

## Title

# Parental perspectives on teacher strikes in Seke Rural District Council, Zimbabwe: Implications for development work

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## Abstract

This article explores the parental perspectives on teacher strikes in Zimbabwean rural areas. To gain more enlightenment on the realities that they encounter, the study incorporated a qualitative methodology using in-depth interviews to collect data from parents in Seke Rural District Council. An Ubuntu approach was embraced as the theoretical framework for analyzing these challenges exacerbated by teacher strikes in Zimbabwean rural areas. Ubuntu is an African worldview that, among other values, values positive, humane and reciprocal relationships in family, community and society. Ubuntu is also about justice, inclusion, engagement, humanness, and recognition of people who are often marginalised. The research findings show that parents face a lot of challenges such as high propensity of school drop outs, child labour, low production on farm lands, juvenile delinquency, early child marriages, and drug abuse due to teacher strikes. . Using the Ubuntu framework, these challenges show that there is usually lack of justice, inclusion, humanness, respect and engagement towards teachers and learners in Zimbabwean rural areas. This article posits that addressing teacher strikes in Zimbabwe is not cast in stone but can be restructured and renegotiated through engagement to ensure adequate incentives of the teachers.

## Key words

Parents, teachers, strikes, rural, children, Zimbabwe

## Key dates

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## Introduction

The Zimbabwean government has had an acrimonious relationship with its workers and this has led to a number of protracted industrial actions over the past decade. The strikes usually last from a few days to a few months. These strikes have significantly crippled the education sector which once had a yearlong strike in 2008. Students are the most affected by these strikes as they are never compensated for the time they lose while the teachers are on strike. The situation is even worse for students that would be scheduled to seat for their exams that year, as they go into these exams without adequate coaching from teachers. While the government and the teachers fight, the students suffer and the parents have to come up with an alternative plan so that they cater for the educational needs of their children. This paper investigates parental perspectives on the recent industrial action by the teachers using a case study of Seke district.

## Background

Teacher strikes are a global phenomenon. Studies by Chifamba (2012); Evans et al. (2021); Gillespie (2020); Wills (2014) have shown that teacher strikes can be found both in the global north and south. Hudson (2018) categorises a teacher strike as an organised refusal to work that can cause public schools to close indefinitely. A teacher strike can be taken as a situation where a group of teachers refuse to work as means of a protest (Taylor, 2017). A strike is a way through which teachers can register their grievances with their employer. There is no prescribed time on how long a protest can last. They can last from a few hours to months/years. The teachers strike in Chicago lasted for seven days (Gillespie, 2020), another one in South Africa lasted for 2 months (Wills, 2014a), while in Zimbabwe estimates that teacher strike usually take 1-6 months (Maposa, 2012). Strikes usually end when teachers' grievances have been met or a compromise has been attained.

After attaining its independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government focused on making education accessible to all, marking a significant shift from the exclusionary colonial era policies which had made education largely available to the whites. The Nziramasanga Commission (1999), noted that there was a 176.8% and 950.5% increase in primary and secondary education enrolment respectively. The increase in the number of learners was accompanied by an increase in the number of teachers (Maposa, 2013) (Dzvimbo, 1991). It was not long after independence that the education sector started facing challenges which largely involved recurring teacher strikes. A majority of these industrial actions have been blamed on the failing

economy and other related factors. Murigo (2014) lists education as one of the areas that were greatly affected by the economic crisis of the 2000-2008 period. Chamunogwa & Chakanya (2021) point out that there has been a general decline in the standard of living in Zimbabwe owing to a number of factors such as protracted years of economic decline, corruption, droughts and ineffective government policies amongst other problems. The sequel to this myriad of challenges has been perennial industrial action by workers, teachers included, led by their unions.

In the education sector, the strikes have been recurring with the recent one in February 2022. Teachers have been arguing that they are incapacitated to report for duty and that an extra US\$100 will not do them any good as they want their salaries increased to US\$540 per month. On average teachers in Zimbabwe earn US\$200 using the official exchange rate and less than US\$100 using the widely accepted black market rate. The government responded by firing all the teachers that did not report for duty. A High Court challenge by the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union in Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) to stay the suspensions was granted. In some situations, this has led to teachers showing up for duty but not executing their duties. The recent strike occurred on the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictive measures which had seen schools being closed for a lengthy period. Strikes usually affect the students who are the intended beneficiaries. Wills (2014) noted that industrial action by teachers' leads to reduced levels of teaching effort and efficiency which then results in lower-than-expected student achievement.

The effects of a teacher strike vary. Wills (2014), points out that while it is logical to assume that if students are not in school or not being taught by teachers, learning cannot take place, empirical evidence exists where in some instances teacher strikes have no effect on learner's outcome had. The nature and time period of a strike determines its impact on learner's outcome. Baker (2011), Belot and Wedbink (2010) studies identify no effects o teacher strikes o students' outcomes. Wills (2014) highlights that in instances where teacher strikes have had no effect, it was because teachers would make up for lost time once they resume their duties. It is logical to argue that, 'making up for lost time', is a remedy to the negative impact of teacher strikes on learners hence one cannot argue to say that teacher strikes have no effect o learners.

There is a lack of literature that adequately explores the effects of teacher strikes on parents, later alone how they perceive industrial action by teachers. Jaume et al., (2021) note that temporal school closures as a result of teacher industrial action leave

millions of families struggling with disrupted childcare arrangements and this has an effect on the labour market. In a study conducted by Taylor (2017), he noted that mothers respond to industrial action by teachers by dropping out of the labour force. Dropping out of the labour force leads to reduce incomes for households. Mothers tend to be the primary care givers around households and naturally they are the ones that feel the brunt of teacher strikes as they have to dropout of the labour force and attend to their children. What remains unclear is whether parents view teacher strikes as opportunities for them to spend more time with their children or they view as something that limits their productivity.

### Ubuntu perspective

The Ubuntu perspective was adopted as the theoretical framework for the article. Ubuntu is an African worldview that values positive and reciprocal relationships in family, community and society. Ubuntu is also about justice, inclusion and recognition of people who are often marginalised and their needs. A person is not considered a true human being unless one is concerned about the well-being of other people. One of the main characteristics of Ubuntu is communality or communal well-being.

This principle is mainly expressed in the Zulu saying *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (A person is a person through other people). This saying can exist in most African languages. Letseka (2012) argues that Ubuntu is based on the etiquette of humanity, which includes caring for each other’s well-being and reciprocating kindness. Louw (2003) postulates that Ubuntu is more than just being who you are through others; he extends Ubuntu to how people relate to others around them. Louw’s concept of Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of having a mutual understanding of how people treat each other.

Different authors have defined Ubuntu as the ethic of care (Waghid and Smeyers 2012) and ‘a theory of right action’ or ‘moral theory’ (Letseka 2000; Metz 2007; Teffo 1994), as a pedagogical principle (Letseka 2013) and as a constitutional and jurisprudence principle (Mahao 2010; Mokgoro 1998). As Ubuntu concerns the way in which people treat each other, this article focuses mainly on the teachers, parents and learners in rural Zimbabwe. The main research objective guiding the study was to establish the parental views on teacher strikes in rural Zimbabwe. The research also sought to investigate how different players including development workers could work with this group to improve their wellbeing and inclusion.

## Research methods

This article is based on qualitative data resulting from in-depth interviews carried out in Seke Rural District Council for 5 months. The research participants voluntarily participated in the study with the guarantee that their identity would not be divulged as per the ethical requirements. Eight (8) parents were selected to generate data for this study through in-depth interviews. Chifamba (2012) and Evans *et al* (2021) among other scholars also used the qualitative method to generate data about teacher strikes. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard the real identity of the participants. For analysis, the qualitative raw data were arranged into thematic categories which included, incentives, high propensity of school drop outs, child labour, and low production on farm lands, juvenile delinquency, early child marriages, and drug abuse.

Table 1: Profile of research participants

Participant	Gender	Age
Parent 1	Female	27
Parent 2	Female	44
Parent 3	Female	34
Parent 4	Male	32
Parent 5	Female	26
Parent 6	Female	51
Parent 7	Male	43
Parent 8	Female	28

The researchers recorded the interviews at the same time as concurrently taking down notes for transcription and verification. After completion of data collection and transcription, the researchers took transcribed data and came up with themes which include incentives, high propensity of school dropout, child labour, and low production in farmlands among others. The African human research ethics – justice, inclusion and recognition of people who are often marginalised and their needs – guided the researchers throughout the study and in concocting this article.

## Findings

### Incentives

It was found that parents are requesting the government to address teachers’ grievances in time as children are already behind time because COVID-19 lockdowns that resulted in school closures.

Parents also indicated that children in rural areas are the most affected as students in urban areas had a chance to do online learning during lockdown even in these strikes parents in towns can send their children to private schools and extra lessons yet in as parents in rural areas we do not afford that.

Parent 2 indicated that,

*“dai hurumende yanzwawo kuchema kwevadzidzisi zvagadziriswawo nguva iripo vana vedu kuno kumamisha ndivo vakanyanya kusarira nekuda kwe Covid iyi yakambovharisa zvikoro ,zvekare kuno hatina maprivate schools ekuendesa vana tinongomira nehurumende nekudaro kana ikasatibatsira tauraya ramangwana revana vedu.”* Translated to English as, “We wish that the Government responds to the grievances of teachers in time so that our children in rural areas are not left behind due to COVID-19 that has seen school closures. In addition we do not have private schools to send our children to, we just wait for the government, if it does not help our children’ future will be ruined.”

Weighing in on the same note, Parent 3 added that,

*“tinokumbirawo hurumende igadzirisewo dambudziko rematicha nguva ichiripo tinevana varikunyora gore rino vangazokundikane mubvunzo dzavo sezvo vasina kunyanya kudzidza.* Translated to English as, “We kindly ask the government to address this issue of teacher strikes in time considering we have children sitting for exams this year. They may fail their exams since they did not learn much.”

### High propensity of school dropout

The findings indicated that strikes increases the propensity of school drop outs in rural areas especially in instances where school is not regarded as important people survive by working in farms and through farming. The findings also show that in rural areas when children are not learning parents prefer them to go and work, some parents prefer children to help them with work at home and in the fields, some helping parents by heading cattle whilst parents are doing other work at home and by the time strike stop most of the parents will not send children back to school.

Lamenting about some parents’ ignorance on the significance of education, Parent 1 had this to say,

*“vamwe vabereki muno mumamisha havakoshe chi korokana vachinzwa kuti vadzidzisi havasikuuya kumabasa vanoregeresa vana kuenda kuchikoro zvachose.”* Translated to English as, “Some parents here in the rural areas to not think education is important. If they hear that teachers are not coming, they simply withdraw their children forever.”

### Child labour

Parents indicated that strikes in Seke districts expose children to child labour as there a farmers who are into tobacco farming and they require human labour at cheap price, and this lures children who are home because of strike. The parents highlighted that this is dangerous for the children’s health as they do not know safety precautions that are required when processing tobacco.

Expressing some views on consequences on the children, Parent 4 had this to say,

*“manje kana maticha asingauye kudai vana vese vanopera kutiza vachienda zvavo kufodya”.* Translated to English as, “So if the teachers are not coming, all the children will end up working at tobacco farms.”

Parent 6 added that,

*“zvekushaikwa kwema teacher vana havazomboda kuenda kuchikoro nekuti vanenge votomhanya kufodya kwavanopiwa tuma dhora vachishandiswabasa rnorwadza uye zvinozovarwarisa mangwana nekuti uye vanhu vekufodya vanomhanyira vana vadiki diki vasinganetse kubhadhara.* Translated to English as, “If these teacher strikes continue, the children will no longer be eager to return to school, they will prefer to remain working in tobacco farms were they get some money. However, they will be exposed to arduous jobs and will be under paid.”

### Low production in farmlands

It was found that parents are against strike as it affects them in farmlands and leads to low productivity in farm lands as the parents will be diverting their attention to take care of children who would normally spent the day at school with teachers. Most of the families in Seke Rural District earn a living through farming; hence school helps parents with childcare whilst parents are working in farmlands.

Parent 5 had this to say,

*“Strike iyi ikutikanganisa se vabereki, hatichakwanise kuenda kumunda kundorima sezvatinosiita vana vaenda kuchikoro. Vana ava vanotoda kutariswa, uye vanowedzera basa pamba zvekuti dzimwe nguva unotonovabikira zvasiyana nepavanoswera vari ku zvikoro.”* Translated to English as, “this whole strike issue is affecting us as parents ,as we cannot work in the fields as we do when children are at school ,as they will requiring attention ,they also increase our work at home as we need to go back home and cook for them unlike when they are at school”.

## Juvenile delinquency

It was found that parents are against strike as it results in juvenile delinquency. The parents argued that teachers' foster discipline in their children and their absence due to strikes exposes children to delinquent behaviours. The teachers are the ones that enforce social control at school hence in their absence students behave anyhow.

Parents 7 indicated that,

*“Isu tinobatsirwa kudzoreredza vana vedu nema ticha asi kana vasiko kuavikoro ,kana vasingashande vana vanoita zvanoda sanika iko zvino nemafoni avako aya hapana anombovazoreredza kana vari vega.”* Translated to English as, “We are helped to discipline our children by teachers but when there are not available, children do whatever they want especially nowadays with the availability of phones, no one can discipline them when they are alone.”

Parent 8 added that,

*“ikozvino kusina vadzidzisi vana zvavanenge vachiita nemafoni hazvitaure chiroba , vamwe vachitorana mavhidhiyo vachikisana, kudanana, ko kuzoti zvimwe zvatisingazive vadzidzisi dai vadzoka kumabasa chokwadi”.* Translated to English as, “Nowadays when teachers are not available, children will be mischievous with their phones. Some children even take videos kissing each other, having sex, and other things that we do not know about. We hope that teachers quickly return to work to resume their duties.”

## Early child marriage

The findings indicated that teachers' strikes increase the propensity of early child marriages in rural areas.

Parent 3 shared that,

*“kana vana vachienda kuchikoro vachidzidza vanosangana nevamwe vana vezera ravo vachiitawo zvinhu zvezera ravo ,asi kana vadzidzisi vasingashande vana vari vega hapana anotarisa vana kuti varikuuya kuchikoro here varikuswera nani sezvo muno mumamisha mune zvikomana zvakawanda zvisingaende kuzvikoro zvinonogarira vanasikana munzira ,pamedhe emuzvikoro ndivo vanopedzisira vakutibatira vanasikana ,uye vanawo vakomana vanodzidzawo tsika iyi yokurara nevasikana kubva kuzvikomana izvi”.* Translated to English as, “When children go to school they mix and mingle with counterparts of the same age, however, when teachers are not available and they spent their time at home. They end up interacting with many boys especially those who no longer go to school and often wait for them just outside the school gate or on their way home. They are the one who end up sleeping and impregnating the children.”

Parent 1 added that,

*“Zvikomana zvakapedza chikoro zvinotoenda kuchikoro zvakapfeka ma uniform kana kusitorina vadzidzisi nekuti zvikoro zvekuno hazvina vanorinda pamagedhe uye hakuna kma school ID anongogadzirirwa vanoita zvema sports chete.”* Translated to English as, “The boys who would have completed or dropped out disguise themselves as students in the absence of teachers to gain entry into school premises and meet with children.”

## Drug abuse

The findings indicates that the strike of teachers increases drug abuse among the children ,in the absents of teachers children tend to experiment a lot of things and in Seke rural areas parents indicated there are other children who come from families with elders will uses drugs and the children come with drugs and share with other school children ,hence teachers strikes bring more harm to the students as there will be no monitoring of children activities as have been indicated earlier by one of the parents that, some boys who do not go to school can wear uniforms and be with students exposing them to all sorts of behaviour and with peer pressure children engage in using drugs and some even engage in gang rape, stealing.

## Discussion

The findings corroborate an argument by Maposa (2012) who posited that, the disparities that exist between rural and urban areas in terms of service provision, they also affect the education system of children in rural areas, and children in rural areas have no access to quality education because they cannot afford to raise teacher incentives. Through embracing Ubuntu, the government and society understanding of teacher strikes can improve as people will recognize that it is not their fault but rather the need for provision of adequate incentives to continue their work and ensure that the rural learners are not left behind.

These findings verify the argument by Nyoka (2020) who reported that, parents in rural areas do not prioritise education of children teachers encourages them to enrol their children but when teachers are not working it increases the rate of school dropouts. Ubuntu is about inclusion, it is about leaving no one behind but, in this case, others are being excluded.

These findings vindicated the arguments by International Labour Organisation (2003) and African Union (1999) who noted with concern that, children in rural areas go to look for jobs in tobacco production during school holidays, weekends and whenever they got the chance as they enjoy the small amount of money that they get after working. Children enjoy those remunerations they got not

knowing that the process of tobacco production endanger their health to disease such as liver damage, vision impairment, chemical poisoning, tobacco sickness, skin rash and breathing difficulties. Through embracing Ubuntu, the government and society can appreciate the importance of having a mutual understanding of how they should treat rural teachers and learners.

These findings reinforce arguments by Wills (2014) and Taylor (2017) who propounded that school strikes disrupts childcare arrangements and they have a negative impact on parents' work and this translate into large reduction of parents' earnings and work productivity. Wills (2014) also posited that school services are valuable services that give parents the freedom to work and advance their carriers and increase productivity. Through embracing Ubuntu, the government and society can express kindness and care for the well-being of teachers and learners.

The findings strengthens the arguments by Golden and Golden (2010) who posits that school is an institution that ensures or enforces social control with the availability of teachers. In line with Ubuntu ideological parameters, it is evident that teacher strikes can result in children losing their moral or *hunhu* in their absence.

As alluded earlier, school is regarded as institution that ensures social control in children and when children are at school with no strikes, teachers there much of their time they will be occupied and also that students will be limited to who they mingle with. The findings vindicate arguments by Will (2014) who argued that, with well-functioning school children will be exposed not only to new ideas but also to same aged compatriots, that do not expose them thing that are not applicable to their age, but with lack of teachers that limits children to mingle with elder can expose children to elder persons that engage children in sexual activities that leads them to early pregnancies, unprotected sex and early child marriage.

## Recommendations

- To ensure inclusivity, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should consistently engage with teachers in rural areas to resolve their challenges swiftly so as to avoid interruptions in learners' education.
- There is a need to raise awareness among all stakeholders including government, civil society organisations, private voluntary organisations and citizenry to safeguard the rights and interests of all teachers and learners right to education.
- There is a need for the implementation of programmes that cushion the teachers from

economic shocks that that push them further into poverty and subsequently result in strikes.

- There is a need for provision of adequate learning material to rural learners so that they are not left behind in situations of teacher strikes.
- Development workers should prioritise this group in research

## Conclusion

As discussed above, parents face a plethora of challenges caused by teacher strikes. The authors used Ubuntu perspective to provide insight on how these challenges posed by the society and government show lack of care, respect and compassion for teachers, learners and parents. A number of recommendations are also given so that several stakeholders, especially those that have a mandate to ensure the wellbeing of this group, can take action. A lot needs to be done to ensure the wellbeing of teachers, learners and parents.

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