

Management of Teacher Attrition in Public Secondary Schools of Chongwe, Lusaka and Kafue Districts of Lusaka Province in Zambia

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Abstract

The article establishes how school managers address the challenge of teacher attrition. This was done by assessing its effects on the functionality of and closely examining measures put in place to sustain teacher retention in public secondary schools in Zambia. This study employed action research strategies of inquiry utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection to a total of 33 participants. Data was mainly analysed using thematic analysis, a process involving coding and categorising major themes emerging from the study findings and in relation to the objectives of the study. Findings of the study seem to suggest that teacher attrition led to poor staffing levels and poor student achievement. Moreover, school managers lacked sufficient support and ability to address the challenges arising from teacher attrition. Further, school managers should use the participative management approach and continuous professional development through proper valuation of teachers' continuous professional development needs as strategies to enhance teacher motivation and retention. Another significant finding in this study was that the participants had limited understanding on the role school managers' played in staff retention. Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that school managers that lack basic understanding of what they are expected to do cannot be perceived as effective in addressing teacher attrition. The empirical investigation also underscored a series of practical challenges faced by school managers in Chongwe, Kafue and Lusaka districts.

Key Words: *Attrition, Management, Functioning, Public Secondary School, Retention*

Background and Context

Literature, Theory and Problem

According to Ministry of Education (MoE) (2016), a large number of qualified teachers are leaving the teaching profession seemingly faster than they can be replaced. This invariably has an effect on recruitment, training and deployment processes. Ensuring that teacher retention is enhanced in schools stretches the managerial capacity of most education systems and it is even more difficult for Zambia. It is against this background that this study investigated how school managers address the problem of teacher attrition and its effects on the functioning of public secondary schools in Zambia. Developing countries like Zambia are faced with the problem of retaining its workforce, especially those in the teaching service. In Zambia, almost all teachers, whether they leave the system or remain in it, are somewhat dissatisfied with some aspect of the conditions of service in the Ministry of Education. This makes them choose to either resign or go for greener

pastures in countries like Botswana, Namibia or South Africa or other Ministries offering attractive conditions of service.

Studies have been conducted in other countries worldwide on the causes of teacher attrition and its effects on the functioning of schools. For instance, in the United States of America, Ingersoll, Merrill and May (2012) report that each year about 16 per cent of qualified teachers leave their schools to join other professions. They further point out that almost 40 per cent of teachers who go for advanced studies are not motivated to go back to teaching again. However, in the Zambian context, few if any studies have been empirically conducted to address issues relating to teacher attrition. Published data on teacher retention is patchy while the situation seems to be poorly monitored in the Zambian Education system. The focus is more on statistical data rather than giving an explanation on why teachers were leaving the profession. In 2015, the Ministry of Education reported that 8,893 teachers in Zambia's primary and secondary schools left the profession (MoE, 2015). In 2016, the MoE (2016) report showed that 1,902 teachers resigned, while 1,148 either retired normally or on medical grounds, and others died. These statistics show the prevailing challenge of teacher retention and attrition in the system.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study was anchored on the Human Capital Theory of Occupational Choice. This theory suggests that individuals make informed decisions regarding their net monetary and non-monetary benefits from a wide range of occupations and make deliberate decisions either to enter, stay or exit an occupation (Ben-Poratha, 1967). Human capital theory of occupational choice stipulates that any given job can be ascribed to two characteristics namely inspection or searching which are observed without actually encountering the job and precise characteristics which are seen only after experiencing the job. A major constraint of human capital theory lays in the assumption where we can state with precision an individual's precise knowledge about salary, benefits and the non-monetary aspects of the work (Masaiti, Mwelwa and Mwale, 2016). In fact, the process of finding and acquiring a job is done in an environment of uncertainty. The employee and employer both have insufficient understanding of each other and of other employment alternatives (Lawson, 2012).

Normal career progressions within the education sector are also important and these include seeking higher wages, better working conditions, returning to college for further continuous professional development; and promotion or lateral transfer out of teaching to other education related jobs (Piketty, 2014). It is assumed that people are more likely to choose jobs which maximise their income. In this study, teacher attrition can be explained as emanating from new information concerning the costs and benefits of the existing jobs against alternate jobs (Piketty, 2014). The Human capital theory of occupational choice relates well with the current study in that, in Zambia teacher movement is mostly associated with factors such as good

salary and teacher development programmes which promotes teachers satisfaction and job security.

Methodology and Design

In this study, a mixed embedded design using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis was used to collect qualitative and quantitative data by individual and focus group interviews (Masaiti and Mwale, 2017). Other researches have relied on this design of the mixed method who, like Mulenga and Lubasi (2019:65), stated that ‘comparing the two data sets during the discussion and interpretation stages helped the researchers have an in-depth understanding’. The qualitative data was gathered through interviews and focus group discussions and was analysed using thematic analysis to obtain the actual voices of the participants (Njobvu and Yang, 2014). The quantitative data collected through self-administered questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences to generate descriptive statistics which were used in describing the single and summative results of the study findings.

Findings and Discussion

Johnson *et al.* (2012), posit that school climate is a critical factor in teacher retention as it ensures high levels of job satisfaction amongst teachers. A school’s effectiveness in supporting teachers concerning student discipline, instructional methods and curriculum as well as an enabling school environment constitute what is known as administrative support (Borman and Dowling, 2008). For instance, school administrators play a significant role in motivating and ensuring that teachers show a sense of efficacy and a positive attitude towards the profession (Brown & Wynn 2009). A closer examination of the above insights suggest that there must be a shared vision and collective responsibility between administrators and staff which in turn can lead to the creation and upholding of quality relationships and sound communication between all those involved.

During data collection, most school managers displayed awareness that they had a responsibility to provide support by creating a healthy environment that facilitates, rather than hinders teacher retention. Kukla-Acevedo (2009), suggests that school managers have a responsibility to generate the conditions and establish the climate for teacher retention. Allensworth *et al.* (2009), describes school climate as the psychological environment that represents the ‘feel of the place’ at a given moment in time. In this regard, school managers are expected to adjust the school climate to reflect essential variables which *inter alia*, include high teacher morale, adaptation, decentralised power, effective communication and goal focus (Bitzer, in Munonde, 2007). The findings showed that some external factors that contributed to qualified teachers’ decision to stay in the profession included: adequate administrative support, positive school climate, reduced workload and high salaries.

Adequate Administrative Support

During the focus group interviews, the study findings showed that school managers provided the necessary support and created work environment that teachers needed in their work. The majority of the school managers saw themselves as key players in the institution. For instance, one of the school managers commented on the dominant role of the school manager in teacher retention. She said had this to say:

What one actually observes is that school managers are key in the institutions because they are able to identify problems. Teachers in the classrooms do experience challenges that need school managers' intervention. According to my observation in most cases school managers are providing support to teachers by creating an enabling teaching environment especially when it comes to teaching materials, continuous staff development and motivation.

Another school manager shared his feelings, saying that school managers were let down by their subordinates who did not fulfil their duties. He narrated thus:

I am going to be honest with you; teachers I have worked with in the past have performed. But the current ones am working with there are challenges, I can actually put my head on the chopping board that I have been let down by some of my subordinates, as a school manager am complying, take instructions..... by creating a healthy work environment but am actually complying by motivating them. I feel am providing sufficient school management support though some have chosen to ignore this.

Likewise, another manager mentioned that school managers' depended on the support from the school management team and the teachers to do his task properly. Where this commitment was lacking, the school managers' effectiveness suffered.

I think school managers are managers of institutions. And as managers' we are responsible for professional matters and the day to day operation of the school. Actually, the support we give to our teachers should make them feel wanted and cherished by the school. As school management we have to put measures that motivate teachers that would not make them want to leave the school. We have to create a conducive climate that can encourage teacher retention.

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed similar findings as those obtained from interviews and focus group discussions with the school mangers, with (77%) agreeing to the statement that sufficient school management support fostered teacher retention in public secondary schools. The majority, (77%) of the school managers "strongly agreed" that sufficient school management support promoted teacher retention. However, (7%) of them were undecided on this matter while 3 per cent disagreed with the statement.

The above findings confirm the assertion of Kapadia *et al.* (2007) who found that

teachers cited administrative support and the extent of being welcomed by their faculty as the greatest influences on the decision whether to leave or remain in the profession. Furthermore, Tickle *et al.* (2011) point out that administrative support is a necessary strategy in teacher retention. This implies supporting teachers' concerning student discipline, instructional methods and curriculum as well as an enabling school environment.

Positive School Climate

Some of the participants revealed that establishing a safe work environment for teachers, staff and students which fosters effective teaching and learning is the very core of positive school climate. The majority, 67 per cent of the school managers "strongly agreed" that positive school climate promoted teacher retention. This study revealed that most participants understood the need of a positive school climate as an aspect in teacher retention. Establishing a safe work environment for faculty, staff and students which fosters effective teaching and learning is at the very centre of positive school climate (Weissbourd, Boufford & Janes, 2013). The above findings are in agreement with Weissbourd *et al.* (2013) who argue that positive school climate is crucial for teacher retention. It is evident that teachers would not want to continue to work in schools where students are riotous. It should be noted that establishing a safe work environment for faculty, staff and students, which fosters effective teaching and learning, is at the very centre of positive school environment. Therefore, teacher attrition can significantly be reduced if close attention is paid to the work environment.

Fair Promotion Opportunities

Fair opportunities are seen as one of the factors contributing to teacher retention in public secondary schools in Zambia. Findings from the focus group discussions with the school managers' revealed that poor management of promotion opportunities, which in some instances were not done according to the qualifications of the teachers and at times took too long, were a barrier to teacher retention in schools.

The empirical study showed that unfair and irregular promotion practices in schools has major implications for teacher retention. Needless to say, any teachers' realistic prospect for promotion should be based on the Annual Confidential Appraisal Forms which are no longer meaningful. To tackle this problem, this study suggests that school managers should take responsibility to correct the processes that are involved with the view to bringing the purposes of Annual Confidential Appraisal Forms to fruition. In accordance with Bipath's (2008) recommendation, the teachers Annual Confidential Appraisal outcome should first be addressed at school level. Most significantly, this study suggests that school managers should receive specific training on how to manage Annual Confidential Appraisal Forms at their respective levels.

Similar findings emerged from the quantitative data, with (50%) and (30%) of the school managers “strongly agreed” and “agreed” respectively to the fact that fair promotion opportunities maintained teacher retention in secondary schools in Zambia.

Participatory Decision Making in School Programmes enhances Teacher Retention in Public Secondary Schools

From the empirical investigation, it was discovered that most participants were aware that lack of teacher participation in decision making was a barrier to teacher retention. For instance, one of the school manager remarked the following:

When I was promoted as a school manager to another school, I found a culture where decision making over key issues in the school was only a preserve of the school management. I observed that there was very little input from the rest of the members of staff. Teachers looked demotivated and seemingly frustrated because they were not active participants in decisions that were done in the school. I changed this approach by involving members of staff in matters relating to school governance and this has created collegiality among members of staff.

Further, another school manager stated the following:

There was need to be inclusive in the way decisions are made that affect the running of the school so that teachers feel are part of the process and this enhances teacher retention.

Yet another school manager also said:

Teachers in school feel part and parcel of the school administration when they are involved in decision making; they don't feel left out and they actively take part in implementing projects and have a sense of ownership. This is one of the reasons that make teachers want to stay in a school.

The review of related literature ties with the views and experiences of the participants regarding teachers' participation in decision making. Everton *et al.* (2007), endorses the view that school climate promotes collegiality among and between students, members of staff and administrators, where possibilities are created for everyone to have a say in the decision making process. According Boyd *et al.* (2011), teachers' display a less positive attitude towards the profession because of inadequate support, little or no say in decision making. Botha (2015) supports the above views when he avers that when teachers have a say in decision making a conducive positive school climate is created.

In agreement with the above authors, the study found that schools were not consistently engaging teachers in matters relating to school governance. In some cases, schools only had the so called 'working committees'. This implied that

the majority of teachers in the school who do not belong to such committees are not privy to major decisions which were made without their input. Most school managers revealed that the rigid and sometimes insensitive manner in which information was handled had led to feelings of job insecurity, uncertainty, low morale and frustrations among teachers.

Related findings emerged from the quantitative data with (47%) and (53%) of the school managers “strongly agreeing” and “agreeing” that participatory decision making in school programmes enhanced teacher retention in public secondary schools.

The findings above clearly suggest that the school managers were in agreement that participatory decision making in school programmes enhanced teacher retention. In line with the above findings, the literature study suggests that school managers should engage in participative decision making by carrying out various tasks which include the following: administrative support and creating a positive school climate. Although majority of the participants’ responses seemed disjointed, inarticulate and difficult to follow in most cases, the researcher was prudent to put together their views according to the above two functions. The aim was to create a deeper insight into the many meanings that the participants ascribed to their role as school managers in addressing the challenge of teacher attrition. Mertler (2013), suggests that participation in decision making is strongly associated with teacher retention. This assertion is complimented by Everton *et al.* (2007) who point out that teachers displayed less positive attitude towards the teaching profession because of little or no say in decision making. It is interesting to note that teachers’ marginalisation is not only peculiar to matter at school level decision making but this phenomenon is extended to national matters such as curriculum development as Mulenga and Mwanza (2019:38) observed that ‘teachers are not given such chances and thus their voices are only heard as cries in the school wilderness’. Mulenga and Mwanza (2018:81) also observed in an earlier study that ‘it seems teachers’ thoughts are only allowed to be expressed in their classrooms and are marginalised from contributing to the curriculum development process which they are expected to fully implement’.

Fair Treatment of Teachers by School Managers encourage Teacher Retention in Secondary Schools

The majority of participants revealed that teachers needed to be fairly treated by school managers. The study found that the majority of the school managers held an opinion that consistently side lining some teachers in the school did not inspire a sense of ownership in those teachers who were perceived to be side lined.

The above views were supported by those school managers who collectively indicated that side lined teachers were in most cases demoralised, as a result the affected teachers reacted with mere compliance to instructions. One of the school manager had this to say:

It seems as school managers we do not take some teachers seriously. Personally, I do not consult some teachers because I feel their input may not be valuable since I have those who are close and work with me. But, what I have realised is that even those teachers I exclude should be given the opportunity to voice out concerns and needs. They need to be consulted as well.

This finding of side lining teachers is consistent with the reviewed literature. Studies show that bias and lack of fairness by school managers does not include teachers liked by school management (Munonde, 2007). The tenuous involvement of all teachers in fair and equitable distribution of responsibilities in a school is inexcusable in this era of democracy. School managers, are therefore expected to shift from a rigid authoritarian model of management to embrace the democratic principles in their management practices.

The literature abounds with typical repercussions facing school managers that institutionalise tenuous involvement of side-lined teachers. According to Smit *et al.* (2011), such school managers run risks of facing side-lined teachers' dissatisfaction which may give rise to low morale, poor cooperation and resistance prone reactions. The current researcher's stance was that, side lined teachers expected their input to be valued but felt disregarded and isolated. These side lined teachers tended to be become frustrated and felt disillusioned and unfulfilled. This condition may impact negatively on these teachers and eventually leave the profession. An effective remedy in dealing with tenuous involvement of side lined teachers is to create an invitational organisational climate. To this end, school managers should create opportunities that engender effective consultation with the side lined teachers.

The quantitative data also showed similar findings with the majority of the school managers, (60%) "strongly agreeing" that fair treatment of teachers by school managers encouraged teacher retention in secondary schools. The preceding presentation of the findings showed that generally school managers were of the view that fair treatment of teachers by school managers encouraged teacher retention in public secondary schools. The above findings are in line with the views of Brown and Wynn (2009), who contend that fair treatment of teachers by school managers can motivate teachers who in turn show a sense of efficacy and a positive attitude towards the profession. This perception is further articulated by Wood (2005), who points out that school managers have five significant roles they play in the school to bring about fair treatment of teachers by creating a positive school culture, instructional leadership, facilitator of mentors, teacher recruiter and teacher advocacy. These findings are also augmented by Masaiti (2018) who stated that schools managers are expected to provide instruction leadership.

Reduced Workload

The empirical evidence suggested that work overload on the part of teachers was another major impediment to discharging their duties effectively. The majority of the school managers, in their focus group interviews, stressed that teachers were experiencing heavy workloads especially in schools where there was a shortage of teachers. Most respondents, who participated in this study, expressed a similar opinion that teacher attrition led to a heavy workload for those teachers who remained since they had to cover up for the classes where teachers had left. One of the school managers said:

Our teachers are stressed given that they teach more than one class in spite of appealing to the Ministry of Education to send teachers but the problem is deployment of new teachers which often takes as long as two or three years because the government has no money to pay newly recruited teachers. Teaching Service Commission recommends an average teaching load of 18 lessons per week for one teacher, holding all other factors constant. Increased workloads mean that a teacher taught more than 27 lessons per week and they were doing other roles like being games master/mistress, class teacher, house masters/mistress among other responsibilities other than just teaching. Increased workloads make it difficult for the teachers to cope and eventually this fuels teacher's desire to leave for greener pastures or movement to private sector or career switch in a bid to look for better paying jobs that are not cumbersome and rates of returns are higher. If the workload is reduced teachers who leave are likely to stay in the profession.

In support of the above comment, another school manager stressed the importance of reducing teachers' workload if teacher attrition was to be reduced in schools. In this regard, she stated that she was made to understand that almost all schools were facing the challenge of increase in workload as a result of teacher attrition. She further said:

Even though the case is minimal in some subject areas, this is still common in other subjects such as Mathematics, English and Science. Teachers are few and the rate at which the graduates in the field are entering the profession is low. Therefore, you will realise that those who are leaving the teaching profession are adding to the burden and increasing the workload of those teachers who are remaining. She added that, on several occasions has heard other school managers complain about teacher shortage to the Ministry of Education officials for more teachers, but no action has been taken to tackle the situation. The only option according to the Ministry of Education is that, school managers should continue using the available human resource so as to keep the school going.

The findings from the quantitative data reveal similar results that reduced workload fostered teacher retention in public secondary schools in Zambia as attested by 67 per cent of the school managers who "strongly agreed" compared to 13 per cent)

who “disagreed” to the use of continuous disturbance of students during class as a way of sustaining teacher retention in secondary schools.

The findings of the current study relate well with those of Johnson and Birkland (2003), who posit that teachers encounter a series of challenges in their working life especially in the early years of teaching. In some cases, they are given challenging tasks such as handling large classes and extra-curricular activities which make them focus less on teaching and learning preparations. Students’ academic learning time is considerably reduced. This scenario resonates with what Mulenga and Lubasi (2019:75) found out in their study that ‘a lot of factors contributed to wasted time for teaching and learning. It was also noted that some of the challenges that teachers encountered in terms of time loss were beyond their control’. Ingersoll (2004), reports that 13 per cent of new teachers had reduced workload in their first few years of teaching which encouraged teachers to continue in the profession. This view is in agreement with Guarino *et al.* (2006), who contend that assigning challenging tasks to new teachers interferes with well-meaning support programmes designed by a school such as mentoring and collegiality among administrators and colleagues.

High Salaries

Data collected from the three District Education Board Secretaries (DEBS) who participated in the qualitative investigation, was analysed and coded, resulting in the following major themes, stated in order of priority: improving salaries and conditions of service; harmonisation of teacher qualifications and salaries; and professional development. In order to improve teacher retention, most DEBS argued that it was necessary for the government to improve teacher salaries and other conditions of service. In this regard, DEBS ‘1’ said:

there should be an improvement and harmonization of teacher salaries and conditions of service.

This was seen as an essential intervention to reduce teacher attrition and maximise teacher retention.

Findings from the quantitative data showed similar findings as those from the interviews and focus group discussions, with the majority, 77 per cent of the school managers “strongly agreeing” that high salaries promoted teacher retention. The influence that teacher salary has on attrition is significant. It is an undeniable fact that while attrition is attributed to low salaries, teachers with better pay are less likely to leave the profession than those with poor salaries (Masaiti & Naluyele, 2011; Masaiti, 2015). The implication is that school managers have to provide effective strategies that can be implemented to ensure that teachers remain in the profession. Furthermore, Joseph and Jackman (2014) hold an opinion that majority of men in their study left teaching because of low salaries.

Conclusion

This study found that the school managers and the district education board secretaries had notable conception of the constituent elements of teacher attrition and functioning of public secondary schools. It was discovered that their conceptions, in this regard, were supported by extant literature.

Another significant finding in this study was that the participants had limited understanding on the role school managers' played in staff retention. For instance, during data collection some participants went as far as disclosing that they were not aware that school managers were expected to adhere to a set of formal processes of management in order to reduce on teacher exodus. Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that school managers that lacked basic understanding of what they were expected to do could not be perceived as effective in addressing teacher attrition. The empirical investigation also underscored a series of practical challenges faced by school managers in Chongwe, Kafue and Lusaka districts such as poor working conditions, lack of administrative support, low salaries and lack of continuous professional development.

School managers should provide monetary incentives so that the gap is reduced in what teachers receive as salary. This strategy will make teachers remain in the school though this may not be the only reason for staying. Furthermore, if teachers were to be retained in public secondary schools, good working conditions have been found to have the potential of positively sustaining the achievement of this goal. The absence of a policy on good working conditions as a support system for teacher retention in public secondary schools in Zambia is, therefore, inexcusable given the overwhelming evidence regarding its significance in promoting teacher competence and raising learner outcomes. Indeed the absence of good working conditions in public secondary schools is a missed opportunity to teachers' retention and competence. Consequently, education authorities in Zambia would do well to learn from other government and private sectors about the benefits of providing good working conditions to the teaching profession if it were going to retain teachers in public secondary schools.

It is equally clear that teacher retention is a complex and multidisciplinary subject that incorporates areas such as workplace environment, learning, communication, and motivation and good leadership management. Taking into account that some measure of benefits have been derived from the random help provided by the Ministry of General Education, it seems sensible to deduce and expect that greater benefit could be achieved from a more systematic arrangement of provision of good working conditions to the teachers to help the process of teacher retention in public secondary schools in Zambia.

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