and zeal with which he was motivated when entering the teaching profession (McBeath, 2012) – and therefore decides to leave.

3.1.4 Teacher burnout

The majority of the respondents also cited teacher burnout as the cause of the resignations. However, this paper noticed a different pattern of resignations based on burnout amongst South African teachers and those in other countries such as Namibia (Louw et al., 2011) and Australia (McBeath, 2012) who mostly experienced or suffer burnout while still young in the profession – mostly, within the first five years of their first teaching. In the case of this study, teachers showing burnout have teaching experiences of between 20 and 30 years. Teachers suffering from burnout lack motivation, and they also have low morale on the work. In the case of this paper, this factor could hold water because the majority of the respondents had been with the Department of Education as classroom based teachers for periods ranging from 20 years and above. Given the routine and other factors, teachers develop anxiety and fatigue and therefore get exposed to physical, psychological and behavioural exhaustion (Louw et al., 2011), which subsequently affect their enthusiasm, interest, commitment and effectiveness in the profession (Steyn, n.d). Evidently, under these conditions, Motseke (2013) postulate that teachers are exposed to increased stressful work conditions which they fail to manage, and the final output is dislike and decreased morale – subsequently pushing the teachers out of the system. Teacher de-motivation and low morale has been reported as being common amongst teachers in Africa in general (Mungai, 2015). This study further established that, in the main, the majority of the respondents also thought that government officials within the education system never mind about teacher challenges. This is corroborated by a tiered thrown by one of the respondents, who said, teachers are
blamed by everybody; the politicians, including the president of this country would stand in parliament and accuse teachers of laziness, drinking at work, and all sorts of immorality without ever looking at the circumstances of teachers – the low pay, violence, ill-discipline of learners, lack of support by the very politicians...my friend, teachers can't be blamed for poor subject knowledge. We are not being assisted... (Long pause)...no in-service training, no laboratories; text books; libraries; you name them

Another respondent said,

the whole country, all teachers need strike after strike to get a decent salary increase. Do not forget, you go on strike for days...they say, no work no pay. You sit home, you get nothing. By the time they pay you the so-called increase, they will have already deducted the whole of that increase from your pay for the so-called no work no pay. A teacher is a serious victim of the political game. No one helps a teacher...don't tell me! Unions? They work for politicians; they do not represent us because they are long dead if you do not know

This paper opines that the sentiments expressed by these teachers vindicate Mungai (2015) who postulated “teachers do not get much attention except when they go on strike” - however referring to the broader African continent.

Having considered the seriousness of the challenges facing teachers in general, it became inevitable that teacher formations and unions would have to be approached for comment and views. The Regional Secretary of the largest teacher union – SADTU in the Vhembe District was approached for views. The focus of this paper on the Regional Secretary concerned the intervention strategy and measures of the union in curbing teacher exodus from the department – in the short term and future. This paper established that the union had addressed the teachers – by clarifying the contents with regard the new pension regulatory framework as proposed by government to minimise fear amongst teachers. However, except keeping statistics of teachers leaving the system, the union did not have any other commitments to improve the situation. In addition, the union was asked if any education was provided to resigning and retiring members with regard financial management to avoid backlash. What emanated from the discussions was that there was nothing done to assist the teachers who were leaving in terms of financial management and planning post-employment. This could have serious implications on the retired teachers and the country as a whole. A lot of these teachers might deplete their pension savings long before pensionable age, and therefore expose these teachers to poverty of income, for example.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main objective of this paper was to investigate the reasons behind increased resignations and early retirement of teachers from the South African education system – especially in 2014. This qualitative study was undertaken in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa amongst 14 of the 32 resigned and early retired teachers during the mentioned period. A semi-structured questionnaire based interview model of data collection was administered on the 14 sampled teachers to provide primary data. Fourteen principals selected from the schools of the selected participant resigned and early retired teachers were also interviewed as key informants. Other stakeholders such as the Chairperson of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), Dzanani Branch of SADTU and the Regional Secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), Vhembe Region and two circuit managers were also selected for interviews as key informants. Conclusions drawn from the study were that:

The number of teachers resigning and/or taking early retirement from the education system in the Vhembe District is high – and increasing from time to time. Resigned and early retirement teachers expressed different reasons for their action such as poor remuneration and incentives, exhaustion, burnout and fatigue while others expressed lack of interest of the authorities to improve teacher challenges in the education system – including amongst others; compromised and highly fraudulent systems of promotions and career development, non-improvement on teacher safety and security with regard learner ill-discipline in schools and abnormal workload which is not equivalent to teacher output, amongst others. The perceived low salaries and incentives of teachers is, however, not in terms of relative
comparison with other sectors in, or outside government, but what teachers are able to do with the salaries they received. In other words, it refers to the low purchasing power of teacher salary.

The teachers who are resigning or taking early retirement are older, matured, experienced and highly skilled individuals in their fields of practice. The majority of these teachers had been teaching for periods of more than 20 years.

Too many teachers are leaving the system without being replaced because of insufficient teacher training systems in the South African college and university systems. In addition, South Africa lacks effective recruitment of teachers from non-teacher component of the work force largely because motivation and interest in other work force components of the economy remains weak. There is no effective recruitment, development and retention teacher systems adopted in the education system. For example, teachers who are leaving are never asked to provide feedback on the reasons for leaving the department – except that department officials jump into false assumptions that, in the main, the reasons for the masses of teachers resigning and taking early retirement are due to the new pension amendment regulations. Some teachers who resign or take early retirement immediately returned to the education system – in government schools in other provinces or in private schools. Some of these teachers start small businesses while some have no clear objectives yet. It is the view of this paper therefore that a more “hands-on-strategic approach” to resolving this challenge is needed as a matter of emergency. Amongst others:

- Education authorities should instead go beyond communicating issues of the newly proposed pension regulatory framework through circulars to schools but engage teachers in road shows and campaigns to address the fears demonstrated by teachers with regard their pensions.
- Critical working conditions affecting teachers need to be speedily resolved. Amongst others, there is need to urgently establish the reasons influencing increased indebtedness of teachers to loan sharks and other informal lending financial institutions with the ultimate objective of designing an instrument to assist teachers with financial management expertise. Community Engagement Projects run by universities such as the University of South Africa – although meant for other sub-themes of education such as teacher subject content knowledge development, could be extended to design financial management intervention strategies and instruments to assist teachers as professional intervention measures.
- Since there are teachers opting for early retirement while left with two to three years of teaching, government should look at regulating such retirements by, say, prohibiting such retirements at all or placing a moratorium on the final year of taking early retirement. For example, one might not retire while left with two years of service in public service, unless that person has a proven compelling medical condition.
- Teacher training colleges must be resuscitated in order to build a sustainable base for teacher supply for the South African education system. The university teacher training system must be made to account more to government with regard productivity.
- Stakeholders such as teacher unions should also seek to have intervention measures with regard indebtedness of their members to financial institutions by providing professional counselling to indebted members. Before any member resigns or opts for early retirement, members must be compelled to inform the unions at least three months before such actions are effected so that unions might conduct person-to-person inquiries and counselling, where need be, before the member might exit the system.

REFERENCES


الأسباب التي تؤدي بالمعلمين العاملين في المدارس الحكومية إلى الاستقالة أو التقاعد المبكر

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ملخص
إن أهذ الأسباب التي تؤدي بالمعلمين إلى الاستقالة أو اتخاذ التقاعد المبكر أن تكون واسعة ومتداخلة. ويعود هذا البحث أسباب الاستقالات الجماعية المعلم والتقاعد المبكر في جنوب أفريقيا، وقد تم اختيار ثلاث دول فردية، وجدت هذه الدراسة أن الغالبية العظمى من المدرسين الذين استقال أو اختراع التقاعد المبكر كان بدفع ضغط العمل بسبب زيادة عمل، وتعدد الرواتب، والمأذون بالإصابة والمدوية والمدرسة المعلمين وعدم وجود حوزة التي يضعفه معلومات المعلمين، وبناء على هذه النتائج، يمكن المستحسن أن صاحب العمل يجب تحسين شروط الخدمة.

الكلمات الدالة: استقالات المعلمين وأسباب التقاعد المبكر، التعليم والتنمية، وحده العمل والرواتب.