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Editorial Note:

This latest issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society Education (JCSE) arrives at a moment when the boundaries between the academic, the social, and the urgently practical have never been more porous. A glance at the twenty-one articles in this forthcoming collection reveals a publication that understands its mandate: to serve not merely as a repository of scholarship, but as a sharp, coherent lens through which to examine the pressing complexities of contemporary society, with a firm grounding in education as a transformative force.

What distinguishes this issue is its refusal to settle for disciplinary comfort. The contributions, drawn from institutions across Africa, demonstrate a welcome intellectual restlessness. We see scholars interrogating the intimate, such as Mudau et al.'s exploration of language as a source of family conflict within Vhavenda families alongside those grappling with structural questions, such as Sikwela and Diedericks' critical look at performance management as "a mirror of inertia" in public administration. This range is not a sign of incoherence; it is a testament to the journal's understanding that societal education occurs in classrooms, in homes, in municipal water governance (as Zulu and Nojiyeza's work on Zululand shows), and in the very language we use to communicate.

Several pieces stand out for their conceptual bravery. Maungedzo's reframing of academic literacy through sociocultural theory for rural teacher development tackles a perennial challenge with fresh theoretical rigour. Similarly, Lubombo and Zethi's work on "linguistic justice" and the Disciplinary Literacies framework asks a question that South African higher education can no longer afford to postpone: how do we re-imagine instructional communication not as a barrier, but as an equitable foundation? These are not abstract debates; they are core pedagogical interventions.

The journal also demonstrates a commendable commitment to surfacing marginalised voices and experiences. Nkumane's exploration of intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women scholars at UNISA, and Sibango's ethnographic look at how belonging is negotiated in Anthropology departments, remind us that the university itself is a site of intense social contestation. When Lekoa and Nojiyeza connect off-campus housing to "ecologies of distress" affecting student mental health, they do what good contemporary scholarship must: they trace the material conditions of life directly into the outcomes of education. If there is a through-line to this collection, it is the insistence that no social phenomenon, whether climate governance under the AU (Yemisi and Ani), the antinomies of decolonisation in literature (Moopi), or the gendered nexus of marital status and poverty (Dunga), exists outside the purview of rigorous inquiry. The JCSE is building a platform where scholars can hold those complex phenomena up to the light.

This volume does not offer easy answers. It offers something more valuable: a coherent, sharply focused set of questions, pursued with methodological care and regional relevance. For a journal of contemporary society and education, that is precisely the work that matters.

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A COLLABORATIVE OR DISPUTED SPACE? TEACHER UNIONS AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The function of Teacher Unions (TUs) in the realm of school leadership is frequently characterized by their commitment to collective bargaining and the promotion of improved working conditions for educators. This typically results in a narrow focus on the professionalization of school leadership. The professionalisation of school leadership pertains to the process of improving the knowledge, standards, skills, and practices of school leaders, ensuring they operate effectively as educational professionals. This research investigates the extent to which TUs, and school leadership engage in collaboration or contribute to contestation in the advancement of professionalisation. Rooted in collaboration theory, this research employed a qualitative case study design to explore the dynamics between teacher unions and school leaders concerning the establishment of professional identity and how their perceived relationship impacts the goals of educational excellence. By school leadership structures, we refer to the school governing bodies (SGB) and the school management teams (SMTs). Data were collected from principals (n=4), SMT members (n=4), SGB members (n=4), and union representatives (n=4), resulting in a total of 16 participants. Our findings indicate that although TUs aims to support the professionalisation of schools, their engagement with school leadership structures frequently encounters challenges such as role overlap, power dynamics, and conflicting priorities. Organised collaboration between TUs and school leadership structures presents an opportunity to enhance leadership capacity, promote equity-driven governance, and effectively support school improvement initiatives. Therefore, it is advisable to reconceptualize TUs as collaborative partners in the development of leadership, rather than viewing them as adversaries, to cultivate a more professional and sustainable leadership environment.

Keywords: *leadership professionalisation; collaboration theory; equity governance; equity leadership; role conflict*

Introduction and background to the study

The professionalisation of school leadership continues to be a significant element in modern educational policy and governance (Boje *et al*, 2021). At the core of this discussion lies a significant tension that prompts an inquiry: should school leadership fundamentally prioritize a professional education grounded in pedagogical theories, expertise, and administrative proficiency, or should it also incorporate the interests and advocacy of TUs as an essential aspect of democratic participation? (Clarke & Wildy, 2010). This tension is especially pronounced in public schools, where TUs assert their roles not merely as labour representatives for various teacher groups, but also as significant stakeholders in leadership and governance (Msila, 2022). Consequently, the significant rise in the participation of TUs in school leadership prompts inquiries regarding cooperation, collaboration, and contestation. TUs are recognized for their advocacy of teachers' rights, engaging in negotiations to enhance working conditions and to implement educational policies that reflect their overarching ideological stance (Medadi & Mahdavi, 2025). In contrast, school leadership emphasizes the necessity for prioritizing school effectiveness, exemplary leadership, and accountability. This association of interest primarily blurs the boundaries between collaboration and conflict, thereby necessitating a complex shaping of school governance (Campbell, 2024).

This study investigates whether the interaction between TUs and school

leadership, including SMT and SGB, constitutes a collaborative partnership that enhances professionalization or instead creates a contentious space that undermines leadership autonomy. Through the exploration of the dynamic relationship between TUs and school leaders, this article intends to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how authority, power, and professional identity are negotiated within the governance structure led by school governing bodies in public schools (Weddle, 2022). The role of TUs in education has become increasingly significant as they have evolved considerably over the past few decades. They have transitioned from a traditional focus on labour issues, such as working conditions and fair remuneration, to becoming influential stakeholders in school leadership and policymaking (Mafisa, 2017).

Many education systems, particularly those implemented in public ordinary schools, observe that TUs are actively engaged in the decision-making processes that influence school leadership (Musengamana *et al.*, 2024). This involvement encompasses various aspects, including the appointment of principals, the development of professional training programs for educators, and the allocation of financial resources. Consequently, the ongoing engagement of TUs in school leadership has ignited persistent debates regarding whether their involvement enhances the professionalization of school leadership or detracts from it by fostering a contentious governance atmosphere (Henry *et al.*, 2024). Professionals in the realm of school leadership refer to the

process of establishing school leadership as a specialized field that necessitates specific qualifications, ethical standards, and job competencies (Young, 2020). However, TUs, tasked with advocating for the rights of educators, often oppose the concept of autonomous leadership by exerting their influence over the leadership framework and governance processes.

In many instances, TUs exert influence over the selection process of SMTs particularly regarding the appointment of the school principal. While the involvement of unions in these processes is frequently defended as a means of promoting fairness, representation, and transparency, critics contend that it may result in politically motivated appointments that prioritize union loyalty over leadership competence (Bush, 2022). This perspective challenges the agenda for professionalization, as significant leadership positions may become the focus of political bargaining rather than being filled through merit-based selection. In many instances, TUs are regarded as guardians of educational policy advocacy and collective bargaining, which directly influences the leadership and governance of schools (Cowen, & Strunk, 2014). TUs exist to advocate for policies that correspond with their broader ideological and labour-related interests, such as educator remuneration, workload regulation, and curriculum implementation (Oldham, 2020).

Through these initiatives aimed at transforming educational landscapes for the benefit of both teachers and learners, it becomes evident that school leaders

may find themselves in a challenging position, striving to balance institutional objectives with the demands of unions (Ghimire, 2024). This indicates that principals frequently find themselves navigating the tension between aligning with government policies and adhering to internal interests, which can lead to a governance landscape that is both intricate and, at times, contentious (Gibson & Bailey, 2024). The process of professionalising school leadership bears a strong resemblance to the principles of performance management and accountability. The contemporary education system emphasizes the necessity of collective decision-making informed ongoing professional development for stakeholders, and the implementation of school improvement initiatives, all of which are crucial components for effective leadership (Meyer et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, TUs, in certain cases, opposed performance-based evaluation mechanisms, contending that they exert undue pressure on educators and foster a pervasive culture of managerialism that prioritizes numerical outcomes at the expense of a comprehensive educational experience (Traianou, 2023). This resistance frequently places school leaders in a challenging situation, as they are tasked with maintaining specific standards while navigating potential conflicts with unions that oppose certain accountability measures (Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023). Despite these challenges, it is essential to recognize that TUs are playing a helpful role in promoting collaborative governance models within educational institutions. In contexts where unions and school leadership structures participate in

collective decision-making and engage in mutual dialogues, they undoubtedly play a significant role in fostering inclusive leadership practices, enhancing professional development, and improving working conditions (Morvan & Smith, 2020).

In these instances, unions act as collaborators in the process of professional development, advocating for school leaders to prioritize their own professional growth and well-being alongside that of teachers (Msila, 2022). Ultimately, the determination of whether the relationship between TUs and school leadership is characterized by dispute or collaboration largely depends on the broader and enhanced governance framework within which they function (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). If school leadership is genuinely professionalized, it is essential to delineate the limits of union influence while simultaneously establishing significant and organized avenues for engagement.

Aim of the study

- This study aims to explore the dynamics between teacher unions and school leaders concerning the establishment of professional identity and how their perceived relationship impacts the goals of educational excellence.

Objectives of the study

- To shed light on the ways in which school leaders' professional identities are influenced by their interactions with teacher unions.

- To offer insights into how the relationship between school administrators and the teacher union affects the overall goal of achieving educational excellence.

Research question

- What is the effect of the tensions in the interactions between teacher unions and school leaders on the professional identity of school leadership, particularly regarding its influence on the goals of educational excellence?

Sub-research questions

- What insights can be drawn from the interaction between teacher unions and school leaders regarding their impact on the professional identity of the school?
- What is the perception of the interaction between teacher unions and school leaders regarding the influence they exert on the identity of the school?

Literature review: Teacher unions professionalising school leadership

Collaboration theory in the professionalisation of school leadership

The professionalization of school leadership represents a crucial element of educational reform, with the objective

of enhancing the quality of leadership and management within schools. Collaboration theory offers a foundational framework that underlines the importance of cooperative engagement among stakeholders, fostering a shared vision and collective responsibility in school leadership (Williams, 2015). We believe that collaboration theory plays a significant role in the professionalization of school leadership by enhancing knowledge sharing, fostering collective decision-making, and promoting sustainable leadership practices (Meyer, Richter & Hartung-Beck, 2022). Collaboration theory is grounded in the premise that joint efforts produce more effective and sustainable outcomes compared to individual decision-making (Heath & Isbell, 2021). It posits that an organization operates effectively when stakeholders collaborate towards a shared objective, recognizing each other's expertise and skills, mobilizing resources, and respecting diverse perspectives.

Within the realm of school leadership, collaboration theory emphasizes the importance of an inclusive leadership framework. This theory promotes practices that consider key stakeholders in educational settings, including the school principal, SGBs, SMTs, teachers, and other relevant education stakeholders (Young, 2020). The professionalisation of school leadership necessitates an inclusive approach to decision-making, wherein all stakeholders are actively involved in the formulation of policies, the introduction of pedagogical strategies, and the allocation of resources. Collaboration theory emphasizes participatory

governance, wherein teachers, SMTs, and SGBs collectively engage in the formulation of school policies to ensure transparency and accountability in leadership (Soipimai & Sanrattana, 2023). An essential aspect of the professionalization of school leadership is the ongoing learning and development of leaders, as well as the cultivation of learning communities where school leaders can share best practices and leadership skills.

This process should be enhanced through cooperative networks and mentorship opportunities. Collaboration improves the effectiveness and efficiency of school leadership structures (Cowin & Newcomer, 2022). Schools ought not to function in isolation; rather, they should integrate into a wider educational and socio-economic framework. Consequently, collaboration theory advocates for the establishment of partnerships with various stakeholders to enhance leadership development (Modha, 2021). These established partnerships exist to offer professional development opportunities, secure financial resources, and implement policies designed to enhance leadership effectiveness. Collaboration theory encompasses not only the empowerment of school leaders but also promotes distributed leadership, wherein roles and responsibilities are shared among a broader group of stakeholders. This approach fosters a culture characterized by accountability, mutual respect, and collective problem-solving (Jung, 2021).

However, collaboration theory faces challenges such as resistance to change, hierarchical power structures, and a lack

of trust among stakeholders, all of which can impede full participation (Margerum, 2016). Fostering a culture of collaboration through structured leadership training, stakeholder engagement, and policy reform can address these challenges and create opportunities for sustainable growth and development (de Mello & Dutz, 2012). In conclusion, collaboration theory provides a robust framework for the professionalization of school leadership by fostering opportunities for knowledge sharing, encouraging intersectoral partnerships, and promoting inclusive decision-making. By adopting collaborative strategies, educational institutions can foster a leadership culture that is dynamic, well-equipped, and resilient in addressing the demands of modern educational challenges. Therefore, the professionalization of school leadership, supported by collaboration, not only strengthens school governance but also enhances overall educational outcomes (Campbell, 2024).

Teacher union as partners in school leadership: Advocates or Adversaries

TUs significantly influence the educational landscape by championing the rights and welfare of educators. Nonetheless, their participation in school leadership frequently ignites discussions regarding whether they serve as proponents of educational enhancement or as obstacles to the advancement of school reforms (Medadi, & Mahdavi, 2025). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the dual role of TUs as both collaborators and challengers in the realm of school leadership, while further evaluating their

impact on decision-making, educational policies, and school management. TUs have historically played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of educators, promoting fair labour practices, and ensuring the provision of quality education and professional development (Msila, 2022). Their participation in school leadership encompasses not only collective bargaining for educators but also extends to improved policy negotiation, financial decision-making, and the establishment of school governance structures.

TUs serve as both supportive partners and provocative agents in the realm of school leadership, influenced by the prevailing approach and the specific context of school governance. TUs primarily promote ongoing professional development, ensuring that educators obtain training and resources designed to improve their teaching practices (Huber & Pruitt, 2024). This, in turn, enhances school leadership by fostering well-equipped educators who actively support the learning process. This fosters a stable educational environment in which teachers feel valued and motivated (Lee & Swaner, 2023). Effective TUs engage in progressive collaboration with school leadership, ensuring that governance decisions consider the needs of all stakeholders involved in policy reform, including educators and learners. This collaboration holds the promise of enhancing the implementation of policies while simultaneously improving educational outcomes within schools (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021).

Nonetheless, there are instances where TUs may be perceived as contesting decisions made by school leadership,

particularly those associated with performance management, alterations in policy, and disciplinary measures. Such resistance can lead to conflict that disrupts the functioning of the schools (Msila, 2022). The participation of unions in SGBs and SMTs may occasionally result in power dynamics, wherein union representatives emphasize labour concerns at the expense of educational advancement (Myburgh et al., 2017). The effectiveness of school leadership may be compromised if governance becomes politicized. While unions are tasked with safeguarding the rights of teachers, their opposition to performance evaluations and accountability measures can hinder efforts aimed at improving schools. Consequently, school leaders face challenges in implementing essential reforms due to union resistance to a stringent accountability framework (Traianou, 2023). Nonetheless, TUs hold a crucial position in the realm of school leadership, with their influence alternating between advocacy and opposition. When TUs are effectively engaged, they can enhance professional standards, support governance, and drive educational improvement. However, if overlooked, adversarial tendencies may disrupt the effectiveness of leadership (Browne, 2020). Therefore, an approach that promotes collaboration while upholding governance integrity is essential for ensuring that TUs act as genuine partners in enhancing school leadership and the quality of education.

Impactful role of teacher union on school leadership autonomy and accountability

TUs significantly contribute to the development of educational environments, impacting school leadership regarding accountability and autonomy. The advocacy of TUs aims to protect the rights and professional interests of teachers; however, their participation in decision-making significantly influences the way school leaders implement and uphold accountability frameworks (Sundberg, 2024). TUs frequently participate in dialogues concerning policies that impact educators, occasionally constraining the discretionary authority of school administrators. This ensures fair labour practices; however, it may impose potential constraints on leadership autonomy in areas such as disciplinary measures, staff allocation, and instructional leadership (Msila, 2022). In balancing governance and advocacy, school leaders must carefully navigate the tension between implementing institutional policies and accommodating union demands.

In certain instances, unions may engage in influencing school governance policies to promote democratic leadership, while also potentially constraining the flexibility of decision-making processes (Cowen & Strunk, 2014). Through collective bargaining, unions can negotiate terms that address salary structures, working conditions, and workload distribution. While this enhances job security and boosts teacher morale, it may restrict school leaders' ability to implement policies that necessitate immediate structural changes

or performance-based differentiation (Strunk, 2012). TUs serve as supervisory body, ensuring that school leaders maintain ethical and transparent leadership practices. This oversight role enhances accountability, particularly in financial management, policy implementation, and staff welfare (Karyana & Aryani, 2021). While accountability serves as a crucial component for enhancing school performance, unions occasionally contest stringent performance management systems, contending that these practices unjustly target individual teachers.

This can lead to challenges in implementing accountability measures, particularly when disciplinary actions are viewed as biased. The collaboration between school leaders and TUs enhances accountability and fosters joint decision-making regarding significant educational policies (Msila, 2022). When unions endorse performance-driven policies, they play a significant role in fostering a culture of collective responsibility in initiatives aimed at enhancing school improvement (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2016). Therefore, achieving a balance in school leadership autonomy and accountability necessitates the implementation of transparent strategies. The intervention is significant as it questions the flexibility of leadership and the emphasis on performance-driven reforms (Cassano, 2017). A balanced approach encourages collaboration while safeguarding leadership effectiveness, fostering school improvement, and upholding professional integrity within educational systems.

Mending the gap: strategies for reconciling teacher union influence with leadership professionalisation.

By fostering collaboration, establishing clear goals, ensuring shared governance, promoting joint professional development, and creating a unified vision, schools can benefit from the strengths inherent in both union and leadership structures (Scribner et al., 2007). A balanced approach should be established that respects the autonomy of school leadership while valuing the advocacy of TUs, leading to effective governance and a more professionalized structure. It is essential to comprehend the function of TUs in collective bargaining, as they represent the voices of teachers within governance frameworks, thereby impacting decision-making across different levels (Medadi & Mahdavi, 2025). In their actions to protect the rights of teachers, it is essential to acknowledge the necessity for school leadership to exercise greater independence in decision-making processes and accountability. There needs to be the establishment of regular dialogue in which both leadership and the union openly discuss concerns, issues, and shared objectives (Mafisa, 2017).

This can be accomplished through joint committees that include union representatives and leadership in the decision-making process, particularly in the realms of governance and policy development. It is essential to actively engage TUs in determining the strategic direction of the school, thereby ensuring that their contributions are recognized and valued (Salomon-Fernández, 2022).

When unions perceive their role in leadership processes, they are more inclined to advocate for and support initiatives that promote the professionalization of schools. Establishing clear roles is essential to prevent overlap and confusion concerning decision-making authority (Margolis & Huggins, 2012). This approach can be beneficial in preventing adversarial relationships, as unions can concentrate on advocacy while leadership directs its attention towards administrative and strategic oversight. Reconciling the influence of unions with the professionalisation of leadership can be achieved through collaborative professional development programmes. These initiatives are designed to enhance the skills and knowledge necessary to bridge the divide between union advocacy and effective leadership (Tay et al., 2021).

Workshops should be developed to assist union representatives in understanding the challenges encountered by school leaders, while concurrently providing school leadership with insight into the concerns of teachers (Zengele, 2021). A culture of continuous learning must be established, benefiting both educators and leaders, thereby contributing to the overall advancement of professionalization within school leadership. A crucial aspect of harmonizing union influence with the professionalization of leadership involves the creation of frameworks and mechanisms that facilitate shared governance (Hess, 2017). This strategy encourages collaborative decision-making, with union and school leaders actively participating in ensuring that policies

and decisions reflect the best interests of the school communities, thereby fostering accountability through shared governance. This collaborative approach to school leadership will ensure that both union representatives and school leaders are held accountable for the outcomes of their decisions. Furthermore, fostering transparency, inclusivity, and collective decision-making enhances the credibility and legitimacy of both school leaders and unions (Woods & Roberts, 2018).

A successful reconciliation of union influence in leadership professionalization requires a shared vision for school improvement. This decision should be grounded in the shared objectives of delivering high-quality support to leaders (Henry et al., 2024). Both TUs and school leadership are encouraged to collaborate in identifying the challenges and opportunities for improvement, thereby acknowledging that their joint efforts are essential for achieving success (Mafisa, 2017). By aligning their goals and strategies, unions and school leadership can collaborate effectively to foster a supportive and positive school environment for educators, students, and the broader community (Msila, 2022). This approach enhances the professionalization of school leadership by fostering an atmosphere of collaboration, in contrast to conflict.

Research Methodology

Using a qualitative research approach, a case-study design was applied to explore the perceptions and experiences of teacher unions regarding the professionalization of school leadership

(Henry et al., 2024). By school leadership, we refer to the School Governing Body (SGB) and the School Management Team (SMT). The study sought to explore the nature of the environment in which teacher unions engage with the SMT and the SGB, specifically determining whether it is characterized by collaboration or contention. This study investigates the interactions between teacher unions and school leaders in relation to the formation of professional identity, examining how their perceived relationship influences the objectives of educational excellence and the professionalisation of public ordinary schools (Msila 2014, 2022). Using purposeful sampling method data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants who were considered to have firsthand experience relevant to the research problem under investigation; we employed purposeful sampling to identify participants in Limpopo, South Africa. (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Following the acquisition of the requisite approvals, four educational institutions were identified: specifically, two public primary schools and two public secondary schools. The selection of these schools was grounded in the premise that there exists a functional union wing, SMT, and SGB. The participants were anticipated to occupy roles as principals, union representatives, SMT representatives, and SGB representatives. The insights provided by these members were necessary for comprehending the pathways through which schools can achieve professionalisation. Therefore, the target sample consisted of a total of

16 participants, comprising 4 principals, 4 union members, 4 SMT members, and 4 SGB members. The main approach for gathering data involved conducting semi-structured individual interviews, which were recorded to guarantee precise documentation of the information collected (Bearman, 2019).

Data was transcribed verbatim and subsequently verified for completeness. Tesch's open coding method was employed to discern themes that facilitate data interpretation and analysis. Themes were meticulously refined to align with the research question, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the theme (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). We obtained informed consent from all participants, thereby emphasizing confidentiality and anonymity to protect their identities and reputations (Moser, 2019). To ensure confidentiality, we employed pseudonyms for all schools and participants, and recorded interviews were securely stored with restricted digital access to maintain data protection standards. Participants were made aware that they have the option to withdraw from the study at any time should they feel it necessary (Heaton, 2022). To reinforce the credibility of the study, a variety of verification strategies were employed. We also engaged in member checking to verify the accuracy of transcription and interpretation, thereby enabling participants to clarify or elaborate on their responses (Vella, 2024). The study undertaken a rigorous ethical protocols and robust measures to ensure the reliability, credibility, and validity of its findings (Burnard, 2024). Therefore, the insights provided enhance the ongoing discourse surrounding the

professional role of school leadership within a contested governance framework, thereby offering significant lessons on the evolving role of teacher unions in influencing leadership practices and the professionalisation of schools.

Discussion of findings

Following an inductive approach, this study identified the subsequent four sub-themes and the codes shown below. In this study the relationship between the collaborative theory and participatory governance aims to improve the legitimacy and trust in systems of governance in the professionalisation of of school leadership. It provides opportunities to interested parties to become involved in shaping the goals,

design and practice of governance in the professionalisation of of school leadership. The interested stakeholders include school governing bodies and members of the communities. Thus the relationship between between collaborative theory and power dynamics implies that collaboration as an agent of leadership plays an important role in determining school effectiveness in that a leader should have the ability to influence and persuade the other team members towards the realisation of the school’s objectives. In a school the principal is the leader of both the administrative and the professional personnel. This is the team that should strive to collaborate in all the school programmes for the achievement of the school’s predetermined objectives.

Participants Codes:	
❖ Principal of School A/B/C/D	PSCH-A/B/C/D
❖ School Management Team Member of School A/B/C/D	SMT-A/B/C/D
❖ School Governing Body member of School A/B/C/D	SGB-A/B/C/D
❖ Union Representative of School A/B/C/D	Unionist-A/B/C/D

Main themes for the study
• Two-fold nature of teacher union engagement in school leadership.
• Role function of teacher unions and professional identity of school leadership.
• The influence of teacher unions in decision-making and leadership stability.
• Strategies for balancing union influence and professionalisation of school leadership.

Theme One: Two-fold nature of teacher union engagement in school leadership

TUs have emerged as significant and influential entities within the global education system, transitioning from

traditional labour representatives to active participants in school leadership (Mafisa, 2017; Msila, 2022). The dual

nature of theoretical engagement highlights both collaborative and adversarial positions. On one hand, we have TUs advocating for the professional development of educators, enhancing learner outcomes, and serving as a voice for the improvement of teaching conditions—thereby positioning themselves as equal partners in school leadership (Swaner, 2023; Huber & Pruitt, 2024). Conversely, the resistance of TUs to performance-based evaluation, accountability, or any advocacy reforms that they view as impositions often results in a contentious environment (Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2023; Traianou, 2023). Some participants expressed that the dual role of TUs as facilitators of collaboration and defenders of teachers' rights contributes positively to school reforms. For example, a member of the SMT remarked that *“Teacher unions positively impact decision-making by engaging educators in comprehensive discussions about policy and the implementation of guidance, particularly concerning the workplace code of conduct.”* [SMT-A]. This assertion aligns with the scholarly perspective that conceptualizes TUs as agents of professional development, particularly in their role as facilitators of compliance, especially regarding policy interpretation and ethical conduct (Morvan & Smith, 2020).

In a related context, contributions from an SGB member highlighted that *“Teacher unions promote collaboration in decision-making, ensuring inclusivity for all. They ensure that the decisions made within the union are effectively executed.”* [SGB-A]. This is reflected in our literature, demonstrating that unions serve as facilitators of inclusive

decision-making and democracy at the school level, where all stakeholders are provided the opportunity to have their voices heard on important matters affecting their schools (Medadi & Mahdavi, 2025). However, the participant indicated the strategic role of unions in school governance, particularly highlighting their dual function as negotiators and advocates. The principal of school 2 articulated that *“Teacher unions, school governance, and professional management are important stakeholders in the school. Collaboration in decision-making is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of the school. A prominent figure within the union advocates for peace and harmony, while governance provides support to educators, and management implements necessary measures.”* [PSCH-B]. Supporting this assertion, Bush (2022) notes that while TUs advocate for equity and transparency within educational institutions, their participation and impact on the appointment of school leadership and the enforcement of policies may obscure the distinctions between governance and management, potentially resulting in political tensions.

The SGB member in school B emphasized this assertion by stating, *“Teacher unions serve as the primary line of report.” Their responsibilities include advocating for the interests of educators, engaging in negotiations on their behalf, and representing them in significant decision-making forums”* [SGB-B]. These continuations highlight the dual role that can be both disruptive and protective, largely depending on how the mandates of the union align with the goals of the school. The literature

supports the idea that, as noted by Gibson and Bailey (2024), TUs serve as both enablers and constraints in the pursuit of leadership professionalism. Consequently, the dual functional nature of teacher unions impacts professional standards, collaborative decision-making, and educator welfare. Additionally, they may occasionally challenge leadership autonomy and contribute to governance tensions, particularly when the priorities of the unions diverge from the goals of institutional improvement. Consequently, this cooperative-contested dynamic space highlights a defining aspect of TUs engagement in contemporary school leadership.

Theme Two: Role function of teacher unions and professional identity of school leadership

The core of the professionalisation agenda reveals a nuanced tension between the autonomy of school leadership, which is rooted in pedagogical expertise and administrative authority, and the democratic engagement promoted by trade unions through their labour representatives (Clarke & Widly, 2010). The traditional conception of school leadership emphasizes the importance of professional competence, as well as accountable and ethical governance (Young, 2020). Yet, TUs play a significant and direct role in matters that influence leadership, advocating for improved working conditions and providing policy direction (Cowen & Strunk, 2014), which can impact the distinct emergence of a unique professional identity for school leaders. The data revealed that participants

confidently recognized the supportive and influential roles that teacher unions fulfil in advocating for leadership dynamics. The principal of school A emphasized that *"The primary function of teacher unions is collective bargaining, grievance handling, and professional support, which encompasses professional development and career advancement through mentorship programs and training workshops."* [PSCH-A]. The assertion made by the school principal emphasizes that constructive engagement by unions with the school contributes to the development of the professional identity through mentoring and training initiatives (Msila, 2022; Ghimire, 2024).

The function of the union in promoting compliance and workplace cohesion was also emphasized, as a union member remarked, *"They (TUs) encourage teamwork among educators and guide them in adhering to workplace laws and regulations, ensuring they can better adapt to work environments."* [Unionist-B]. This is evident in the literature, which illustrates how the establishment of ethical and collaborative school cultures facilitated the transformation of the leadership environment and strengthened professional norms (Karyana & Aryani, 2021). The legislative advocacy role of TU was also emphasized by a member of SGB from school D, who remarked, *"Teacher unions influence education legislation at both provincial and national levels by ensuring that teachers are engaged in the policymaking process." Additionally, they facilitate professional workshops aimed at enhancing learner outcomes.'* [SGB-D]. This is consistent with the findings of Cowen and Strunk (2014),

who emphasized that TUs not only represent the interests of their members but also play a crucial role in shaping systematic educational reforms. These reforms, in turn, have a significant impact on leadership changes and contribute to the development of institutional identity. However, there are concerns that such influence undermines the autonomy and meritocratic principles inherent in school leadership. As Bush (2022) notes, union involvement in leadership selection tends to prioritize loyalty over competence, thereby placing a strain on school systems.

This statement was made by a unionist who articulated that *“The teacher union's primary function is to advocate for teachers by negotiating terms and conditions of employment, safeguarding teachers' rights, and influencing school leadership through collective bargaining.”* [Unionist-A]. Oldham (2020) articulated a statement that reinforces this idea, indicating that literature suggests collective bargaining serves as a potent instrument for unions to negotiate leadership influence, albeit with the potential risk of undermining strategic autonomy if not managed properly. In conclusion, the presence of unions significantly influences the professional landscape of school leadership by fostering positive contributions to professional support and inclusivity. However, it also presents challenges, as governance participation can disrupt the independence of strategic leadership. Consequently, while the contribution of TUs to professional identity is evident, it necessitates a balanced approach that honours the independence and accountability of

school leadership, while simultaneously fostering equity and empowering teachers.

Theme Three: The influence of teacher unions in decision-making and leadership stability

TUs hold minimal value in educational governance; however, their contributions are likely to significantly influence the management and operation of schools, particularly within inclusive frameworks, where collective decision-making is anticipated to promote democratic participation (Musengamana et al., 2024). While this involvement fosters inclusiveness and transparency, it simultaneously introduces a negative influence between teacher advocacy and institutional leadership priorities (Henry et al., 2024). The participant reflected this opposition in their involvement with the union. On a positive note, one member of the SMT observed that the involvement of unions enhances teacher advocacy and the effectiveness of institutional leadership. A member of the school A SMT observed that *“Leadership and management practices achieve stability and momentum through the engagement of teacher unions. The insights they provide to educators following a meeting or workshop greatly enhance management's effectiveness.”* [SMT-A]. The dynamics described align with the findings of Rubinstein and McCarthy (2026), who assert that when TUs collaborate in the development of school initiatives and support leadership strategies, they cultivate a coherent and stable environment characterized by a robust leadership structure. Furthermore, TUs are recognized for their contributions to ensuring legal

compliance, fostering mutual trust, and enhancing the legitimacy of governance. The principal of school A articulated that *"Unions play a crucial role in ensuring adherence to legal jurisdictions and legislative frameworks, thereby fostering a harmonious relationship between employer and employee."* [PSCH-A]. This clarified the constructive function of union in mediation and regulation ensures that governance occurs within the confines of legislation, thereby reinforcing stability in schools (Msila, 2022).

Nonetheless, it was evident from the participants' voices that the very structures facilitating collaboration may also serve as arenas for conflict and contested stability. The SMT member of school B articulated that *"Teacher unions serve as a buffer between educators and leadership. Nonetheless, a challenge emerges when unprofessionalism is defended, as certain educators exhibit a lack of discipline, fully aware that the union will provide them with protection"*. [SMT-B]. This assertion was supported by Gibson and Bailey (2024), who discovered that in school environments characterized by the dominance of teacher unions, the authority of principals is frequently undermined, resulting in instability and compromised disciplinary processes. Another member of the SMT expressed comparable views regarding the motivational and developmental role, stating that *"Positive effects include helping to create a motivated workforce, encouraging high teaching and leadership standards, and providing platforms for teachers to engage in decision-making with policymakers."*

[SMT-C]. Such insights indicate that TUs can act as catalysts for shared leadership and professional development, particularly when focused on collective school improvement rather than individual interests (Henry et al., 2024).

While this is indeed a consideration, concerns were expressed regarding situations where involvement may become adversarial. As another member of the SMT pointed out, *"Unions can also negatively impact leadership stability when they undermine the authority of school management by making unrealistic demands."* [SMT-D]. This insight aligns with the findings of Myburgh et al. (2017), who expressed concerns that politicised union involvement can destabilise leadership, compromise trust, and hinder strategic decision-making. This underscores that TUs function at the confluence of stability and disruption within the realm of school governance. Consequently, they can assume the role of partners in accountability and reform, significantly influenced by the stance taken and the degree of responsiveness to the structures of school management.

Theme Four: Strategies for balancing union influence and professionalisation of school leadership

It is necessary to develop effective strategies that ensure union engagement enhances rather than hinders the professionalization of school governance. Collaboration theory presents a robust framework that emphasizes the significance of a shared vision, participatory structure, and

reciprocal learning in the establishment of a sustainable partnership (Williams, 2015; Heath and Isbell, 2021). Rather than perceiving TUs as adversaries, emerging perspectives advocate for their involvement in shaping professional and governance priorities (Scribner et al., 2007; Soipimai & Sanrattana, 2023). Participants expressed this viewpoint, providing context-specific and practical strategies for aligning TU influence with school leadership. One principal proposed the implementation of targeted interventions aimed at bridging the gaps between general education and professional practices. The principal of school A stated that *"Annual symposiums, mentorship programs, and training workshops (planned outside of school hours can effectively bridge the gaps between experienced and novice teachers."* [PSCH-A]. This was evident in the works of Jung (2021) and Modha (2021), both of whom underscored the necessity for capacity-building partnerships and the establishment of models that concurrently foster professional identity and enhance collaboration in union leadership. Equally significant is the necessity to foster open, trust-based dialogue among unions, policymakers, and school leaders.

A member of the union from school A remarked that *"Teacher unions, school leaders, and policymakers must establish shared goals, foster open communication, and build trust to engage in effective decision-making."* [Unionist-1]. This collaborative approach to goal setting not only strengthens trust in the institution but also fosters an environment conducive to distributed leadership and accountability

(Campbell, 2024). The principals emphasized the strategic planning mechanism that respects the sequence of school operations while simultaneously facilitating union participation. The principal of school C articulated that *"Prioritizing collaboration is essential for fostering teamwork among teachers. Engaging in strategic planning meetings between school administrators and unions during holiday periods has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning"*. [PSCH-C]. This assertion aligns with the vision of leadership presented by de Mello and Dutz (2012), which emphasizes strength and innovation, grounded in authentic collaboration and shared responsibility. Furthermore, participants advocated for an inclusive and comprehensive approach that integrates community voices while balancing the rights of educators with the interests of learners.

In this regard, the SMT-C articulated that, *"Encouraging community involvement and balancing teacher rights with student needs can create a more inclusive approach to school improvement."* [SMT-C] This statement indicates that there is a necessity to reframe the influence of unions, extending beyond mere negotiation to encompass a broader stakeholder ecosystem that collaborates towards achieving educational equity and reform. One member of the SGB remarked that *"Unions should be allocated additional resources to facilitate professional workshops and enhance collaboration among educators from various schools."* [SGB-D]. Therefore, fostering that repurposing for professional development can aid in redefining TUs as catalysts for

innovation and pedagogical enhancement, rather than simply as gatekeepers of labour rights. In summary, the data demonstrates a consensus on the necessity for trust-based, structured, and adequately resourced collaboration. Therefore, strategies that prioritize mentorship, collaborative policy development, scheduled engagement platforms, and broader community alignment can effectively balance union advocacy with leadership autonomy. Through these initiatives, TUs can be redefined as significant collaborators in the professionalization of school leadership, ensuring that leadership strategies are accountable, ethical, and strategically focused.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research highlights the complicated and frequently debated dynamics between teacher unions and the professionalization of school leadership. The findings presented highlighted the dual aspects of teacher union engagement, oscillating between the advocacy for educators' rights and active participation in school leadership frameworks. Teacher unions have been observed to play a significant role in shaping decision-making and leadership stability. Their influence can, at times, challenge the professional autonomy of school leadership, often resulting in tensions within governance. The study further examines the significant role of teacher union in shaping the professionalism of school leaders, thereby highlighting the necessity of establishing clear distinctions between union advocacy and professional management. The study also emphasizes

the significance of strategies for balancing union influence and the professionalization of school leadership, thereby ensuring that the collaboration of these key stakeholders promotes school improvement rather than conflicts in governance.

To address these complexities, we recommend clarifying roles and responsibilities by explicitly defining education policies concerning the scope of teacher unions in relation to school leadership. This approach aims to prevent conflicts that may arise due to overlapping roles. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the distinction between professional management and teacher union advocacy to uphold leadership stability. We propose that schools establish formalized engagement structures that facilitate constructive collaboration between school leaders and unions. It is essential that these initiatives delineate explicit protocols for union involvement in the decision-making process, all the while maintaining the integrity of professional autonomy. Furthermore, there should be ongoing professional development focused on effectively managing union engagement. Consequently, training ought to emphasize the development of leadership resilience, the implementation of governance strategies to maintain school stability, and effective conflict resolution, all while considering the diverse interests of various stakeholders. The education sector should undertake a thorough review and refinement of policies to recognize teacher unions as collaborative stakeholders rather than adversarial entities in the realm of school leadership.

It is vital to establish policies that encourage the involvement of unions in advisory capacities within governance, while simultaneously safeguarding the integrity of decision-making processes within professional leadership frameworks. It is also recommended that schools implement structured mechanisms to evaluate the significant role and influence that teacher union involvement has on leadership and school improvement. The evaluations should focus on policy adjustments and exemplary practices aimed at

harmonizing professional leadership within union representation. By implementing these recommendations, schools will be able to effectively navigate the contested space between teacher unions and professional school leadership, thereby fostering a governance model that is both professional and collaborative. Therefore, we contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership by advocating for a policy framework that fosters well-governed, equitable, and professionally autonomous school environments.

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