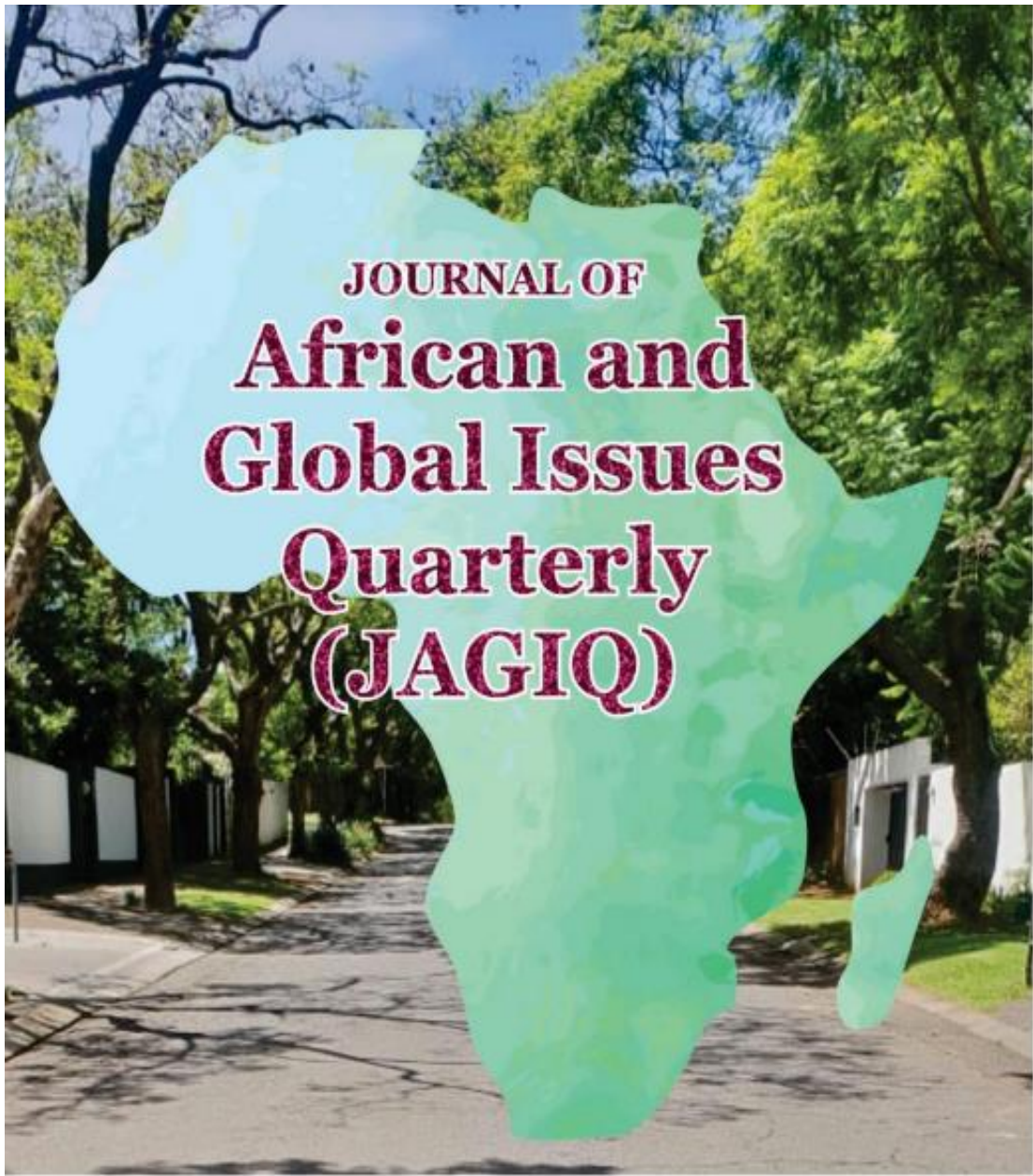




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EDITORIAL NOTE

This volume represents concerted calls within and outside Africa on the need for multidisciplinary collaboration and research output. Specifically, papers were drawn from all disciplines and research focuses, which has further increased the quality of research and collegial engagement. Hence, topics covered in this volume cut across the areas of economics, politics, security, ICT, indigenous knowledge, development studies, finance, trade, youth engagement, agriculture, democratization, and nation-building, among others.

For instance, Thizwilondi Josephine Mudau in *African Youths and the Promotion of Sustainable Development through the Lens of Indigenous Knowledge (IKS) in the 21st Century* employed qualitative desktop research methodology in synthesizing existing literature to argue that IKS represents a dynamic body of wisdom encompassing sustainable agriculture, natural resource management, and community resilience and offers proven, contextually grounded solutions to modern challenges like climate change and food insecurity. The analysis highlights youth-led initiatives across the continent that are revitalizing indigenous crops, integrating traditional ecological knowledge with climate adaptation strategies, and using digital platforms for cultural preservation. Mudau concluded that for Africa to achieve authentic and sustainable development, a concerted effort is needed to empower youth through inclusive education, supportive policy frameworks, and intergenerational dialogue, thereby transforming indigenous knowledge from a cultural heritage into a living toolkit for a resilient future.

Masila Joshua Masipa in *Beneficiaries of Corruption? An analysis of the function of South African banks in handling and making money from crime proceeds* adopted institutional theory and the political economy of corruption and a qualitative research design that combines semi-structured interviews with compliance officers, financial regulators, and civil society actors with document analysis of Zondo Commission and Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC) reports, legal statutes, and policy papers in examining how, in spite of strict anti-money-laundering (AML) and anti-corruption laws, South African banks may profit from, handle, or ineffectively stop the flow of monies associated with corruption. Specifically, with an emphasis on whether banks directly or indirectly benefit from the proceeds of crime, Masipa investigated the relationship between financial institutions and illegal financial flows within the following objectives: (1) assess the regulatory framework that oversees AML compliance; (2) examine high-profile cases of corruption in which banks are implicated; (3) evaluate due diligence and institutional accountability; and (4) suggest changes to improve ethical banking governance.

Then Sipho Patrick Bhengu-Mancosa & Andrishah Beharry-Ramraj in *Advancing Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprise Growth through Digitalized Enterprise and Supplier Development in South Africa* examined the current state of Enterprise and Supplier Development (ESD) in South Africa, investigated the role of digitalization in enhancing ESD, identified the challenges and opportunities in digitalizing ESD, and provided recommendations for policymakers, corporates, and Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs). A qualitative secondary data approach was employed, drawing on thematic analysis of existing literature, reports, and industry initiatives. For key findings, Bhengu-Mancosa & Beharry-Ramraj indicated that ESD adoption remains limited; digitalization (Mancosa) significantly enhances market access and supplier diversity; infrastructure and skills gaps persist; and strategic digital integration can unlock growth opportunities for SMMEs.

Lere Amusan & Ebenezer O. Oni, in **their study, *Disinvestment of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in Developing Areas: An Assessment of Shoprite Disengagement in Nigeria, started by reflecting on why***, at the global level, many MNCs have started to disengage from their host states. In a bid to respond to the possible reasons, Amusan & Oni pushed further into examining possible reasons that could explain why Shoprite, a large South African retailing company, disinvested from Nigeria after operating in the country for about 15 years, using secondary sources supported by primary data and personal observations. For them, the reasons range from political, economic, marketing, and legal to civil society attitudes towards their business. Employing the twin theories of neoliberalism and oligopoly that facilitate globalization, Amusan & Oni concluded that, aside from losing litigation to its erstwhile Nigerian business partners, competition from domestic and foreign retail companies contributed in no small measure to why Shoprite exited the Nigerian market.

In A sober teacher is a problem”: Unpacking Political Ideology and Emancipatory Struggles Within teacher unionism, Zwane Theminkosi Trevor & Matsepe David adopted the grounded postcolonial theory in examining how teacher unions embody and deploy political stances and ideologies to promote the emancipation and freedom of education, as well as the broader communities they aim to serve. Clearly, Trevor and Matsepe employed a qualitative interpretivist approach to analyze data from narrative interviews with unionized educators, along with further examination of public union discussions. Key findings of their research indicated four interrelated themes: (1) political consciousness as both a threat to order and a driver of democratic emancipation; (2) teacher unions functioning as a counter-hegemonic force challenging neoliberal geopolitics and political norms; (3) the ideological repositioning of teacher unions as intellectual activists rather than compliant officials; and (4) tensions between political agency and professional identity.

Douglas Nyath in Rural Youth and the Future of Farming in Sub-Saharan Africa: Revisiting the Abandonment Debate explored whether rural youth are truly abandoning agriculture or are instead redefining their involvement through diversified livelihood strategies. It examines the socio-economic, institutional, and cultural factors influencing youth decisions and analyzes how emerging hybrid forms of engagement—such as agripreneurship and part-time farming—are reshaping rural economies. A systematic desktop synthesis of peer-reviewed literature (2000–2025) was conducted using databases like Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Nyaath observed that youth disengagement from agriculture is not uniform but context-specific, and the key determinants to such disengagement include land scarcity, education, labor market structures, gender norms, and limited access to finance and technology.

Then, in ***Equal Ideals, Unequal Realities: Gender Dynamics in the Workplace of an International Religious Non-governmental Organisation in Eswatini***, Thembumenzi Jomo Ntshalintshali & Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza examined attitudes, experiences, and organizational practices regarding gender roles, power dynamics, and inclusivity by drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 20 employees from a range of departments and hierarchical levels. The results of their findings show that male participants, who were primarily ideologically devoted to gender equality, showed conflicted feelings about shifting power dynamics. Unconscious bias, policy implementation gaps, and organizational culture were equally identified as the primary obstacles to change. The results emphasize that in order to guarantee changes in gender equality, context-specific solutions are required that go beyond the adoption of policies.

In Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Conservation *Ngugi's Petals of Blood*, Thabo Prince Zondo started by reflecting on members of the impoverished and socio-

economically disadvantaged community who are distressed by incessant drought and who consult a seer and offer sacrifices to seek solutions. Using this as a point of departure, Zondo explored how text gestures and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) address the real dilemmas faced by Africans following the extensive and cross-generational crises that accompany coloniality. In this, Zondo provided an ecocritical reading of the text, drawing on relevant postcolonial/decolonial ideas to illustrate the ways in which indigenous African epistemologies can indeed boost efforts at environmental conservation and poverty alleviation in rural communities today.

Also, **Rendani Tshifhumul** in *Exploring the Role of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Healing Practices and Resilience During the COVID-19 pandemic in Thohoyandou*, presented a narrative inquiry into the experiences of individuals who survived COVID-19 without requiring hospitalization, based on in-depth interviews with three respondents. For Tshifhumul, among the identified practices were the inhalation of steam treated with stones and salt, as well as the application of various herbal concoctions, including *Tshiumbeumbe*, *Musese*, *Mufula Musudzungwane*, *Miora*, and *Mubomo*, guava leaves, and lemon grass tea, including a mixture that comprises onion, ginger, lemon, honey, and garlic. Therefore, Tshifhumul concludes that these findings not only shed light on the adaptive strategies employed by individuals in response to the pandemic but also underscore the significance of traditional healing practices in the context of contemporary health crises. Khulisile Judith Nkuna & Sikhumbuzo Sibuso Khoza, in their work, *Capturing Cultural Heritage: Exploring the Poetic Elements of Domesticated Animal Praise*, carried out an analytical analysis of the lyrical components found in the praises of Siswati domestic animals. Nkuna & Khoza observed that expressing gratitude to animals for their contributions to human life remains a significant goal of animal praise. Reflecting on case studies, they noted that the Nguni people view domestic animals as very close environmental companions, particularly for those who live in rural areas. Praise poetry's primary goal is to commemorate great men's accomplishments. However, the reverse is the case for the Swati people, who have a tradition of honoring non-human animals in their poetry, including the wild animals they encounter in their environs as well as the domestic livestock they raise.

Intaher M. Ambe, Ellsworth C. Jonathan, Phathutshedzo D. Lavhelani,* and David H. Selby, in their study, *Exploring the landscape of demand management practices in the public health sector in the Gauteng Province, South Africa: An Empirical Analysis*, employed secondary sources in determining what demand management practices are employed within Gauteng, South Africa, and public health sector institutions. Findings in their study revealed substantial obstacles in organizational structure, demand management techniques, budget, and alignment between demand planning and strategic goals, as well as supply chain management (SCM) rules, regulations, and specifications. They conclude that the paucity of demand management implementation in public sector organizations reveals a misalignment between strategic goals, demand management, and demand planning, resulting in a loss of value for public sector organizations.

Aderinsola E. Kayode, Shalini Sing, & Patricia P. Badenhorst's research, *ICT for Indigenous Knowledge Dissemination and Education in Africa: A Systematic Review*, conducted a systematic review of literature published between 2015 and 2025 to examine how ICT tools and platforms have been deployed to support indigenous knowledge dissemination and education in African contexts. The findings of their research indicated that ICT can enhance indigenous knowledge preservation, improve youth engagement, facilitate intergenerational learning, and broaden global visibility of African knowledge systems when implemented with community participation. However, challenges remain regarding digital

access, cultural sensitivity, intellectual property rights, and the sustainability of technology-driven initiatives.

In ***Donald Trump-Twitter Diplomatic Disruptions And Impact On The Post-World War II International Order.***, Ndivhoniswani Aaron Tshidzumba & Puseletso Nthate examine how President Donald Trump's unprecedented use of Twitter as a direct channel for foreign policy communication disrupted established diplomatic norms inherited from the post-World War II international order. Through content analysis of Trump's social media communications, examination of foreign policy outcomes, and comparative analysis with traditional diplomatic practices, Tshidzumba & Nthate demonstrated that Trump's social media presidency constituted a significant departure from institutional diplomacy and contributed to broader challenges facing the established international order. Further findings reveal that digital direct engagement by heads of state bypasses institutional constraints, undermines multilateral consensus-building, and creates new vulnerabilities in international relations.

Furthermore, in ***Determinants And Effect Of Small-Scale Livestock Production On Household Income In Malawi: Evidence From Fifth Integrated Household Survey***, Gladson Andrew Chipala, Christopher Chombo & Hannah Dunga examined the determinants and effects of small-scale livestock production on household income among farmers in Malawi, using cross-sectional data from the Fifth Integrated Household Survey (IHS5) with a sample of 8,795 households. Their key findings indicate that household size, access to credit, access to extension services, landholding size, distance to the market, and location in the Northern region significantly increase the likelihood of participation in livestock production. Notably, households engaged in livestock production earned, on average, an additional MWK 36,405.76 compared to non-producing households, demonstrating its important role in improving economic welfare.

In ***Navigating Artificial Intelligence Personalization and Consumer Privacy in Digital Marketing across South Africa and Global Contexts***, Suraksha Moothura and Andrishah Beharry-Ramraj critically examined how AI-driven hyper-personalization in digital marketing influences consumer privacy, with a specific focus on its ethical implications and regulatory challenges in South Africa in comparison to global standards using desktop literature review methodology. Moothura & Beharry—Ramraj observed that ethical concerns such as manipulation, algorithmic bias, and reduced consumer autonomy were found to be inadequately addressed in South Africa, where legal instruments like POPIA lack the specificity and enforcement capacity evident in global standards like the GDPR. Taleat, Bisiriyu Abiodun & Lukamba, Muhlya Tshombe's article, ***Energy Sustainability and Sustainable Development Agenda: The Role of Public-Private Partnership in South Africa***, investigated the role and effectiveness of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in South Africa's energy development towards sustainability using a qualitative desk research methodology to analyze secondary data from policy documents, scholarly literature, and government publications. For Abiodun & Tshombe, key findings demonstrate that PPPs have attracted a substantial amount of private investment and benefited the economy through job creation and community development. However, institutional and systemic barriers, e.g., Eskom monopoly, regulatory uncertainty, grid integration constraints, and institutionalized dependency on coal, impede the full implementation of PPPs in accelerating the energy transformation. Hence, they recommend policy stability, energy regulation reform, enhancing financial methods, and ensuring that social equity consideration is factored into PPP structures.

For Olukayode Idris Lasisi in *The Governance–Development Nexus in Nigeria: A Conceptual Synthesis of Good Governance and Policy Discourse Theories*, a qualitative, conceptual, and desk-based review approach was employed, relying on the literature, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks in reevaluating the governance development interface in Nigeria in terms of the role of institutional weaknesses, the inconsistency of policies, and discursive framing in the determination of sustainable development outcomes. Findings revealed that weak institutions, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, low accountability, and marginalization in policymaking processes bedeviled Nigeria’s sustainable development, thereby distorting policy implementation and weakening effective service delivery. Lasisi concludes by calling for the need to strengthen institutions, improve transparency, guarantee policy sustainability, encourage civic participation, and apply digital governance solutions, which is essential to attaining sustainable development.

Eyitayo Francis Adanlawo & Mpho Chaka in *The Effect of Ethnicity And Politics on the Democratization of African Nations* examined the theoretical challenge that ethnicity poses to the African state and the challenges it poses for democratization on the continent. To guide the discourse, critical questions are raised: What kind of connection exists in Africa between politics and ethnicity? Under what conditions may ethnicity either support or undermine democracy? Can citizenship rights be reconciled with ethnicity? . Furthermore, Adanlawo & Chaka explored the evolution of ethnicity from the viewpoints of development communication and provided it with a psycho-social meaning. In their conclusion, Adalanwo & Chaka posited that, if ethnicity has an informative component, we should anticipate that voters' reliance on ethnic cues will decrease when certain forms of higher-quality information become available.

Lindokuhle Senamile Ntuli & Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza in *Does Resource Scarcity Constrain Rural Women’s Entrepreneurial Performance in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa?*, examined whether resource scarcity significantly constrains the entrepreneurial performance of rural women in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. Anchored in the Resource-Based View (RBV), the study adopts a quantitative research design using survey data collected from 273 rural women entrepreneurs across uMhlabuyalingana, Big5Hlabisa, and eJozini municipalities. Ntuli & Nojiyeza revealed statistically significant relationships between entrepreneurial performance and seven resource-based constraints: leadership skills, financial institutional barriers, entrepreneurial experience, regulatory constraints, access to financial resources, technological limitations, and limited training opportunities. Lastly, in *Transformative Governance Frontiers: Relational Public Administration for Smart City Inclusivity*, Melvin Diedericks examined the conceptualization of informal systems in the context of South African smart city initiatives. By repositioning informal systems as co-creators in urban governance, this study advocates for a paradigm shift from technocratic optimization to relational inclusion. This reframing aligns with South Africa's constitutional and developmental goals, enabling transformative governance and the effective localization of SDGs in sustainable cities.

It is expected that these works compiled in this volume will further enrich the discourse and provide policy options to individuals, governments, and countries, particularly in Africa.

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“A SOBER TEACHER IS A PROBLEM”: UNPACKING POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND EMANCIPATORY STRUGGLES WITHIN TEACHER UNIONISM

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Abstract

Participation of teacher unions in post-apartheid South African schools is a subject of significant debate, especially concerning their impact on school governance and professional management. Using postcolonial theory, this study examines the metaphor “a sober teacher is a problem” as a critical lens for analysing the resistance faced by conscious educators in the context of systematic depoliticization. Although unions are frequently depicted as disruptive entities, there is a scarcity of research exploring how unionized educators perceive their political role in school leadership. The study also explores the ideological functions of teacher unions within school governance and the construction of political consciousness as both emancipatory and threatening. For the purpose of addressing the research problem a qualitative interpretivist design is adopted to conduct narrative interviews with principals, SMT members, SGB representatives, and union leaders. The findings identify four interrelated dynamics: political consciousness functioning as both democratic empowerment and institutional disruption; unions acting as counter-hegemonic entities that challenge managerial authority; the transformation of unions into intellectual activists; and ongoing tensions between political agency and professional identity. The study suggests that education departments ought to create formal participatory governance forums at both district and provincial levels, recognizing teacher unions as legitimate contributors to policy rather than merely reactive stakeholders. The study also suggests that policymakers must delineate the extent and limitations of union participation in school governance frameworks. To this end, the study also recommends that teacher unions ought to establish internal frameworks that clarify the alignment of political engagement with professional ethics.

Keywords: *Critical pedagogy; Emancipatory education; Ideological consciousness; Institutional resistance; Political ideology; Postcolonial theory*

1. Introduction and background to the study

The involvement of teacher unions in school governance in post-apartheid South Africa is a subject of significant contention.

Unions significantly contributed to resisting apartheid-era authoritarianism; however, their current participation in school leadership and professional management is often perceived as disruptive, politicized, or obstructive to reform (Chikoko & Jorgensen, 2018; Wills, 2020). In increasingly standardized and accountability-focused education systems, politically aware educators are frequently depicted as disruptive agents rather than as contributors to democracy (Tsang & Qin, 2020; Pereira & Tay, 2023). The metaphor “*a sober teacher is a problem*” illustrates this tension, indicating that political awareness among educators can be perceived as non-compliance in bureaucratized educational settings.

Current research acknowledges that teacher unions have progressed from their conventional role in labour representation to address wider issues of justice, professional identity, and educational reform (Schneider, 2022; Vally, 2021). Neoliberal policy reforms that emphasize performance measurement, managerial accountability, and institutional neutrality have restructured school governance, potentially limiting teacher agency (Tikly, 2020; Tsang & Qin, 2020). While these reforms seek to improve efficiency and quality assurance, they frequently overlook the experiences of educators in historically marginalized and under-resourced communities (Fataar, 2021; Sayed & Singh, 2022). Teacher unions hold a dual role; they act as collaborators within established governance frameworks while also challenging institutional authority.

Previous studies have primarily analyzed teacher unions in terms of labor relations, collective bargaining, and strike activities (Wills, 2020; Schneider, 2022). Although these studies offer important structural insights, there has been insufficient focus on how unionized educators comprehend and implement political consciousness in school governance and professional management. There is a lack of empirical

investigation into the construction, negotiation, and contestation of political agency within daily leadership practices. The ideological aspect of union participation, particularly its impact on professional identity and decision-making processes, is inadequately explored in existing literature (Hung, 2019; Msila, 2022).

This research investigates the ideological stance of teacher unions in the context of school governance in South Africa. This study examines the role of political consciousness as a catalyst for democratic engagement and as a potential challenge to institutional stability. This study, rooted in postcolonial theory, examines the intersection of historical power relations with neoliberal governance pressures and current professional expectations (Andreotti, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). This research highlights the lived experiences of governance negotiation through narrative interviews with principals, members of the school management team, representatives of the school governing body, and union leaders. This study prioritizes these voices, transcending binary views of unions as either obstructive or emancipatory. It conceptualizes teacher unionism as a contested democratic space where authority, professionalism, and political agency are perpetually negotiated.

Comprehending this dynamic is important for three reasons. It illustrates that school governance is influenced by both formal policy frameworks and ideological conflict (Giroux, 2022). Furthermore, it adds to discussions regarding professional identity by demonstrating that teaching in post-apartheid South Africa is fundamentally political (Hung, 2018; Vally, 2021). Third, it provides insights for policymakers and school leaders aiming to balance institutional stability with democratic participation in accountability-driven contexts (Pereira & Tay, 2023; Tikly, 2020). This study positions political

consciousness as a central feature of educational transformation, rather than treating it as disorderly.

2. Research aim and objectives

2.1. Research aim

This study aims to examine the construction and negotiation of political consciousness and ideological agency by teacher unions in post-apartheid South Africa within the contexts of school governance and professional management.

2.2. Research objectives

1. To examine the comprehension of political consciousness among unionised educators in the context of school governance.
2. To analyse the impact of teacher unions on decision-making processes within school leadership and professional management.
3. To investigate the influence of union participation on the professional identity and political agency of educators.
4. To examine the tensions and challenges associated with union participation in school governance.

3. Main research question and sub-research questions

3.1. Main research question

In what ways do teacher unions shape and negotiate political awareness and ideological influence within the frameworks of school governance and professional management in post-apartheid South Africa?

3.2. Sub-research questions

1. How do unionized educators comprehend and articulate political consciousness within the frameworks of school leadership?

2. How do teacher unions impact decision-making processes in school governance?
3. How does union participation shape educators' professional identity?
4. What tensions and opportunities emerge from the involvement of teacher unions in school management?

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Postcolonial Theory and the Politics of Teacher Unionism

This research is based on postcolonial theory, which analyses the ongoing influence of historical power dynamics on authority, knowledge creation, and institutional governance in societies that have emerged from colonialism. Postcolonial scholarship posits that colonial logics persist beyond political independence, manifesting in institutional practices, policy discourses, and epistemic hierarchies that govern voice and participation (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). In educational systems, these dynamics are frequently perpetuated by managerial structures that favour technocratic control and administrative efficiency, consequently marginalizing historically subordinated voices (Tikly, 2020).

Post-apartheid South Africa implemented school governance reforms aimed at democratizing education through the establishment of structures like School Governing Bodies. However, structural inequalities between historically advantaged and disadvantaged schools continue to shape participation, representation, and decision-making processes (Naidoo, 2021; Sayed & Singh, 2022). Postcolonial theory facilitates a critical examination of how ostensibly

democratic governance structures can perpetuate hierarchies rooted in historical inequality. This highlights the voices that are legitimized, those that are silenced, and the dynamics of power within institutional contexts.

This lens is pertinent to the study's primary focus which is the ideological positioning of teacher unions in relation to school governance and professional management. The metaphor "*a sober teacher is a problem*" illustrates the perception of politically conscious educators as disruptive within systems that emphasize managerial compliance and institutional stability. Postcolonial theory offers a framework for analysing the tension by conceptualizing teacher unions as contested spaces in which authority, resistance, and professional identity are perpetually negotiated.

From this perspective, teacher unions operate not only as labour organizations but also as platforms for ideological conflict. They can function as agents of emancipation by amplifying marginalized voices and challenging depoliticized reform agendas (Andreotti, 2019). They are concurrently situated within institutional frameworks influenced by persistent inequalities and bureaucratic standards, which may limit or complicate their potential for emancipation. This duality illustrates a fundamental postcolonial condition: the simultaneous presence of resistance and the perpetuation of power (Mbembe, 2019).

Postcolonial theorists contend that modern governance reforms often utilize neutral or technocratic language, which conceals the political aspects of inequality (Mbembe, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Accountability regimes and discourses of managerial efficiency in education may unintentionally depoliticize teaching by framing educators as policy implementers rather than as democratic participants (Tikly, 2020). This study investigates how

unionised educators resist depoliticisation and assert political consciousness in school leadership processes by emphasizing ideological agency.

Postcolonial theory offers essential analytical tools for examination:

- The negotiation of power by teacher unions within school governance structures.
- The construction of political consciousness as either emancipatory or disruptive.
- The formation of professional identity is influenced by both historical and contemporary conflicts regarding authority.

This framework positions union participation not just as a procedural or administrative matter, but as part of larger conflicts concerning knowledge, representation, and justice in post-apartheid education. This approach directly aligns with the study's objective of analysing how teacher unions construct and negotiate ideological agency within school governance.

4.2. Literature Review: Teacher Unionism, Political Agency and Professional Identity

4.2.1. Transitioning from Industrial Representation to Political Agency

Recent scholarship increasingly critiques the characterization of teacher unions solely as industrial bargaining entities focused on wages and working conditions. Cross-national research indicates that unions function as hybrid political actors, negotiating labour conditions, engaging in curriculum debates, influencing policy formulation, and participating in governance processes (Bascia & Stevenson, 2017; Schneider, 2022). Political influence is determined by organizational structure, ideological orientation, political alliances, and access

to bureaucratic networks. In certain contexts, unions are viewed as obstacles to reform; in others, they play a crucial role in shaping policy and facilitating democratic dialogue.

Research conducted in South Africa illustrates this ambivalence. Strike activity has been linked to instructional disruption, especially in under-resourced schools (Wills, 2020). Additionally, unions have mobilized against reforms viewed as detrimental to equity, teacher dignity, or constitutional protections (Vally, 2021). This dual character complicates simplistic binary portrayals of unions as either developmental partners or systemic obstacles. Unions are not merely peripheral to governance; they are integral to reform processes, balancing cooperation and resistance.

Empirical evidence indicates that union activism is not solely instrumental but is also rooted in ideological foundations. Research demonstrates that teacher unions utilize liberation histories, narratives of redistributive justice, and discourses of social justice to position their actions within the context of wider democratic struggles in education (Hung, 2019; Msila, 2022). This positioning transcends collective bargaining, influencing epistemic and civic domains, wherein unions challenge prevailing narratives of professionalism and accountability. Some scholars characterize teacher unions as venues of “institutionalised resistance,” where engagement in formal governance frameworks coexists with ongoing critique of policy directions (Schneider, 2022).

Nonetheless, despite the increasing volume of research, a significant portion of the literature continues to concentrate on structural aspects, analysing union power primarily at macro-policy or industrial levels. Empirical research on how unionized educators experience, interpret, and construct political agency in everyday school leadership practices is relatively

scarce. The negotiation of authority, professionalism, and ideological positioning at the micro level within school governance structures is insufficiently examined. The current study focuses on the lived experiences of educators involved in union participation within the context of school governance, addressing a significant gap in the literature.

4.2.2. Neoliberal Governance, Depoliticization, and the Regulation of Professional Conduct

Contemporary scholarship extensively analyses the impact of neoliberal governance on teacher professionalism. Across global contexts, education systems have increasingly adopted accountability regimes, performance metrics, audit cultures, and managerial oversight mechanisms that redefine teachers as technical implementers rather than democratic actors (Tsang & Qin, 2020; Pereira & Tay, 2023). The reforms redefine professionalism by emphasizing measurable outputs, efficiency, and compliance, which frequently limits opportunities for critical engagement and political participation. In these governance regimes, political expression can be characterized as inappropriate, disruptive, or misaligned with professional neutrality.

Tsang and Qin (2020) define this process as “ideological disempowerment,” in which educators lack the discursive resources required to critically examine policy directions and propose alternative educational visions. Research on audit culture and performativity indicates that accountability frameworks foster risk-averse professional identities, which inhibit activism and favor managerial conformity (Pereira & Tay, 2023). In this context, educators expressing dissenting viewpoints may be viewed as challenges to institutional stability rather than as participants in democratic discourse.

In South Africa, neoliberal reforms interact with ongoing structural inequalities and changes in governance following apartheid. Research indicates that managerial approaches can depoliticise education by emphasizing efficiency, compliance, and standardisation at the expense of contextual responsiveness and social justice imperatives (Wills, 2020; Schneider, 2022; Tikly, 2020). Empirical findings, however, remain inconclusive. Certain scholars contend that union activism intensifies instability by politicizing professional environments and interrupting instructional continuity (Wills, 2020). Some argue that union mobilization serves as an essential counterbalance to technocratic reforms that diminish teacher input and reinforce inequities (Vally, 2021; Msila, 2022).

Despite the increasing volume of research, empirical investigation into the negotiation of these tensions within individual schools remains limited. Current research predominantly focuses on macro-level policy changes, industrial actions, or structural governance trends, providing limited understanding of how educators perceive and navigate neoliberal pressures in their daily leadership practices. The role of politically conscious teachers in school governance structures, as well as the interpretation of their activism by principals, SMT members, and governing bodies, is insufficiently examined.

This research investigates the construction, legitimization, and problematization of political consciousness within the context of school-level leadership. This approach highlights the experiences of educators and leaders, transcending structural analysis to reveal the micro-political processes involved in negotiating professionalism, authority, and ideological agency.

4.2.3. Teacher Unions as Counter-Hegemonic and Epistemic Agents

Recent research positions teacher unions within wider contexts of knowledge production, authority, and democratic citizenship. Building on critical pedagogy traditions, researchers contend that unions are increasingly challenging not only labor conditions but also the epistemic hierarchies present in curriculum design, assessment frameworks, and reform discourse (Giroux, 2022; Hung, 2019). In this context, teacher unions function as counter-hegemonic entities that contest prevailing notions of legitimate knowledge, professionalism, and the objectives of education. Their interventions address not only industrial issues but also the legitimacy of knowledge, the validation of voices, and the interests that reforms ultimately serve.

Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship supports this argument by illustrating how modern reform initiatives can perpetuate colonial epistemologies via standardized curricula, language hierarchies, and externally imposed accountability frameworks (Heleta, 2024; Mahabeer, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). In South Africa, union activism frequently utilizes narratives of redistributive justice and liberation memory to challenge the marginalization of local histories and lived experiences. By adopting this framing, unions assert their role as protectors of democratic knowledge production, rather than solely as negotiators of employment conditions.

Empirical studies indicate notable internal contradictions in union politics. Unions articulate critiques of neoliberal governance and epistemic injustice, yet they operate within institutional frameworks necessitating pragmatic engagement with state actors (Schneider, 2022). This results in what is termed “institutionalised resistance,” where unions engage in formal governance processes while upholding oppositional rhetoric (Schneider, 2022; Wills, 2020). This positioning creates tensions between

ideological goals and bureaucratic limitations, prompting inquiries into the boundaries and potential of union-based counter-hegemony.

Despite these advancements, a significant portion of the current literature continues to focus on structural and policy dimensions. Empirical exploration of the enactment of counter-hegemonic roles in routine school governance interactions is limited. The micro-political processes by which unions impact decision-making, negotiate authority with principals and school governing bodies, and transform professional identities within schools are insufficiently explored. The routine negotiation of power, wherein ideological commitments intersect with managerial realities, remains inadequately documented.

4.2.4. Political Agency and Professional Identity

An increasing amount of research examines the connection between political activism and professional identity. Scholars contend that professionalism is progressively being redefined to encompass civic responsibility and public intellectual engagement (Giroux, 2018; 2024). Educators adopting activist orientations often face institutional resistance, as policy narratives depict political action as inconsistent with professional neutrality (Hung, 2018; Tsang & Qin, 2020).

Empirical studies indicate that this results in identity tensions. Educators are required to balance their dedication to social justice with the demands of institutional compliance. Unions frequently address this tension by presenting activism as a moral duty rather than a political disturbance (Hung, 2019). Research indicates that union advocacy may foster perceptions of dual authority within schools, thereby

complicating leadership relationships and governance processes (Wills, 2020).

Despite the increasing volume of research, limited studies investigate the dynamics of identity negotiations within particular school governance contexts in South Africa. The ideological aspect of professional identity, especially regarding the legitimisation or delegitimisation of political consciousness in school leadership, is still insufficiently explored. This study enhances the understanding of the co-construction of political agency and professional identity within post-apartheid schooling through the analysis of narrative accounts from principals, SMT members, SGB representatives, and union leaders.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Paradigm and Design

This study employs an interpretivist framework, asserting that social reality is constructed through the lived experiences, meanings, and interactions of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interpretivist approach effectively analyzes the formulation and negotiation of political consciousness by teacher unions in school governance, prioritizing subjective interpretation rather than measurement or prediction (Tracy, 2019).

A qualitative research design was employed to examine participants' experiences and perceptions of teacher unionism within the framework of school leadership (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research employs phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience; however, it does not claim to conduct a thorough phenomenological analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This research utilizes a qualitative exploratory design to conduct a thorough investigation of the meaning-making processes among unionized educators and school leaders (Tracy, 2019).

This study utilizes postcolonial theory as a framework to analyze voice, representation, power, and ideological agency within school governance structures (Andreotti, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Tikly, 2020).

5.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select participants possessing direct experience in teacher union involvement in school governance and professional management (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method enabled the inclusion of relevant and informative cases related to the research issue (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample comprised 12

participants drawn from four primary and secondary educational institutions. The participants included four principals, four members of the school management team (comprising deputy principals and departmental heads), and four union-affiliated teachers. All participants were affiliated with established teacher unions, enabling the study to obtain insights from both leadership and practitioner levels within unionized educational contexts. The diversity in school type, gender, and years of experience offered a range of perspectives on political consciousness and governance practices, thus enriching the data (Patton, 2015).

Table 1: Participants demographics

No	School	School Type	Participant	Code	Gender	Experience
1	A	Primary	Principal	PSCH-A	Male	17
2	A	Primary	SMT	SMT-A	Male	15
3	A	Primary	Unionist	Unionist-A	Female	13
4	B	Secondary	Principal	PSCH-B	Female	12
5	B	Secondary	SMT	SMT-B	Female	9
6	B	Secondary	Unionist	Unionist-B	Male	9
7	C	Primary	Principal	PSCH-C	Male	22
8	C	Primary	SMT	SMT-C	Female	14
9	C	Primary	Unionist	Unionist-C	Female	9
10	D	Secondary	Principal	PSCH-D	Male	18
11	D	Secondary	SMT	SMT-D	Female	6
12	D	Secondary	Unionist	Unionist-D	Female	8

The diversity illustrated in the table ensures that perspectives from management and practice are adequately captured.

5.3 Data Generation

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to reflect on their experiences and allowing the researcher to investigate themes related to political agency, governance, and professional identity (Kallio et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in English. Clarification and translation were offered as necessary to guarantee precise understanding of inquiries. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with participant

consent (Tracy, 2019). The semi-structured format enabled alignment with the research objectives and allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms (Kallio et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

5.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework (2006, 2019).

1. Familiarity with the data
2. Initial coding
3. Generation of themes
4. Analysis of themes
5. Identification and designation of themes.
6. Report preparation

The coding process involved inductive reasoning and was informed by theoretical guidance (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes derived from participants' narratives were analyzed using postcolonial theory, emphasizing the construction of voice, power, and ideological positioning in school governance contexts (Andreotti, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). This analytical approach corresponds with the interpretivist paradigm, prioritizing meaning-making rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2019).

5.5 Study reliability and validity

The study upheld methodological rigor by following the criteria of trustworthiness, encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The credibility of the study was enhanced through prolonged engagement and member checking, allowing participants to validate the interpretations of their narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was enhanced by detailed contextual descriptions of school environments and participant roles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability was achieved through the maintenance of an audit trail that recorded methodological decisions (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was improved through the use of reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, aimed at minimizing researcher bias (Tracy, 2019).

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee at the University of

Johannesburg. The Gauteng Department of Education approved the study's conduct. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2019). Transcripts and reports utilized pseudonyms to protect participant identity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher, adhering to ethical standards for qualitative research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

6. Discussion of findings

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of data interpretation and analysis. This process will be delineated individually rather than integrated into a unified narrative. The distinction is essential for several reasons. Data interpretation refers to the systematic process of coding, organizing, categorizing, and identifying patterns within raw data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Whilst data analysis extends beyond mere description to assign significance and meaning to the analysed data. Data analysis involves juxtaposing the reviewed literature and elucidating the identified themes. Therefore, treating these as distinct facilitates greater methodological rigor, ensuring that the transition from empirical evidence to conceptual understanding remains transparent and easily traceable.

Additionally, it is essential to distinguish interpretation from analysis to avoid the common pitfalls of conflating "what participants say" with "what the researcher concludes." This approach preserves the integrity and completeness of participants' voices while providing critical and theoretically informed insights (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This will enhance the study's trustworthiness by ensuring clarity and transparency in the process of reaching

conclusions. Readers are better positioned to follow the analytical trajectory, assess the credibility of the findings, and appreciate the depth of the discussion. This process requires meticulous data analysis and critical interpretation of its socio-

political implications. The following table outline the themes that emerged from this study which will guide the process of data interpretation.

Table 2: Themes that emerged for this study

• Political consciousness as both a threat to order and a driver of democratic emancipation.
• Teacher unions functioning as a counter-hegemonic force challenging neoliberal, geopolitics and political norms.
• The ideological repositioning of teacher unions as intellectual activists rather than compliant officials
• Tensions between political agency and professional identity

Data interpretation

Theme 1: Political consciousness as both a threat to order and a driver of democratic emancipation.

The findings indicate that teacher unions foster political awareness, which enhances democratic engagement while also disrupting institutional stability. Participants consistently characterized unions as mechanisms for voice, mediation, and inclusion in governance processes. Unions were characterized as “a voice for teachers in school governance and professional management” (SGB-4) and as a “middleman during negotiations” that safeguards teachers from unfair treatment (SMT-4). One participant emphasized that unions represent them in high-level decision-making meetings (SGB-2), while another noted that unions ensure that teachers' voices are considered in policy development (SMT-3).

These accounts frame political consciousness as a means of democratic

empowerment. Union participation facilitates collective bargaining, grievance resolution, and professional development, as indicated by the description of unions offering “training and workshops, mentorship programmes, career advancement” (Principal-1). Union engagement encompasses not only labor issues but also participatory governance and professional development. Participant noted that teacher leaders can identify areas for improvement within their schools and collaborate with colleagues. Political consciousness facilitates collaborative decision-making and enhances school improvement.

This empowerment is not universally acknowledged. Multiple participants raised concerns regarding the potential erosion of discipline and accountability due to union protection. One participant contended that “overprotection and support given to educators... let our educators become spoiled” (SMT-1), while another remarked

that “*job security is misunderstood for looking away when teachers disregard the main purposes of coming to work*” (Principal-1). It was observed that unions serve as an intermediary between educators and leadership. The issue arises when unprofessionalism is defended.

The differing perceptions demonstrate that political consciousness is understood variably based on one's positional location within educational structures. Unions are recognized for fostering democratic engagement; however, they are also viewed as contributing to instability or “*dual leadership at school*” (SMT-2). The metaphor of the “sober teacher” is evident in this context; political awareness enhances voice while undermining managerial control. Political consciousness functions as an emancipatory force while simultaneously being viewed as a threat to institutional order.

Theme 2: Teacher unions functioning as a counter-hegemonic force challenging neoliberal, geopolitics and political norms.

The findings indicate that teacher unions serve as accountability mechanisms in school governance. Participants consistently characterized unions as mechanisms for holding management accountable and mitigating the misuse of authority. Unions are described as mechanisms that promote effective leadership practices while preventing the misuse of power (Unionist-2). Another participant emphasized that unions serve to ensure management refrains from engaging in unfair practices (Unionist- 3).

Unions have been identified as having an impact on policy processes. They influence decision-making through consultations and participation in school governance structures (SMT-3) and shape the school's policy (Principal-3). In addition to school-

level governance, they guarantee teacher involvement in the formulation of policies at both provincial and national levels (SGB-4). This suggests that unions function both reactively and proactively in influencing institutional direction.

Union resistance to managerial overreach simultaneously reflects their counter-hegemonic positioning. One participant noted that “*management makes unreasonable demands and places educators under pressure to perform miracles*” (Union 3), while another remarked that “*teachers are also bullied in schools*” (Union 2). In these contexts, unions promote an environment that is favorable for both teachers and learners (SGB-2). These accounts demonstrate unions opposing unilateral authority and promoting contextual justice. Counter-hegemonic action is, however, accompanied by tension. Several participants reported “*conflicts between union demands and school management decisions*” (SMT-3) and noted instances where unions “*undermine the Leadership and Management System by making unrealistic demands*” (SMT-4). Unions serve to safeguard teachers against managerial overreach while also creating tension within governance frameworks

Theme 3: The ideological repositioning of teacher unions as intellectual activists rather than compliant officials

The findings indicate a notable shift in the role of teacher unions, highlighting their emergence as intellectual and professional entities. Participants did not characterize unions exclusively as bargaining agents. Unions were linked to the development of professional skills and understanding of policy. They offer training and workshops, mentorship programs (Principal-1), ensure teachers are current with contemporary teaching methods (Principal-3), and

organize professional workshops aimed at enhancing learner outcomes (SGB-4).

Unions facilitate adherence to policy. They conducted comprehensive workshops for educators concerning policy and act implementation guidance (SMT-1) and ensured compliance with legal jurisdictions (Principal-1). Another participant noted that unions “*guide or remind the teachers about how to abide by the laws and regulations*” (Union 2). These roles demonstrate that unions implement legislation in a practical manner within educational institutions.

Unions exert influence on reform processes via legal or political action and are responsible for ensuring that educators comply with educational laws and policies. Unions influence standards, ethics, and professional conduct.

This intellectual activism occasionally intersects with managerial areas, leading to perceptions of overreach. Unions are said to “*reduce labour instability*” and “*encourage working spirit*” (Principal-3), yet they face criticism for allegedly protecting misconduct. This duality illustrates the complexity of their ideological repositioning; they have transitioned from compliant implementers to active shapers of professional culture and institutional norms

Theme 4: The ideological repositioning of teacher unions as intellectual activists rather than compliant officials

The data indicate a continuous conflict between union activism and professional identity. Participants often indicated issues related to governance conflict and relational strain. Challenges identified include “*creating dual leadership at school*” (SMT-2) and “*constant argument and bickering*” (SGB-2). A participant observed that “*programs that are initiated*

by management are viewed suspiciously by teachers” (Principal-1), indicating a lack of trust in institutional relationships.

The issue of communication breakdown was emphasized: “*Communication breakdown between employer and employees*” (Principal-2). Furthermore, non-union staff may experience marginalization, as indicated by the statement, “*Non-union staff members may feel suppressed*” (SGB-4). The observed tensions indicate that union participation alters internal power dynamics and identity alignments. Unions were recognized for enhancing professionalism. They establish equitable working conditions (SMT-3), foster peace and harmony (Principal-2), and advance positive labor relations (Union 2). Participants highlighted the necessity of balancing teacher rights with student needs, indicating an awareness of the ethical negotiation between advocacy and instructional responsibility.

Union involvement in school improvement initiatives exemplifies this duality. Some members expressed reluctance regarding participation in improvement programs, stating that they are “*more than reluctant to assist*” (SMT-1). Conversely, others noted that union involvement “*reduces dispute problems,*” “*creates order,*” and enhances pride in work (SMT-2). Strong collaboration enables unions to advocate for quality education and professional development support, while also providing teachers with a voice and a sense of ownership.

Political agency and professional identity are not in opposition; rather, they are negotiated in practice. Union involvement creates tension; however, it simultaneously promotes accountability, ownership, and collective responsibility.

Data analysis

Finding 1: Political consciousness as both a threat to order and a driver of democratic emancipation.

The post-apartheid South African education system remains a politically contested arena shaped by systemic inequality and ideological conflict (Sayed & Motala, 2019). The metaphor “a teacher who is not drunk is a problem” exemplifies the challenges institutional systems encounter when addressing politically conscious educators. The statement highlights the tension between political awareness and bureaucratic compliance in structured and increasingly technocratic educational systems.

The implementation of neoliberal reforms has intensified this tension. Contemporary educational governance prioritizes standardization, accountability for performance, managerial efficiency, and political neutrality (Chikoko & Jorgensen, 2018; Vally, 2021). In these contexts, politically engaged educators are frequently labeled as disruptive or anti-developmental instead of being recognized as democratic participants. Jansen (2020) argues that the dominant reform discourse reduces teachers to mere executors of top-down policies, thereby marginalizing their political and cultural agency.

Depoliticisation, often presented as a neutral technocratic reform, diminishes critical teacher perspectives and undermines the legitimacy of dissent. Tsang and Qin (2020) characterize this phenomenon as “ideological disempowerment,” wherein teachers are redefined as technical operatives rather than as intellectual contributors to democratic education. Pereira and Tay (2023) illustrate that neoliberal professionalism constrains teacher autonomy by prioritizing compliance over ideological engagement.

Freire’s (2018) notion of education as a practice of freedom contrasts with this

depoliticization. Instruction in societies shaped by colonial and apartheid histories is inherently political. In the South African context, political consciousness involves the examination of systemic violence, racial inequality, and epistemic marginalization. The metaphor of the “sober teacher” critiques the normalization of political apathy and the punishment of dissent.

Postcolonial scholars contribute to this analysis. Mbembe (2019), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), and Tikly (2020) argue that managerial reforms, often portrayed as neutral, tend to reinforce colonial logics of dominance by limiting teacher agency and prioritizing efficiency over justice. Educators who are politically aware may be viewed as “problematic” due to their challenge to established power and knowledge hierarchies.

Finding 2: Teacher unions functioning as a counter-hegemonic force challenging neoliberal, geopolitics and political norms.

Recent research indicates that teacher unions have evolved beyond being solely industrial organizations concerned with wages and working conditions (Schneider, 2022; Wills, 2020). In post-apartheid South Africa, organizations increasingly function within complex neoliberal policy frameworks shaped by global accountability mechanisms, managerial governance, and the practice of policy borrowing. Schneider (2022) analyzes the function of unions as hybrid political entities that participate in reform negotiations while simultaneously resisting specific elements of those reforms. Wills (2020) notes that union actions, such as strikes, may disrupt education but often arise from broader concerns related to teacher dignity and constitutional equity.

The neoliberal global education framework exerts pressure through standardized

testing, managerial audits, and transnational reform models (Pereira & Tay, 2023; Schneider, 2022). In South Africa, reforms promoting neutrality frequently utilize global frameworks that prioritize technical efficiency over redistributive justice. Teacher unions challenge these global narratives by recontextualizing policy discussions within local equity claims and the historical contexts of apartheid (Wills, 2020; Schneider, 2022).

Within critical pedagogy frameworks, unions are viewed as counter-hegemonic spaces (Giroux, 2022, 2024). Their contestation encompasses not only economic policy but also epistemic hierarchies, challenging the validity of specific knowledge and the importance of diverse perspectives. Heleta (2024) and Mahabeer (2020) illustrate that decolonial movements expose the mechanisms by which curricular and assessment frameworks sustain colonial knowledge hierarchies. Teacher unions in South Africa link labor struggles to the concepts of epistemic justice, language equity, and anti-racist advocacy (Naidoo, 2018).

This interpretation is supported by postcolonial theory. Teacher unions serve as arenas where colonial power dynamics are both sustained and contested, as articulated by Said (1978) and Spivak (1988). Chikoko (2019) argues that post-apartheid educational institutions continue to reflect unequal power dynamics reminiscent of colonial dominance. In these contexts, unions challenge the marginalization of teacher input and the exclusion of community histories from curriculum and governance.

Empirical studies conducted during and after COVID-19 (Chiradza & Soudien, 2021; Fataar, 2021; Sayed & Singh, 2022) demonstrate the negotiations among state, market, and union actors concerning education during periods of crisis. The negotiations demonstrate possible

pathways for solidarity alongside limitations imposed by technocratic governance. Unions function as counter-hegemonic organizations that analyze the interests addressed by reform initiatives.

Finding 3: The ideological repositioning of teacher unions as intellectual activists rather than compliant officials

The portrayal of unions as obstructive or anti-developmental often conceals fundamental ideological disputes concerning the objectives of education (Vally, 2021). Unions that contest authoritarian leadership or the contextual applicability of policy implementation are frequently described as acting in self-interest. This portrayal obscures their substantial intellectual and political contributions to democratic education.

Teacher unions in South Africa have historically defended labor rights and addressed issues of epistemic inequality, language equity, and institutional racism (Naidoo, 2018). Their dual role positions them as advocates for labor and as intellectual activists committed to decolonial and emancipatory education. Freire (2018) characterizes educators as conscientized individuals capable of analyzing and transforming their environment. In this context, unions function as platforms for collective political literacy and historical awareness. Their provision includes ideological foundations, contextual understanding, and collective empowerment for educators functioning within structurally unequal systems.

Giroux (2018, 2024) reconceptualizes the function of teachers as public intellectuals rather than as bureaucratic agents. Professionalism includes political reflexivity and civic engagement. Teacher unions formalize this expanded professionalism by framing activism as an ethical duty rather than a deviation.

Postcolonial theory clarifies how colonial legacies are incorporated into policy language and governance structures. The South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996) sought to enhance democratic participation through School Governing Bodies (SGBs); nonetheless, structural inequalities persist between township and affluent schools (Naidoo, 2021). Legal reform alone is inadequate to eradicate epistemic domination. Teacher unions participate in administrative matters and ideological discussions related to governance, representation, and voice.

Spivak's (1988) inquiry, "Can the subaltern speak?" is relevant for examining the prevalence of specific voices in union contexts. Unions function as a collective representation for teachers; nonetheless, hierarchies may persist within these organizations, particularly affecting women, novice educators, and minority members (Chikoko, 2018). This dual character highlights unions as both empowering organizations and arenas of internal conflict. Unions are thus redefined as intellectual entities that manage the tensions between bureaucratic inclusion and the quest for emancipation.

Finding 4: The ideological repositioning of teacher unions as intellectual activists rather than compliant officials

A central theme in the literature is the redefinition of teacher professionalism. Critical scholars argue that professionalism encompasses more than simple neutrality and adherence to standards (Giroux, 2018, 2024). It must incorporate civic responsibility and political reflexivity. Conflicts emerge at the intersection of activist perspectives and institutional demands. Media and policy narratives frequently portray strikes and politicisation as breaches of professional duty (Hung, 2018; Tsang & Qin, 2020). Conversely, unions define these actions as ethical responsibilities toward students and communities.

This poses identity challenges for educators, who must reconcile classroom responsibilities with broader concerns of structural justice. Pillay (2019, 2022) analyses the intricate interactions between government and major teacher unions, characterized by collaboration, mistrust, and conflict. Unions participate in policy processes; however, their contributions are often viewed as self-serving, undermining their legitimacy as partners in reform initiatives.

Neoliberal managerialism intensifies these tensions by promoting a model of the "good teacher" that is apolitical, docile, and managerial (Mbembe, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Tikly, 2020). Educators opposing this model may experience marginalization. The ideological marginalization of teachers who engage in organization and advocacy is central to broader conflicts concerning voice and authority.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analyses the construction and negotiation of political consciousness and ideological agency by teacher unions in post-apartheid South Africa within the contexts of school governance and professional management. The findings indicate that teacher unionism functions within a highly contested ideological landscape influenced by neoliberal governance, managerial accountability, and persistent structural inequalities.

The analysis indicates that political consciousness serves a dual role. It is often characterized as disruptive in institutional contexts that emphasize compliance and stability. Conversely, it serves as an essential mechanism for democratic participation, professional solidarity, and opposition to depoliticized reform agendas. This duality highlights the conflict between

managerial authority and collective agency in school governance structures.

The findings suggest a reorientation of teacher unions' ideologies. Unions are evolving from mere labour representatives to active intellectual and political entities, participating in policy interpretation, professional development, and broader discussions about the objectives of public education. This expanded role creates friction, especially when political activism is seen as conflicting with professional neutrality.

This study reframes teacher union participation as a negotiated democratic process, rather than an institutional obstruction, highlighting the contestation of power, voice, and professional identity. It emphasizes that teacher unionism extends beyond strike actions or confrontational politics; instead, it embodies a continuous negotiation regarding the definition of professionalism and the civic role of education in a post-apartheid setting.

Recommendations

The findings suggest the following recommendations for policy and practice:

1. Institutionalized Participatory Governance Platforms

Education departments ought to create formal participatory governance forums at both district and provincial levels, recognizing teacher unions as legitimate contributors to policy rather than merely reactive stakeholders. Structured consultation mechanisms should be incorporated into these forums during policy formulation and review processes to mitigate adversarial dynamics and improve collaborative reform implementation.

2. Explicit Policy Framework Regarding Union Involvement in School Governance

Policymakers must delineate the extent and limitations of union participation in school governance frameworks. Clear guidelines can mitigate perceptions of dual authority and protect democratic participation. This clarity would mitigate governance tensions and enhance accountability mechanisms for all stakeholders.

3. Framework for Professional-Political Alignment in Unions

Teacher unions ought to establish internal frameworks that clarify the alignment of political engagement with professional ethics. This may encompass:

- Codes of conduct pertaining to the defence against professional misconduct.
- Modules focused on ethical activism training.
- Protocols for conflict mediation between school leadership and union representatives.

These measures would strengthen the legitimacy of the union while maintaining political agency. Joint professional development programmes should involve participation from both school leaders and union representatives, concentrating on:

- Understanding of governance principles.
- Management of conflict.
- Interpretation of policy.
- Practices of democratic deliberation.

This would enhance mutual understanding and diminish suspicion between management and union representatives. Collaborative engagement within the community. Teacher unions, school leadership, and civil society organizations ought to establish collaborative networks to enhance public accountability in education. Building a broader coalition can ensure that political advocacy prioritizes learner outcomes, resource equity, and community needs over factional interests.

Future research directions

Future research should investigate comparative cases of teacher unionism across diverse provincial and geopolitical contexts to analyse the functioning of ideological agency within different policy environments. Longitudinal studies may examine the evolution of political consciousness within school leadership structures over time. Furthermore, ethnographic investigation of daily governance interactions may yield a more

profound understanding of the negotiation of political agency in practice, surpassing the insights gained from formal interviews.

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