



# The Role of Teacher Trade Unions in Preventing Staff Victimisation: Voices from the South African Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher Trade Unions remain an integral part of stakeholders within the basic education sector and the school organogram. However, research pertaining to the role that can be played by Teacher Unions in preventing staff victimisation remains restricted globally, and with no enquiry arising within the South African milieu. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of teachers regarding the role of Teacher Trade Unions in preventing staff victimisation, in the District 10 schools of the Province of Gauteng. The researchers used a qualitative approach, grounded in phenomenology as the research design. The sample consisted of five teachers who belong to various unions and data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The data collected was analysed using thematic content analysis. The study revealed that teacher unions were found to be the main perpetrators of staff victimisation particularly when it comes to promotional positions. The study concluded that for teacher unions to protect teachers' rights, they should not be aligned with political parties. The study recommended that teacher unions should instead conduct training and workshops on pro-social behaviour, peaceful conflict resolution and how teachers are supposed to protect themselves from retribution and threats. The study aims to advance scholarship on the role of teacher unions in creating safer working conditions for teachers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher trade unions worldwide as organisations of teaching professionals, are main actors in education. Shared commonalities in terms of their missions, the responsibility to protect the rights and interests of their members, and safeguarding health and safety matters, are among the shared aims. This is not peculiar to the South African context. Hence, Kennedy-Macfoy and Fyles have contended that unions are uniquely placed to mobilise huge numbers of teachers and education support personnel towards realising shared goals.<sup>1</sup> In light of the positive accomplishments of teacher unions, in Latin America, teacher unions played a major role in education policymaking. For example, in Uruguay, the teacher unions' advocacy and leadership have mostly achieved collaborative and democratic education management. Similarly in Bolivia, teacher unions have proposed agendas that benefited excluded populations.<sup>2</sup> In the same breath, Education International (2017) has linked how teacher unions in Pakistan work to empower teachers. Furthermore, in the United States of America, influential and powerful national unions such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National

<sup>1</sup> M. Kennedy-Macfoy and R. Fyles, "When Teachers' Unions Take Actions, Schools Become Safer for Everyone. Advancing Gender Equality in and through Education. UN Girls Education Initiative.," <https://medium.com/ungei-blog/when-teachers-unions-take-actions-schools-become-safer-for-everyone-69ac85cf>, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Julián Gindin and Leslie Finger, "Promoting Education Quality: The Role of Teachers' Unions in Latin America," 2013.

Education Association (NEA) have supported teachers through better salaries, benefits and working conditions for well over a century.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, and in relation to the violence and victimisation happening in schools, Education Unions all over the world that are members of Education International, have made enduring commitments to address School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV).<sup>4</sup> The above commitments are still to be witnessed in South Africa, in particular from the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the largest trade union for teachers and also a member of Education International. In South Africa, trade unions for many years not only fought for workers' rights within the workplace but also beyond the workplace.<sup>5</sup> For example, unions were able to push for the process of development appraisal, and on 27 August 2003, Collective Agreement 8 in respect of Integrated Quality Management Systems (IQMS), was signed in the Education Labour Relation Council, bringing to the fore among others the 1.5 % yearly pay progression for teachers. This further reveals that the role unions play in educational matters and in schools goes beyond that of protecting employees and extends to that of promoting quality education, as accentuated by Mhlongo, et.al.<sup>6</sup> Their role cannot be ignored or downplayed and they (unions) remain an essential part of institutionalised reform.

On the other side of the spectrum, teacher unions have been labelled as bad for education, rather than the results of their activities.<sup>7</sup> Results from Msila's recent study of two high schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa revealed that many conflicts were caused by two competing unions, stalling the progress in the school as "they fought for terrain".<sup>8</sup> The act labelled 'aggressive unionism' by Masenya, which defends unproductive teachers, creates conflict with other union members and works for political parties.<sup>9</sup> While examining the role of teacher unions in Zambia, Kakunta, Simuyaba, Haambokoma and Mwewa (2020) revealed that some teachers were left alone to peruse and follow up cases which needed the help of teacher unions, and some of the cases were directly affecting the teachers' welfare. Thus, Levy (2022) and Shilowa (2022) posit that "in order for unions to regain their relevance, their focus needs to change from 'revolution' to finding ways to best meet the needs of workers". This is a view that is upheld by Education International (2020) and suggests that the key to making unions more relevant to members is the adoption of strategies that focus on the relevance of unions to teachers in the workplace and in their profession. One of the relevant factors unions have to incorporate is to prevent the victimisation staff members encounter when discharging their responsibilities, specifically from their co-workers.

However, local and international teacher unions have paid little attention to the plight of the teachers when it comes to the type of victimisation that they face on a daily basis at their workplace. That has resulted in a scanty knowledge base. As a consequence, this article is designed to address the gap that exists pertaining to the role that may be played by teacher unions in preventing staff victimisation. To this end, deploying a phenomenological approach, the objective of this article is to draw attention to the role of teacher unions in preventing staff victimisation, through the voices of South African teachers. Consequently, the objective of this study is driven by the following research questions:

\*What are the perceptions of teachers regarding Teacher Trade Unions in Dealing with staff Victimization?

\*What role can be played by Teacher Trade Unions in preventing staff Victimization?

The subsequent sections present the results of the field study and analysis. This is preceded by a literature review on the subject under discussion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Msila has cautioned that there is an inadequacy of research on teacher unionism in South Africa, and more specifically, the role that can be played by teacher unions in preventing staff victimisation.<sup>10</sup> First, this scholarly inattention may partly emanate from the fact that discussion around victimisation in schools has focused mainly

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<sup>3</sup> Grace Chen, "Are Teacher Unions a Help or Hindrance to Public Education?," <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/are-teacher-unions-a-help-or-hindrance-to-public-education>, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy-Macfoy and Fyles, "When Teachers' Unions Take Actions, Schools Become Safer for Everyone. Advancing Gender Equality in and through Education. UN Girls Education Initiative. "

<sup>5</sup> Makwena Ernest Manamela, "The Social Responsibility of South African Trade Unions: A Labour Law Perspective" (University of South Africa, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Asser Ramogoe Mhlongo, Simeon Maile, and Khashane Stephen Malatji, "Collaboration Among Teacher Unions, Parents and Communities for Quality Education in Public Schools," *Journal of Educational Studies* 20, no. 2 (2021): 40–56.

<sup>7</sup> P. Delgado, "The Role of Teachers' Unions. Observatory of Educational Innovation.," <https://observatory.tec.mx/edu-news/the-role-of-teachers-unions>, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Vuyisile Msila, "Public Service, Leadership and Innovation in South Africa," *Technium Soc. Sci. J.* 33 (2022): 456.

<sup>9</sup> Selaki James Masenya, "School-Based Unionism in a Gauteng School District" (University of Pretoria, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Vuyisile Msila, "Teacher Unions, Schools and Success: Opportunities and Contradictions," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 21, no. 3 (2022): 263–80.

on the learners, with less attention to the safety of the teaching staff by the stakeholders and particularly the teacher unions.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, it may be attributed to the enormous focus paid to the role of teacher unions on education,<sup>12</sup> learner performance (see, Kingdon & Teal, 2010), bargaining and politics (see, Moses, 2011; Malhangu, 2013; Bernads, 2019), and appointment and promotion of teachers (see, Ramokgotswa, 2015; Pattillo, 2012).

Within the South African context, the prevention of staff victimisation is incumbent upon innumerable stakeholders within the basic education sector, and that includes mainly the Department of Basic Education (DBE) itself, the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), South African Council for Educators (SACE), School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and to a rational extent the Teacher Trade Unions. Since Teacher Trade Unions, through their site stewards and committees, and given their close proximity to the constituency [the teachers] they represent, they remain the very first line of defence, and the first to receive complaints of victimisation or any form of injustice within their line of employment. Not disregarding their other responsibilities; Teacher Trade Unions as the legitimate structures and as organised labour or pressure groups in education are mainly established to play meaningful roles in education, particularly with respect to bargaining for teachers and safeguarding excellence in education.<sup>13</sup> Their existence is enshrined under Section 23 of the South African Constitution of 1996. As the teachers' mouthpiece, Teacher Trade Unions remain an integral part of stakeholders within schools, and by and large, the education sector. However, their role in preventing staff victimisation has never been satisfactorily explored by scholars.

To exemplify, local and international literature is awash with research on teacher trade unions, for instance, various scholars have discussed the, various roles, responsibilities, and weaknesses (Kudumo, 2011; Kingdon and Teal, 2010; Moses, 2011; Wachira and Odhiambo, 2021; Jabbar, Chanin, Hynes and Slaughter, 2020; Bernads, 2019; and Han, 2019). A recent review by Orange (2018) cautioned that staff victimisation has far-reaching implications for learner performance as mistreated teachers may lack the emotional and mental resources that are necessary for teaching. Moreover, as reported by De Wet, preventing staff victimisation seems to be a huge challenge since the abused teachers do not have the liberty to consult their union representatives as they are often friends of the principal or the colleague who is the bully.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the prevention of staff victimisation by teacher unions remains paramount for the sustainability of a healthy and positive work culture that may manifest in conducive teacher-learner relationships, and ultimately productive teaching and learning ethos.

In the current study, the definition of the concept of victimisation is drawn from Olweus, (1999) who refers to victimisation as a negative act resulting from aggression or oppression which is unprovoked. It is deliberately intended to cause harm and it is carried out repeatedly over time and involves an actual and/ or perceived imbalance of power, in which the aggressor or a group of aggressors are physically or psychologically more powerful than the victim. Thus, within the context of this present study, the form of victimisation (staff victimisation) examined is referred to as... 'victimisation between teachers (colleagues) who are on the same post level, from the superior to the subordinate, and from the subordinate to the superior, repeatedly carried out by an individual or a group of individuals to exclude (the victim) and cause emotional or psychological harm. Besides, victimisation can be committed downwards (from superior to subordinate), Stradmark and Hallberg, (2007) upwards (from subordinate to superior) Einarsen, (1999) or horizontally (between co-workers) Salin, (2003). Throughout the entire study, the concepts of staff victimisation and staff bullying will convey a similar meaning.

In response to the challenges faced by the teachers regarding workplace bullying, Basil Manuel (the executive director of the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa, NAPTOA) indicated that: "Bullying between adults has no quick fix, people need to realise that there is no need to be the victim and stand up and ask for help. Perpetrators hide behind the fact that they will not be challenged and dealt with."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, curtailing bullying is a process that requires the involvement of all the teaching staff within a school and other stakeholders such as the teacher unions. Malahy's mixed-methods study drew attention to the role and

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<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Espelage et al., "Understanding and Preventing Violence Directed against Teachers: Recommendations for a National Research, Practice, and Policy Agenda.," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 2 (2013): 75.

<sup>12</sup> Lekhotla James Mafisa, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Education with Specific Reference to South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 15, no. 4 (2017): 10553–66; Marius Kudumo, "The Participation and Influence of Teacher Unions on Education Reforms in an Independent Namibia" (University of Pretoria, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Mafisa, "The Role of Teacher Unions in Education with Specific Reference to South Africa."

<sup>14</sup> Corene De Wet, "The Reasons for and the Impact of Principal-on-Teacher Bullying on the Victims' Private and Professional Lives," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26, no. 7 (2010): 1450–59.

<sup>15</sup> Destiny Connect, "Teachers Hit by Workplace Bullying," <http://destinyconnect.com/2015/09/sa-teachers-hit-hard-by-workplace>, 2015.

significance of teacher unions.<sup>16</sup> The results from a sample of 318 teachers revealed that victims of prolonged bullying may eventually seek help from union representatives, psychologists, and colleagues. However, colleagues may feel guilty or may not be able to help the victim.<sup>17</sup> The refusal to assist the victimised colleague may be attributed to fear of being targeted as well. Furthermore, in accordance with Kleinheksel and Geisel, some teachers have looked to unions to address the issue of staff bullying, thus turning teacher unions into avenues of hope and protection for the mistreated teachers.<sup>18</sup> The researchers have observed that staff victimisation emanates from multifarious factors, and the Ministerial Task Team MTT identified cadre deployment as one of the sources of colleague-on-colleague victimisation.<sup>19</sup>

The concerns that may include teacher victimisation and the grievances of the member teachers are ignored while union officials seek to enrich themselves. The disservice is confirmed by the MTT report which revealed that, in some cases, there appears to be collusion between union officials and district managers, and sometimes with provincial Human Resources (HR) officials, leading to a system of patronage.<sup>20</sup> The nature of how some teacher unions function calls for an investigation into the role of teacher unions in curbing staff victimisation. Various unions around the world, e.g., the Victorian Independent Teachers Union, Australia, have produced policies to manage school violence. On the other hand, the non-experimental, exploratory, qualitative study by Kleinheksel and Geisel on the prevalence of teacher bullying addressed the role of teacher unions.<sup>21</sup> The study reported that the National Education Association (NEA, 2012) also suggested contacting local union representatives for bullying assistance but recognised that no federal or state law offered protection against teacher workplace bullying. The above situation prevails in South Africa, where teachers' safety is addressed as a secondary problem, as compared to learners' safety, with no clear and coherent policy that discourages teachers' safety, mainly from their colleagues, learners and other role players. Laying it to the bare, with regard to the campaign launched by SACE (2019) on teachers' rights, responsibilities and safety, the draft handbook focuses mainly on learner-on-teacher School Based Violence (SBV) and falls short on teacher-on-teacher SBV.<sup>22</sup>

One of the findings from De Wet's phenomenological study on principal-on-teacher bullying also revealed that teachers did not have the liberty to consult their union representatives as these representatives were often friends of the principal who was the bully.<sup>23</sup> According to the authors, this compounds the culture of fear amongst the teachers and further makes the phenomena more complex. The study also identified the following broad societal factors that may help to create a climate in which bullying is encouraged: the ineffectiveness of trade unions and the unwillingness of colleagues to publicly support victims or to confront bullying principals. In the same vein, the exo-system level (based on the adopted framework of the study) looks at the broad societal factors that help to create a climate in which victimisation is encouraged or subdued. An example may be, the responsiveness of the trade unions with regard to how the reported victimisation cases are handled by the trade unions.<sup>24</sup> The purpose of trade unions is to safeguard the employment rights of the employees; however, when union representatives collude with the principal to bully the teachers, they render themselves ineffective and dysfunctional.

The culture of appointing acquaintances has in some instances led to killings in some parts of South Africa. Reporting on violence in schools, Gina indicated that a deputy principal was killed on the school premises after the principal conspired with outsiders.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, a deputy principal from Duduza Primary School was shot dead at the entrance of the school office by three assailants, allegedly sent by a colleague.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, City Press (2014) reported on the killing of teachers for deputy principal and principal posts. The unions have to curb such killings by refraining from interfering and influencing the appointments of teachers

<sup>16</sup> Sandra Malahy, *Workplace Bullying: Teacher-to-Teacher* (Western Illinois University, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Malahy, *Workplace Bullying: Teacher-to-Teacher*.

<sup>18</sup> Cynthia J Kleinheksel and Richard T Geisel, "An Examination of Adult Bullying in the K-12 Workplace: Implications for School Leaders.," *School Leadership Review* 14, no. 1 (2019): 7.

<sup>19</sup> A Motshekga, "Report of the Ministerial Task Team Appointed by Minister Angie Motshekga to Investigate Allegations into the Selling of Posts of Educators by Members of Teachers Unions and Departmental Officials in Provincial Education Departments. Department of Basic Education. Final Report 18 May 2016," 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Motshekga, "Report of the Ministerial Task Team Appointed by Minister Angie Motshekga to Investigate Allegations into the Selling of Posts of Educators by Members of Teachers Unions and Departmental Officials in Provincial Education Departments. Department of Basic Education. Final Report 18 May 2016."

<sup>21</sup> Kleinheksel and Geisel, "An Examination of Adult Bullying in the K-12 Workplace: Implications for School Leaders."

<sup>22</sup> South African Council for Educators, "Handbook for Teachers' Rights, Responsibilities and Safety.," [https://sace.org.za/assets/documents/uploads/sace\\_90707-2020-01-10, 2020](https://sace.org.za/assets/documents/uploads/sace_90707-2020-01-10, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> De Wet, "The Reasons for and the Impact of Principal-on-Teacher Bullying on the Victims' Private and Professional Lives."

<sup>24</sup> Etienne G Krug et al., "The World Report on Violence and Health," *The Lancet* 360, no. 9339 (2002): 1083–88.

<sup>25</sup> Mshiyeni Jethro Gina, "Safety and Security in Schools: The Case of KwaZulu-Natal Province.," 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Sowetan., "Deputy Principal Shot Dead at School," <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/>, October 12, 2017.

for any promotional post within the school. To alleviate the scourge of irregular appointments, Fahie and Devine suggested that strict adherence to standard appointment procedures for promotion posts would serve to pre-empt claims of bias and partiality.<sup>27</sup>

However, the literature reveals that teachers who are union representatives are intimidated by some principals in executing their duties. This assertion is confirmed by Binduko where a teacher who was a representative of a particular teachers' union deemed to be in the majority, was being bullied because of his position.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Manuel reported that in some cases teachers are bullied because they belong to a minority union (Sowetan, 25, 2015). Teacher victimisation invigorated by union affiliation presents an avenue for further research. In the same news report, Manuel further elaborated that the union must intervene in cases of intimidation either between teachers or teachers with principals. The statement further brings to light the existence of staff victimisation that needs to be curtailed by the South African teacher unions as a collective. On the balance of power, principals also face victimisation from teachers, who are union members. Binduko's study indicated that two principals faced problems with union members who were not willing to obey them, thus rendering the principals' work emotionally draining in the view of Maxwell and Riley.<sup>29</sup>

Representing what can be done to address this issue at the negotiation table, the Winchester Massachusetts Education Association (WMEA)<sup>30</sup> approved contract language stating, "Inappropriate forms of communication, including but not limited to bullying, demeaning, sarcastic or unprofessional comments with or to a staff member will not be tolerated", and added that "no administrator shall demean, bully, reprimand, or otherwise speak about a personal or professional matter regarding a staff member to another staff member or in the presence of another staff member or in any public forum."<sup>31</sup> Administrators are required by law to treat junior staff members with respect and impartiality at all times. McMahon et al. reported that teachers described problems with violence that were not resolved at the school level and required additional support from outside systems such as union representation, police, or legal representation.<sup>32</sup>

Given the foregoing, the article accentuates that; it is not the sole responsibility of the teacher trade unions to uphold teachers' safety, however, teacher trade unions have a meaningful and active role to play in ensuring that amongst other things, staff victimisation is curtailed. In the view of Msila, this will be possible when teacher unions as stakeholders in education are empowered, so that they could, in turn, empower the school community.<sup>33</sup> By so doing the scourge of school violence in its different forms and in general may be minimised. The preceding literature further highlighted the significance of this enquiry.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although there is some important scholarly work on workplace violence and victimisation, theoretical or empirical work on staff victimisation is scarce. Several scholars have specifically developed theories of boss abuse of subordinates.; Baillien, Neyens, De Witte and De Cuyper (2009); Cox and Leather (1994).<sup>34</sup> After weighing the applications of the above theories, the researchers opted for the utilisation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in the rest of the entire study, staff victimisation is discussed and analysed in line with this theoretical framework. To this end, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is helpful for identifying the roles that can be played by teacher trade unions in preventing staff victimisation, by specifically applying the three identified levels of the framework, namely, the personal level, the interpersonal level and the organisational level. Concerning the personal level, the article focuses on how staff victimisation affects the teachers' well-being and whether their union membership assists in times of need. It is the article's contention

<sup>27</sup> Declan Fahie and Dymna Devine, "The Impact of Workplace Bullying on Primary School Teachers and Principals," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 58, no. 2 (2014): 235–52.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Binduko, "The Role of the Principal in Maintaining a Harmonious Working Environment: An Investigation into" Legal" Staff Bullying by the School Management Team in Ekurhuleni North District High Schools" (University of South Africa, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Binduko, "The Role of the Principal in Maintaining a Harmonious Working Environment: An Investigation into" Legal" Staff Bullying by the School Management Team in Ekurhuleni North District High Schools"; Aimee Maxwell and Philip Riley, "Emotional Demands, Emotional Labour and Occupational Outcomes in School Principals: Modelling the Relationships," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 45, no. 3 (2017): 484–502.

<sup>30</sup> Winchester Massachusetts Education Association., "Teacher Contract.," <http://www.winchester.masterteacherorg/local-contracts/teacher-contracts>, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Kleinheksel and Geisel, "An Examination of Adult Bullying in the K-12 Workplace: Implications for School Leaders."

<sup>32</sup> Susan D McMahon et al., "The Ecology of Teachers' Experiences with Violence and Lack of Administrative Support," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 60, no. 3–4 (2017): 502–15.

<sup>33</sup> Msila, "Teacher Unions, Schools and Success: Opportunities and Contradictions."

<sup>34</sup> H. A. Hornstein et al., "Disrespectful Supervisory Behavior: Effects on Some Aspects of Subordinates' Mental Health," *Unpublished Manuscript, Teachers College, Columbia University*, 1995; Elfi Baillien et al., "A Qualitative Study on the Development of Workplace Bullying: Towards a Three Way Model," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2009): 1–16.

<sup>35</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard university press, 1979).

that incidents of teachers victimising each other could have a damaging emotional and psychological impact on both teachers and learners. At the interpersonal level, the article illustrates how the relationships between teachers(staff), and office and school-based union office bearers may contribute to the prevention or promotion of staff victimisation. At the organisational level that Mahome labelled as the 'teaching and learning milieu', the union support or the lack of school-based teachers is brought to the fore.<sup>36</sup> The theory has been extensively employed in various fields; however, it remains moderately applied in this part of bourgeoning research.

### **Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory**

Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory it can be argued that staff bullying does not occur in isolation and has to be understood across different ecological systems.<sup>37</sup> According to Espelage and Swearer, teacher-targeted victimisation is encouraged or inhibited as a result of complex relationships between the individual, family, colleagues, school, community and culture.<sup>38</sup> Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory describes socialisation as the way of becoming a member of society, and it allows for a better understanding of education and the problems attached to it.<sup>39</sup> One of the problems the South African education system is facing is staff victimisation within the teaching ranks, where teachers' relationships are characterised by anti-social behaviour, that is to a certain extent influenced by union affiliation. A view also held by Msila, observed that teachers could be very confrontational towards one another and be divided according to union affiliation.<sup>40</sup>

The personal level identifies biological and personal factors that influence how individuals behave and therefore surge their likelihood of becoming a victim or a perpetrator of staff victimisation. In a school setting, clashes are inescapable and as a result, the unions owe it to their members to show their strength.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, attributed to the monthly subscriptions paid by affiliated members to the union, members feel entitled to protection from being victimised by some of the staff members. Furthermore, Devine (2013) purported that schools are, like most other organisations, susceptible to the effects of micro and macro-political influences on their cultures. Mahome and Rampa purported that the interpersonal level is distinguished by relationships between the teachers, the School Management Teams SMT and the district officials.<sup>42</sup> In the context of this article, this will include union leaders at various levels. Emphasising the same view, Coetzee explained that teachers have various relationships with family, friends, colleagues, learners and authority individuals (e.g., principals, deputy principals, and union officials) that are multifaceted and can be the source of violence in the workplace, more especially staff victimization.<sup>43</sup> Research further shows that individuals in stressful environments with little support often are at great risk of committing or experiencing school violence;<sup>44</sup> thus, the study seeks to also investigate the teacher trade unions' lack of support.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative research was used in this study to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role that can be played by teacher unions in preventing staff victimisation within the South African context. As a result, the problem of staff victimisation was investigated from the participant's point of view as emphasised by Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole.<sup>45</sup> The selected five participants (P1-P5), from four schools, were identified through the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Subsequently, individual interviews were conducted in order to collect the

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Moreti Mahome, "Perpetrators of Staff Victimisation within the Teaching Ranks: A Socio-Ecological Perspective," *Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology & Victimology* 34, no. 2 (2021): 1–25.

<sup>37</sup> Corene De Wet, "The Prevention of Educator-Targeted Bullying: The Perspectives of School Principals," *Journal for Christian Scholarship= Tydskrif Vir Christelike Wetenskap* 47, no. 1 (2011): 1–21.

<sup>38</sup> Dorothy L Espelage and Susan M Swearer, *Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention* (Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>39</sup> U Härkönen, "The Impact of Theories on the Early Childhood Education Culture—The Impact of the New Systems Theory on the Early Childhood Education Culture," *International Views on Early Childhood Education. Ebook. University of Joensuu. Savonlinna Department of Teacher Education*, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Vuyisile Msila, "Teacher Unionism and School Management: A Study of (Eastern Cape) Schools in South Africa," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 42, no. 2 (2014): 259–74.

<sup>41</sup> Msila, "Teacher Unionism and School Management: A Study of (Eastern Cape) Schools in South Africa."

<sup>42</sup> Michael Moreti Mahome and Sakhe Harry Rampa, "The Prevalence of Learner-on-Teacher School-Based Violence: A Qualitative Study," *Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology & Victimology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 91–104.

<sup>43</sup> A. Coetzee, "Workplace Violence against Educators in Public and Private Schools in Pretoria, Gauteng: A Comparative Investigation" (University of Pretoria, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Ron Avi Astor, Ronald O Pitner, and Brent B Duncan, "Ecological Approaches to Mental Health Consultation with Teachers on Issues Related to Youth and School Violence," *Journal of Negro Education*, 1996, 336–55; McMahan et al., "The Ecology of Teachers' Experiences with Violence and Lack of Administrative Support."

<sup>45</sup> Claire Bless, Craig Higson-Smith, and Ashraf Kagee, *Fundamentals of Social Research Methods: An African Perspective* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2006).

participants' experiences on the unions' effectiveness in preventing staff victimisation, since phenomenology involves the use of interviews for data collection.<sup>46</sup> Consistent with the thematic content analysis, the authors engrossed themselves in the data reading and rereading of participants' responses, McMahon, Reaves, McConnell, Peist, Ruiz, and APA Task Force.<sup>47</sup> Subsequently, data was coded, by employing the Quirkos qualitative software that helps users to sort, manage, and comprehend text data. In the concluding step, data was interpreted, the themes were presented in an interconnected style and synthesised general conclusion. This process is consistent with Hennink, Hutter & Bailey who maintained that through the process of data analysis, the researcher makes "sense" or ascribes meaning to the data.<sup>48</sup>

The research design of this study was phenomenological. Creswell and Creswell define a phenomenological study as one in which the lived experiences of persons about a particular phenomenon are described by a researcher based on the participants' responses.<sup>49</sup> Within the context of this study, the lived experiences of teachers regarding the role of Teacher Trade Unions in preventing staff victimisation were essential. Additionally, phenomenology is suitable for exploring concepts associated with social and cultural meanings that cannot be quantified.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the article sought to draw attention to the role of teacher unions in preventing staff victimisation, through the exploration of the lived experiences of South African teachers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Perceived Ineffectiveness of Teacher Trade Unions in Dealing with Staff Victimisation.**

Most of the interviewed participants belonged to a trade union; however, the role of the teacher trade unions in curbing staff victimisation was viewed in a negative light by the same member teachers. The teacher trade unions present in all the schools under study were NAPTOSA and SADTU, and many of the teachers belong to the latter union.

#### ***Teacher trade unions lack support (Organisational level).***

As argued in the introductory section of this study, the purpose of teacher trade unions, among others, is to safeguard the employment rights of the employees. However, when union representatives collude with the principals and district officials to bully the teachers, they render themselves ineffective and dysfunctional, a view also upheld by De Wet and Jacobs (2006). The findings of this study have confirmed that the self-interest of union leaders and site stewards takes precedence over the victimised teachers' concerns.

Responding to the trade union's ineffectiveness in handling staff victimisation, P4(Principal) stated that *"they are not supportive; because they make us the enemies of the teachers claiming were the ones annoying them. When a teacher goes and reports the principal, they (The Union) don't look for the other side of the story. They mobilise, and you will find them picketing at the school gate. Imagine the whole union executive at your school around 9 am in the morning."*

The above finding exposes how some unions disregard the significance of protecting contact time.

P3(Departmental head) stated: *"Some of the unions are very close to the district officials; they can't make decisions on their own ... I see it happening now. I am a union member, but I am not happy these days."*

This disservice was confirmed by the MTT report which revealed that, in some cases, there appears to be collusion between union officials and district managers, and sometimes with provincial Human Resources (HR) officials, leading to a system of patronage.<sup>51</sup>

Holding a different view, from the participants above, P5 (office-based, union leader), argued that... *"there are a couple of things I will take issue with, that is the ineffectiveness of teacher trade unions ... it depends on an individual experience with their particular union."*

The article argues that teacher trade unions should work on improving their efficiency, so that all the member teachers, not a selected few are content with their role because these (teacher trade unions) are the

<sup>46</sup> E.O. Adu and C.I.O. Okeke, *Fundamentals of Research in Humanities, Social Sciences and Social Sciences Education* (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2022).

<sup>47</sup> McMahon et al., "The Ecology of Teachers' Experiences with Violence and Lack of Administrative Support."

<sup>48</sup> Monique Hennink and Bonnie N. Kaiser, "Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests," *Social Science & Medicine* 292 (January 2022): 114523, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.

<sup>49</sup> J W Creswell and J D Creswell, "Research Design Qualitative, and Mix Methods Approaches." (SAGE Publication, Inc. Los Angeles, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> S'lungile K Thwalaa et al., "Teachers' Experiences with Dyslexic Learners in Mainstream Classrooms: Implications for Teacher Education," *International Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 6 (August 25, 2020): 34, <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n6p34>.

<sup>51</sup> Motshekga, "Report of the Ministerial Task Team Appointed by Minister Angie Motshekga to Investigate Allegations into the Selling of Posts of Educators by Members of Teachers Unions and Departmental Officials in Provincial Education Departments. Department of Basic Education. Final Report 18 May 2016."

vehicles that workers use to address any of the issues collectively that they might experience in their workplaces, being it salaries or negotiations. The study can confirm that union representatives who have close relationships with principals are often rewarded with promotional posts at the expense of selling out their members. This was confirmed by all the teacher trade unions that took part in the investigations into the selling of teaching posts. They all agreed that the selling of posts exists.<sup>52</sup> The involvement of trade union leaders and district officials (who are normally office-based) in teacher victimisation illustrates how the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings can enhance the scourge of staff victimisation.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Union Leader's Ascension to Managerial Positions and Political Affiliation (Interpersonal level)***

In line with the interpersonal level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, the interviewed teachers raised concerns about trade union's site stewards being members of the SMT, and unions affiliation to political parties. They viewed that as the reason why unions were weakened especially at times when they were supposed to uphold and fight for teachers' constitutional rights.

P3(departmental head) expressed the following views: "*Teacher trade unions are supposed to serve the teachers, not the government, or the unions themselves. They should fight against unfairness. They must also remember that union site stewards must never be part of the SMT.*" When probed further on his proposition, the participant stated: "*If for example, you become a departmental head, you cannot become a union site steward because it is like you have to protect the staff against yourself.*" Sharing the same sentiments is P1(teacher, site steward) who postulated that if the teachers' trade union site steward was part of the SMT, the site steward would not be active, and the principal would impose directives without consulting the staff. The participant further suggested the following: "*The unions must put a clause that says, 'teacher union site stewards should not be part of the SMT'.*" In his view, this created conflicts.

The article argues that in a school setting, for a teacher union to play a meaningful and active role in fighting for teachers' aspirations and rights, the union office bearers and the site steward should hold allegiance to the teacher trade union, and not to a political party. This will spill over to the member teachers, and when teachers are made to work agreeably and in collaboration with one another, they are inclined to develop healthy relationships that would discourage staff victimisation. Thus, the MTT and Bascia recommended the change of teacher unions into occupational unions that are not adherents of political parties.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Pessimistic Outlook of Teachers' Trade Unions (Organisational level)**

In illustrating the pessimistic outlook of teacher trade unions, P1(teacher, site steward) divulged that "*whenever you hear the voice of the trade unions is when they are talking about bread-and-butter issues such as the increase of salaries and promotions, but when it comes to transformation, transforming the education system from that of the old regime to the one that would empower or change the situation of our children, the union has never done that.*" Sharing the same perspective is P4 (principal) "*Teacher trade unions are only active during advertised promotional posts ... you know we have good policies in the DBE but not implemented and I think this is what is happening in our trade union. They (trade unions) say this but do the opposite.*"

These findings correspond with the report by the MTT that cautioned teacher trade unions that instead, for example, of using transformation as a pretext for gaining control of schools and offices, there should be joint and cooperative efforts to address the manifold challenges and developments that are desperately needed in the education system. This view further lends support to Msila's assertion, that, "teacher unions should be embraced as part of the reform agenda and as critical partners in guiding the school towards meaningful transformation".<sup>55</sup> Based on the aim of this article, the agenda ought to include teachers' safety that incorporates the curbing of staff victimisation.

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<sup>52</sup> Motshekga, "Report of the Ministerial Task Team Appointed by Minister Angie Motshekga to Investigate Allegations into the Selling of Posts of Educators by Members of Teachers Unions and Departmental Officials in Provincial Education Departments. Department of Basic Education. Final Report 18 May 2016."

<sup>53</sup> U. Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological Systems Theory," in *Annals of Child Development: Six Theories of Child Development: Revised Formulations and Current Issues*, ed. Ross Vasta, vol. 6 (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1989), 187-249.

<sup>54</sup> Nina. Bascia, "Teacher Unions and Educational Reform," in *International Handbook of Educational Change*, ed. A Hargreaves et al., vol. Part Two (Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers., 1998), 895-915; Motshekga, "Report of the Ministerial Task Team Appointed by Minister Angie Motshekga to Investigate Allegations into the Selling of Posts of Educators by Members of Teachers Unions and Departmental Officials in Provincial Education Departments. Department of Basic Education. Final Report 18 May 2016."

<sup>55</sup> Msila, "Teacher Unions, Schools and Success: Opportunities and Contradictions."

## **Roles that can be Played by Teachers' Trade Unions in Curbing Staff Victimization (Personal level)**

### ***Empowerment workshops***

As stated in the theoretical section, the personal level demonstrates how victimisation affects teacher's well-being.

P2(teacher) has this to say: *"I think they (union officials) need to conduct talks every year with the teachers or a workshop or something where teachers get to know what to do when confronted with the problem of staff victimisation. It is sad because other teachers when they face victimisation resign and go to another school."* The teacher unions' intervention in staff victimisation may support teacher retention and avert the brain drain of experienced and skilled teachers. That being the case, teachers should be led by teacher unions and DBE with circulars that speak to teachers' rights (SACE, 2020). P3(departmental head) presented his view: *"Trade unions should serve as pillars for teachers and education at large, they should organise workshops for teachers about policy and implications of violence towards their careers, service members and not their personal interests, and prevent disputes before they even occur"*. On the same issue of training, P1 (teacher, site steward) suggested that the DBE should collaborate with teacher unions to provide some sort of workshops to the managers on how to avoid staff victimisation. He further proposed that *"there must be an induction for every management to end this scourge, I think it can work. We must have posters in staffrooms that warn against staff victimisation."*

Holding a different view is, P3(departmental head), highlighted her scepticism on holding workshops: *"Some unions are doing it, sadly teachers do not attend those kinds of workshops where they can be capacitated and gain knowledge with regard to issues of employment"*.

The article is in support of constant and continuous workshops as this may assist in bringing about harmony within the workplace. Staff victimisation is an enormously multifaceted and challenging phenomenon and teachers urgently require sufficient support from the DBE and SACE, as the custodian of the teaching profession. P5 (office-based, union leader) further suggested that *"... during these workshops, teachers should be encouraged to speak out"*. Congruent with the above participants is (P2) who stated: *"I think constant workshops that emphasise good working ethics may assist in minimising the behaviour. I also think workshops should encourage those experiencing bullying to seek help; active labour unions or site stewards may also play a significant role."*

From the foregoing expositions, the DBE, school leadership and teacher trade unions should make it clear that victimisation of teachers mostly by colleagues, learners, parents, district officials, or any outsider will not be endured, irrespective of the source or nature of the bullying. However, Msila contends that this may be attained when schools have clear policies that minimise confrontational relationships between the staff members and strong unions that can elevate school achievement as they entrench professionalism.<sup>56</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings and discussion, this study recommends that for a teacher union to play a meaningful and active role in fighting for teachers' aspirations and rights, the union office bearers and the site stewards should hold allegiance to the teachers' trade union, and not to a political party. To turn schools into peaceful environments, it is further recommended that some teacher trade unions rebrand themselves and work on their image, since the findings and literature suggested that certain teacher unions have branded themselves as instigators of anarchy. These teacher unions in question for the most part have demonstrated their traits by disrupting teaching and learning in most of the township schools and as a result dented the image of the teaching profession in general.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has analysed the role of teacher trade unions in preventing staff victimisation in schools in South Africa. The findings of the study have revealed that at the union level, staff victimisation is thriving as a result of trade union leaders who have been propagating divisions amongst union members and who often act against fellow teacher union members. The findings of this study have further confirmed that the self-interest of union leaders and site stewards have taken precedence over the victimised teachers' concerns. Based on the findings and the analysis, it is concluded that teacher unions generally play an ineffective role in trying to mediate squabbles and animosity among teachers, and between teachers and their seniors. Thus, teacher unions should instead conduct training and workshops on pro-social behaviour, peaceful conflict resolution and how teachers are supposed to protect themselves from retribution and threats. This will ensure that teachers work in amiable environments devoid of anarchy that destroy the images of teacher unions and their respective institutions.

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<sup>56</sup> Msila, "Teacher Unionism and School Management: A Study of (Eastern Cape) Schools in South Africa."

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