

Incapacitated But Bricolising: The Ambivalence Of The Teaching Profession In Times Of Crisis In Zimbabwe

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><i>Article History</i></p> <p>Received: May 23, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: October 27, 2021</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords : Incapacitation, Teacher unions, Bricolage, Participatory action research, Justice and care</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5606086</p>	<p><i>This research paper investigated the survival strategies of some teachers in Zimbabwe in the context of incapacitation. For many years, teachers in Zimbabwe have lamented their low salaries and poor working conditions and, recently, the lack of personal protective clothing. They have declared themselves incapacitated and unable to render teaching and learning services. The paper is couched in bricolage, a theory that recommends that people use the resources that are available to address prevailing trajectories. The study used a qualitative research design to gather data from 12 participants: 10 teachers and two headmasters. Focus group discussions were centred on two questions: What survival strategies do teachers employ? and, How can teachers' professionalism be restored in the context of a crisis? The study found that teachers have bricolised the teaching profession in a quest for survival – some even engage in illegal mining activities for survival, others buy and sell goods –consequently, they pay little attention to teaching and learning. The argument of the paper is that education in Zimbabwe is on the verge of collapse. Government's approach to the crisis, which involves denying that it exists, incapacitates learners further and will produce an illiterate society. Dialogue based on justice and care is required to reinvent quality education in Zimbabwe.</i></p>

Introduction

The teaching profession in Zimbabwe has, over the past years, experienced many challenges, among which low teacher salaries, strikes by teachers, and poor performance by learners in summative examinations. Teachers have made it clear that their salaries cannot sustain them and make it impossible to execute their duties. However, in turn, the government believes it has done everything possible to address teachers' concerns, yet teachers remain unsatisfied. Whatever narrative one may want to pursue, teachers remain unmotivated, and consequently buttress the observation by Richardson (2014, p. 8) that "low motivation results in absenteeism, underutilization of class time, professional misconduct, reliance on traditional teaching practices, poor preparation, and secondary income-generating activities that distract from teaching duties". In the same vein, Iliya and Ifeom (2015, p. 12) warn "against the de-motivating consequences of continually sanctioning poorly performing teachers or schools without simultaneously providing support for those teachers or schools to improve their performance". The consequences of sanctioning teachers are far reaching, affect other sectors of the economy, and undermine the rights of students. Thus, this paper positions itself in alignment with Nkoane (2010, pp. 113–114), who is "opposed to any classroom practices that undermine the rights of learners" as enshrined in the bill of rights. Cognisant of the foregoing, the paper does not seek to worsen the plight or crisis faced by teachers further, but is positioned along the thinking and desire of Mahlomaholo (2009), who asks how conditions that represent distorted learning environments can be subverted, and a positive academic identity cultivated in the contest of known crisis. I am also aware of and in agreement with De Clercq (2013), who observes that "some teachers have deeply ingrained negativity and scepticism towards their jobs and developmental programmes aimed at improving the lives of learners". This work is not premised on teachers with these types of attitudes, but on those whose commitment has been compromised by the economic and political crisis facing Zimbabwe's second republic. The paper seeks to achieve the following: To propose bricolising strategies that can be applied by Zimbabwean teachers, to highlight the implications of teachers bricolising in order to address the crisis confronting them, and to determine how teacher professionalism can be reinvented in Zimbabwe. To this end, the chapter starts by providing a theoretical framework and explaining the methodology used by the study, then reporting on survival strategies applied by the Zimbabwean teachers, explaining the implications for education and, finally, reinventing or proposing ways to enact teacher professionalism in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framing: Bricolage

The study is located in bricolage theory. Bricolage has many facets and can be applied in different ways, depending on context. Bricolage “is a concept that originated from anthropology, [and] designates a type of relationship with time and space and an approach to knowledge and reasoning” (Lévi-Strauss, 1967, p. 2). In this paper, I narrow down the meaning of bricolage, to processes by which people acquire objects from across social divisions to create new cultural identities (Phillimore, Humphris, Klass, & Knecht, 2016). It is a theory that requires people to use all available knowledge – of immediate interest or outdated, within or outside of themselves – to solve a given problem (Louridas, 1999). In doing so, people informed with bricolage “make do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). In explaining bricolage further, Rapport and Overing (2014) see it as the “putting together of multiple cultural forms to innovate and create something new or more fit for purpose”. People informed with bricolage consider “different ways of making sense, and pragmatic solutions that are not degraded by their pragmatism” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 326).

I consider this theory to be relevant for couching the lived realities of Zimbabwean teachers, because I believe bricolage facilitates the adaptive design process that is necessary for developing resilience and providing possible solutions to problems that use critical resources or social systems (Vanevenhoven, Winkel, Malewicki, Dougan, & Bronson, 2011, p. 53). The theory helps to explain “underlying structures that govern human meaning-making” (M. Rogers, 2012, p. 2), especially in the context of deprivation, and lack of care by structures and the system that should ensure the sustainability of teaching professionalism. To this end, bricolage, applied to teaching professionals in Zimbabwe, is seen as negative from the angle of the oppressor and those who are devoid of curricular justice. The theory, applied to incapacitated teachers, evokes strategies that can be adopted to construct something out of the little that is available, whether resources or systems, to achieve new goals (Aagard, 2009, p. 84)

Methodology: Participatory Action Research

The study is located within a broader space, that of the transformative paradigm, which seeks to ensure that positive change is cultivated through championing values such as social justice, equity and hope for incapacitated teachers of Zimbabwe. The study applied a qualitative research design and used participatory action research (PAR) as a methodological approach. Given the context, the PAR approach was ideal in several ways. PAR avoids “univocal research representations, and promotes the adoption of techniques from multiple perspectives, voices, and sources to solve composite class challenges” (Y. Rogers, 2012). PAR is research that “investigates the actual practices and not abstract practices and learning about the real, material, concrete, and particular practices of particular people in particular places” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007, p. 277). It reveals the underlying problematic aspects of a community, as a way of unearthing the lived realities of the people faced by a problem. PAR was relevant as a research approach for this study as it involves “community-oriented research and action for social change to promote marginalized communities, where the quest is to unearth the causes of social inequality and consequently the solution to alleviate the identified problems” (Williams & Brydon-Miller 2004, p. 245). Furthermore, PAR “identifies the rights of those concerned by the research, and empowers people to set their own schemas for research and development, thereby giving them tenure over the process” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1674). Lastly, I used PAR because it is “democratic, unbiased, redemptive and life-enhancing” (Khan & Chovanec, 2010, p. 35), while, at the same time, it challenges conditions of injustice (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt, D’Ambruoso, & Shroff, 2014).

To collect data using PAR, I used focus group discussions to generate data from 12 participants who were teachers and headmasters in Zimbabwe. The focus group discussions were centred around two questions: What survival strategies do teachers employ? and, How can teachers’ professionalism be restored in the context of a crisis? Due to challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to use WhatsApp groups to facilitate discussions. WhatsApp is reported to be advantageous in this regard, due to its easy-to-use group chat feature (Gon & Rawekar, 2017, p. 22). The research observed ethical considerations, such as respect for participants, using pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants, and allowing participants to withdraw from participation should they wish to. The data was analysed using the thematic approach proposed by Laws, Harper and Marcus (2003, p. 59); I followed the following seven steps suggested for analysing data:

- Step 1: Read and reread all the collected data
- Step 2: Draw up a preliminary list of themes arising from the data
- Step 3: Reread the data
- Step 4: Link the themes to quotations and notes
- Step 5: Peruse the categories of themes to interpret them
- Step 6: Design a tool to help discern patterns in the data
- Step 7: Interpret the data and derive meaning

To ensure the validity of the study, I did member checking. This process enabled the participants, including the researcher, to validate, verify, and assess the trustworthiness of the qualitative results (Doyle, 2007). Member checking is essential to ensure that data that has been categorised into themes accurately reports the opinions of the participants, and responds to the research questions. The following section addresses the first research question. The themes serve as subheadings.

Results and Discussion

Survival Strategies of Teachers in Zimbabwe

In this section, the study responds to the first research question. The first point I will discuss relates to ways teachers have managed to survive financially in the context of crisis.

Gold-mining Activities

The research indicated that gold mining has become a way for some teachers to sustain their families during the time of crisis. The gold-mining industry is still one of the productive sectors in Zimbabwe, largely because the United States dollar remains legal tender in this industry. So, some teachers engage in either mining or selling gold – usually illegally. While these activities have become means of survival, it exposes teachers to the dangers associated with illegal mining and the absence of proper infrastructure for mining.

In doing so, teachers have become bricoleurs, though unfortunately not to improve teaching and learning. Bricoleurs work with what is available, with what they can find around them to solve the problem at hand (Louridas, 1999). While engaging in bricolage is important for human survival, this case causes an educational conundrum, leading to the critical question: Where does the teacher get time to plan and execute curriculum practices? Planning for and executing curriculum practices are important activities, and relate to the core or fundamental roles of teachers, which have been undermined by the crisis. Participants explained the following in relation to the crisis. Mbuso, a teacher, said

The only best paying job in Zimbabwe is doing mining, so teachers have opted to do mining to survive since salary is not enough for anything

Zolo, a teacher, added that

We are paid peanuts here, it's not enough for anything but you see goldminers enjoying life to the fullest and insulting us as teachers. So we have joined them because being a teacher here a recipe for poverty. Mining is life here

These narratives explain the crisis teachers face, and how teachers address their lived realities in the context of low salaries and poor working conditions. While the idea of bricolage is noble and viable from the angle of suffering teachers, it poses serious health risks, especially by working in unsafe mine shafts. More so, it confirms a dire situation characterised by declining educational standards, and teachers opting to mine for gold instead of teaching. The government's refusal to acknowledge the suffering soul of the teacher has far-reaching implications, and the consequences are likely to be felt for generations to come. Another survival strategy employed by teachers is buying and selling goods, which is discussed next.

Buying and Selling

Basically, almost every teacher is now a vendor in the school corridors. Instead of students being educational clients, they are business associates and/or clients. Education has become secondary, and business transactions take precedence. Teachers who report to school every day do not do so because they love their work, but because the school is the preferred site for bricolising.

How did we reach this point, where the education site no longer serves its primary purpose, which is teaching and learning? To elaborate the findings based on this point, participants reported the following. Munya said,

every teacher is a vendor, as teachers we come to school not for teaching but to sell sweets, biscuits and anything that can make money"

Nano reported

I have been a teacher for 20 years and I have nothing to show for my long service. Now I have been reduced to a mere vendor within my school so that I have something to eat

This feedback reveals the frustration experienced by some teachers. It also shows that, while some teachers may wish to explore alternative ways to address the situation, they may be too old, and the future looks gloomy; becoming a vendor is the only viable option. The presence of teachers at the school is no longer about the

transmission of knowledge. It can be argued that schools in Zimbabwe are dead sites regarding the transfer of knowledge, and only denial sustains the illusion that teaching and learning are taking place.

Operating Pirate Taxis

Another survival strategy mentioned by the participants is that some teachers have resorted to pirating – a term used in Zimbabwe to refer to unregistered transport of goods or people. In these instances, teachers compete with registered transport providers, which exposes teachers to various consequences (which is beyond the scope of this paper). Ntando said,

In my school, some teachers have become transporters. They look for passengers to ferry them from point one to another. This is the only way to survive because salary cannot even buy enough food and fuel to carry one for a week

In turn, Ndlovu reported

I'm making more money through doing mushikashika [illegal tax operation] than being a teacher. I just keep my teaching job in case things become better I can go back fully to teaching. But for now I will do mushikashika more than teaching because I need to survive

These comments confirm that education in Zimbabwe is positioned for a catastrophe, and requires immediate intervention to return teachers into the classroom to execute their mandate of teaching and learning.

Offering Private Tutoring

In times of crisis, moonlighting becomes the order of the day. In this case, some teachers prefer not to use classrooms for teaching and learning, instead, they do it in their houses or a rented space, where they offer services that the government believes it has already paid teachers to do and should be done in the classroom. In a focus group discussion, participants reported the following. Mnkandla said,

parents do approach us to privately tutor their children and this is how we have made it possible, however, we do it in fear because the government threatens us for conducting extra lessons

Ntando reported

I like the private lessons because there is hard cash, I mean USD, parents are willing to pay us the money, so I rather concentrate on students whose parents pay me USD. But honestly, I am demotivated by this but at-least there are private lessons"

In this regard, we agree with Kincheloe (2005, p. 5) that "bricolage accepts that human experience is marked by uncertainties and that order is not always easily established". The teaching profession faces uncertainty, and by offering private tutoring instead of classroom teaching, teachers exacerbate the poor–rich divide. If teachers fail to teach at school, it means parents must pay twice for the same services – they must pay school fees, and for private tutoring. However, central to this point is that learners whose parents have good financial standing can access teaching services, while children of poor parents are marginalised and deprived of the right to education. This is contrary to efforts related to championing curricular justice for all people, regardless of financial status, colour, race, geographical location, or any other variable that distinguishes people. This activity exacerbates the plight of disadvantaged learners, especially those in the rural context, who have limited resources to pay teachers in foreign exchange. In short, the participants reported that conducting private lessons has become one of the ways teachers compensate for their low salaries.

Stealing School Resources

During the discussion, participants indicated that some teachers have resorted to stealing school resources, especially at boarding schools. This finding reveals the moral decay that characterises a nation in crisis, and serves to dehumanise teachers further, who are driven to theft in order to survive. This crisis cannot be ignored by people oriented to social justice, and a government that is concerned about the welfare of its citizens, and which values education. During the discussion, Munya reported the following:

Some teachers are surviving through stealing from schools' gardens and projects taking place in schools. But what can they do because the employer is not giving them anything meaningful in terms of salary?

Njongo reported

stealing is well coordinated and thus how most teachers have been surviving through staling especially in boarding schools. Yaaa, we have been reduced to thieves in disguise of being teachers and we have been forced by our employer”.

The data indicates that their employer has reduced teachers to thieves due to a failure to pay them a living wage. The foregoing paints a gloomy picture of the teaching profession and calls for urgent measures to be adopted, before the situation is beyond control, which could affect students for many years to come.

This section reveals a teaching profession in crisis in Zimbabwe. It presents trajectories caused by neglect of the education system, which will have a long-term impact on the country. In the following section, we discuss the implications of neglecting the education system, and consider what could be done to address these issues.

Implications for Teaching and Learning in Zimbabwe: What Can We Do?

The survival strategies employed by teachers in Zimbabwe have bearing on and implications for teaching and learning. Thus, this section focuses on the implications of these survival strategies of educators and suggests various ways in which teaching and learning in Zimbabwe can be restored.

Poor Academic Performance of Students

Due the situation exposed by the participants, it is likely that students will perform poorly – especially those whose parents cannot afford private schools or private lessons. This means the future of students is compromised, and teachers are incapacitated in relation to doing positive interventions to address poor performance. This poor performance will affect other sectors of the country’s economy. Associated with poor performance are issues such as high absenteeism, a high teenage pregnancy rate, and other social ills involving students, which could be managed if schools are functional.

The consequences go beyond poor academic performance, and ultimately affects other sectors of life. In this regard, we agree with Hanushek and Woessmann (2020, p. 5), who argue that “nobody can predict perfectly how school closures will affect the future development of the affected children, but past research has investigated how school attendance and learning outcomes affect labour-market chances and economic development”. These consequences mean that challenges in the education system should be taken seriously, and resolved amicably, for the benefit of all citizens and beyond.

Failure to Recognise Student Output

A nation is as good as its educational system. Considering the survival strategies adopted by teachers in Zimbabwe, and which leads to teachers neglecting teaching and learning, it is clear that Zimbabwe’s education is on ambivalent terrain. Not too long ago, Zimbabwe’s educational system was arguable perceived to be one of the best in Africa; however, the current situation paints a gloomy picture. Questionable education standards affect education stakeholder confidence in qualifications obtained in Zimbabwe.

This paper is an attempt to sensitise teachers and government about the grave reputational damage caused by the stalemate in discussions to improve education. It is a reminder that the effects of this stalemate will be experienced by the whole country, and that remedies should be pursued to the fullest to reinvent confidence to the Zimbabwean education system. The future of both poor and rich citizens is compromised by the dire state of teacher professionalism and government failure to address the concerns of teachers.

Reconfiguring Teacher Professionalism in Zimbabwe

The most important questions that haunt the education sector in Zimbabwe are how and when will teachers return to the classroom. These questions do not refer to the mere presence of teachers in the classroom, but refer to their commitment, and a mental reorientation of teachers as respected professionals who are paid a decent, living wage. Perhaps the question will become the baseline thinking for scholars who problematise education in Zimbabwe.

In this section, I also seek to suggest ways in which teacher professionalism can be reinvented and can reignite education that addresses the lived realities of people in Zimbabwe. Thus, the following section discussed, as the first proposed solution, recognition of teachers as professionals

Recognising Teachers as Professionals

My premise in the discussion of this point is that, when teachers raise issues of incapacitation, their concerns are intertwined with political activism – naturally, the agenda of incapacitation can be hijacked by political parties – which seeks to undermine the government. It is, therefore, critical that teacher professionalism is divorced from political activism; teachers' concerns should not be seen as protest action, but as a quest to earn a living wage, which has the impetus to restore teacher professionalism in Zimbabwe. To this end, I agree with Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), that having strategies in place to improve working conditions is essential if a lack of professionalism in teacher education is to be addressed.

Paying Teachers a Living Wage

I begin this point by agreeing with Katete and Nyangarika (2020) that teachers do not need to earn billions, but that all teachers need fair salaries, paid on time. Before October 2018, teacher unions in Zimbabwe called for salaries of USD 520 (*Economist*, 2021; Kulkarni, 2020). All the challenges discussed above suggest that teachers are poorly paid, which leads to teachers resorting to various types of bricolage in order to survive. Consequently, any measures to restore teacher professionalism in Zimbabwe should begin by conducting meaningful conversations about this pathology, including the low salaries of teachers. Without conversations that reference the reality faced by teachers, teacher professionalism is likely to degenerate further, and a pathetic situation will arise, which will consume the little confidence that people have in Zimbabwe's education system. My argument is based on my belief that paying adequate salaries does not always translate into better education; however, it is more likely that teachers who are paid poorly will compromise the teaching field. This belief is supported by several studies (Springer et al., 2010; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1999; Katz, Apfelbaum, Frank, & Miles, 2018) that concur that paying teachers a living wage has an impact on the success of any educational programme, of any country. Thus, unless Zimbabwe pays teachers a living wage, the country is unlikely to achieve quality education; instead, the issue will exacerbate the catastrophe in education, and ultimately affect other sectors of the economy too.

Prioritising Education in the National Budget

In addition to improving salaries, it is important that the government prioritises education in the national budget – doing so will address the scarcity of resources experienced by schools, and address the underpayment of teachers. Critical questions have to be asked before this can become a reality, such as, What role can education play in achieving national aspirations? What effect would prioritising education have on social transformation? and What is the role of Zimbabwe's education in relation to the broader global space? Should the responses to these questions converge at a space that appreciates the role of education in sustainable development of the people of Zimbabwe, education should be prioritised in the national budget. This means that finding answers to questions relating to education and its role should not be mere rhetorical lip service, but should be premised on accountable actions, which should include reflection in the national budget. I submit that any "distribution of an education service, nature of the service itself [the need to centre a narrative of sustainable development failure, which is clearly the case in Zimbabwe] has consequences for society through time" (Connell, 2012, p. 681).

Justice and Care-based Negotiations

Finally, I see negotiations based on social justice and care as central to addressing the educational crisis in Zimbabwe. Teacher unions, such as Zimbabwe Teachers' Union and Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe, accuse the employer of dishonesty in negotiations and failing to understand the realities faced by teachers in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Teachers' Association, 2020). In contrast, the government believes teachers do not appreciate and are ungrateful for government efforts to address their incapacitation. In fact, Education minister Cain Mathema told a press briefing after a cabinet meeting that,

Some teachers might want to hold the Government to ransom by not reporting for duty. We have at least 10,000 teachers who are unemployed and if the crunch comes, we will be left with no option but to quickly employ some of those teachers (Kulkarni, 2020).

In response to the minister, the Zimbabwe National Teachers' Union president Manuel Nyawo said that,

We have decided to escalate our incapacitation fight. There's no way we are going to rescind that decision until the employer addresses our grievances. We don't care what they will do. If they want to kill us, they can kill, but we will continue to press on with our demands and our adopted decision of no pay, no work (Muponde, 2021).

The foregoing conversation indicates that there are two parties who are pulling in different directions, yet both claim to address the problems in Zimbabwe's education sector. I am of the view that the two parties could both

contribute positively to the teaching profession. Their conversation should be premised on justice and care, for the sake of the students, and on the overall benefits of education that society amasses over time.

Value of the Paper

The paper adds value to the education field. It exposes the realities faced by Zimbabwe's teachers in a time of crisis. It exposes denialism of the education crisis in Zimbabwe by the political elite and privileged people. The paper also poses critical questions, such as How did this problem come to be? and What should be done to restore teacher professionalism in the Zimbabwean context? The paper also presents the opportunity for teachers and the government to rectify the crisis and reinvent a better education system for all. It stimulates scholars to tease out new thinking and philosophies for dealing with the teaching profession in times of crisis. Finally, it calls for engagement between the government and teachers, based on honesty regarding and understanding of the realities of the suffering soul of teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper, I reported on the survival skills employed by teachers in Zimbabwe. I explored the narratives of research participants to explain the dire situation affecting the teaching profession. I highlighted the implications of such survival activities for the teaching profession, and provided suggestions for ways the teaching profession in Zimbabwe can be reinvented and, once again, considered to offer the best education in Africa, and beyond. The paper ends by calling for negotiation between teachers and the government, based on justice and care, instead of arrogance and detachment from the reality faced by teachers in Zimbabwe.

I conclude that addressing the needs of teachers should be prioritised. All stakeholders who value sustainable development should propose strategies to bridge the gap of understanding between teachers and the government, which could lead to prioritising students' right to education.

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