

Zimbabwean Teachers' Experiences of Xenophobia in Limpopo Schools

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Abstract

Due to the shortage of teachers in schools, many foreign teachers are employed in South African schools. In rural areas, foreign teachers offer services to communities that need teachers desperately. In the Limpopo province, which is predominantly rural, a large number of foreign teachers are employed in both public and private schools. Many of these teachers come from different neighbouring countries; however, the focus of this study is on teachers from Zimbabwe. These teachers experience many challenges teaching in South Africa. Xenophobia is experienced in many forms. The study was done using qualitative data collection methods. Data was collected from Zimbabwean teachers working within the Capricorn District of Limpopo province. The data collection tool employed was the interview. Teachers were asked to reflect on the incidents of xenophobia that involved them personally, took place within their work or home environment. Findings from the interviews revealed that Zimbabwean teachers experience xenophobia on a daily basis; xenophobic attacks on teachers escalate when there are incidents of xenophobia in the school community or the country; teachers experience xenophobia when local teachers' jobs come under threat (temporary posts, substitutes). Xenophobic attacks range from: verbal abuse, indirect insulting, to the chasing of foreign teachers from villages. The recommendations made by this study include: Zimbabwean teachers should have equal status as local teachers, xenophobic attacks on Zimbabwean teachers must be documented and Zimbabwean teachers in scarce skills areas who work in rural schools should be permanently employed.

Keywords: xenophobia, foreign, teachers, schools, rural

Introduction

In South Africa, issues relating to education, access to services, disparate economic status, autonomy and problems arising from migration are among the manifestations of racism and xenophobia (Chakma & Jensen 2001:90). In particular, this article focuses on the issues relating to education. In the context of basic education, teacher shortage is a common problem experienced in South African schools, especially in rural areas. In scarce skills areas or subjects like Maths and Physical Science, the extent of the shortage is even more greatly felt largely due to the shortage of teachers but also because South African teachers prefer to teach in urban rather than rural areas. This gap in the supply of teachers to rural schools in the scarce skills areas has been exploited by foreign teachers. For many years, Indian nationals highly qualified in Maths and the sciences have been employed in these teaching positions (McConnell 2009:38). More recently, with the continued economic and political turmoil in Zimbabwe, millions of Zimbabweans have fled the country (McConnell 2009:38) and have temporarily settled in South Africa. They brought a wealth of expertise into South Africa; many of these Zimbabweans are qualified teachers who are proficient in the English language. This is an area of expertise sorely needed in South African rural schools where English is used as a medium of instruction and most learners are English second language learners and speakers. Given this scenario, it would be expected that these teachers would be welcomed, however, Landau *et al.* (2005:4) reports that

South Africans' negative attitudes towards non-nationals are largely oriented towards other Africans, although there are increasing reports of discrimination towards new arrivals from the Indian sub-continent.

This led to the central question that this article addresses: What are Zimbabwean teachers' experiences of xenophobia in Limpopo schools? It is crucial to examine this phenomenon in the context of the wider society where xenophobic violence is a constant threat. Since the violent and widespread xenophobic violence of 2008, there have been constant flare-ups of xenophobia across South Africa. As the result of this, foreign nationals live in constant fear of attacks by local people. In order to further understand the

concept, xenophobia is discussed by examining definitions, forms of xenophobia as experienced by the international community and a historical review of xenophobia as experienced in South Africa.

Defining Xenophobia

The concept of xenophobia is believed to have originated from two Greek words: *xenos* (meaning foreigner or stranger) and *phobos* (meaning fear) (Soyombo 2008:86). However, fear of a stranger or foreigner is a simple way of defining xenophobia. In reality, the concept of xenophobia may slightly differ in different contexts. Xenophobia may also be targeted at people or groups of people who are not strangers but are immigrants living in a community for a long time but are not regarded as *sons of the soil* (Soyombo 2008). Xenophobia has also been seen to entail *contempt* or *loathing* of strangers (Van der Veer *et al.* 2011). Whilst fear-like emotions imply a feeling of vulnerability, contempt and dislike imply some kind of dominance (Van der Veer *et al.* 2011). Other terms used to describe xenophobia are *hatred* and *prejudice* against foreigners (Laher 2009). Fear may not necessarily be associated with people only but it can be explained in the context of the fear of losing one's national identity and purpose (Moïsi 2009). Xenophobia is also defined as attitudinal, affective, and behavioural prejudice toward immigrants and those perceived as foreign (Yakushko 2009). Of all the definitions cited, this perhaps best explains the type of xenophobia experienced by foreign teachers in South African schools. A negative attitude and behavioural prejudice is directed towards foreign teachers by local teachers, students and the local community.

Xenophobia as Experienced Worldwide

Xenophobia is not a new phenomenon. It has been experienced worldwide under various kinds of circumstances (Soyombo 2008). Xenophobia is a multidimensional and multicausal phenomenon (Yakushko 2009). Among Western nations, the United States has one of the highest numbers of total immigrants coming to live within its borders each year (Yakushko 2009). Although often related to periods of political and economic instability (like Zimbabweans in South Africa), xenophobia often also follows terrorist

events like the bombings of the twin towers on 11 September 2001. Jones (2011) terms this toxic xenophobia (or Islamophobia). Jones (2011) also reports that xenophobia towards Muslims in the United States and Europe has increased since 9/11. The example she cites is the ban or laws regulating the wearing of the veil by Muslim women in schools and public places, France was the first country to ban the wearing of veils by Muslim women. The other example that Jones (2011) cites is the growing movement by the Swiss to ban the building of minarets. Jones (2011) has identified three distinct forms of xenophobia: *exclusive* xenophobia (you are fundamentally different and therefore exist outside of our imagined community); *possessive* xenophobia (you are fundamentally different and are trying to take our jobs, money, medical aid etc.); *toxic* xenophobia (you are fundamentally different and are trying to destroy that which we hold most dear, our freedom).

In recent times, studies have focused on how to use education to resolve issues of xenophobia in many different countries. Yakushko (2008) suggested strategies for including a systematic focus on the impact of xenophobia in psychological practice, education, research, and policy advocacy. Jones (2011:44-45) proposed creating a critical curriculum within the United States which can facilitate resistance to xenophobia and bias and cites the following conditions as necessary to resist toxic xenophobia through the curriculum: explicitly confront issues of power and privilege; delineate the creation and mobilization of xenophobia against various groups of people internationally and within the US; counteract ethno genesis through explorations of the complexity and diversity of the group called Muslim Americans; and bring in graphic images of xenophobia for critique and for verbal and graphic response. Osler and Starkey (2002) see education for citizenship as a way of combatting racism and xenophobia. This Education for Democratic Citizenship programme was proposed by the Council of Europe. This education programme emphasises the key role of education in combatting xenophobia as it is seen as a barrier to democracy and social cohesion. Van Zalk *et al.* (2013) conducted a study on the extent to which adolescents and their friends socialize one another's attitudes towards immigrants. One of the findings showed that friends' xenophobia predicted increases in adolescents' xenophobia. Put simply, friends influence one another's xenophobic behaviour. The measurement of xenophobia has been inconsistent (Van der Veer *et al.* 2013) and they set out to describe the

development and cross-cultural validation of a new instrument. By using a sample of US, Dutch and Norwegian students, they found that individual respondents' criteria for the ranking of the scale items strongly depend on the way immigrants are framed. They concluded that we often think we know what we measure, but in fact it is not the case. They suggest using pretesting to attain this goal.

Students travelling to other countries also experience all the challenges associated with studying and adapting to a foreign country. Scheunpflug (1997) examined the conditions under which it may be possible to overcome xenophobia through cross-cultural encounters and suggests that communication (common language), planning and length of partnership should be the focus of cross-cultural studying. Cross boundary travel is also influenced by xenophobia as found in the study by Friebel *et al.* 2013). They investigated how emigration from a developing region is affected by xenophobic violence at destination. They surveyed 1000 Mozambican households before and after the xenophobia attacks of 2008 and found that the intention to migrate after the attack was lower.

Xenophobia in South Africa

Over the years, there have been various cases of xenophobia across the African continent; the most recent and highly notable is the May 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa (Soyombo 2008). In South Africa, xenophobia appears to be a racial issue. Black immigrants from other African countries in particular are at a greater risk of being victimised than white immigrants (Warner & Finchilescu 2003). Despite the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, prejudice and violence continue to mark contemporary South Africa (Harris 2002). The culture of violence can be described as a situation in which social relations and interactions are governed through violent, rather than non-violent means; this culture of violence is a legacy of apartheid (Harris 2002). Despite this legacy of the past, South Africa has a democratic constitution and immigration policies and laws which govern the rights, responsibilities and treatment of foreigners (refugees, immigrants etc.) (Landau *et al.* 2005). The legislation has been able to address certain issues like acknowledging the existence of xenophobia and holding South Africa responsible for the treatment of

immigrants (Adjai & Lazaridis 2013). Yet cases of xenophobia are constantly reported in the media. Neocosmos (2010) argues that a new beginning of the conception of politics is needed. He argues that

a truly political community can only be imagined and constructed on the basis of respect for the other; that social justice cannot be bought at the expense of the oppression of others (foreigners, ethnic groups, women, children or whoever) (Neocosmos 2010:549).

An active politics of peace is necessary (Neocosmos 2008:587). Consequent to the xenophobic violence, many sectors of the community (media, social commentators, researchers, public) rightfully questioned the capacity and willingness of the government's safety and security and criminal justice departments to act decisively and effectively against perpetrators of various forms of violence (Seedat *et al.* 2010:18). However, as previously mentioned in this article, xenophobia cannot be easily explained away or blamed on a government. The African context of politics and migration needed to be examined and the impact of this on all aspects of South African life. Of particular note has been the high numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. According to McConnell (2009:38), in 2007 alone, 45 000 new applications for asylum were made to the South African Department of Home Affairs and more recently, an estimated range of between 500 000 to 3 million Zimbabwean refugees are living in South Africa. These large numbers of people, whose presence had not been expected or planned for, put an enormous strain on resources within South Africa. However, measures were taken to prevent xenophobic violence; for example, the Counter Xenophobia Unit was established. Adjai and Lazaridis (2013) describe the 2008 xenophobic violence as 'Two Steps Backwards' and argue that the ANC government must take a lead in the fight against xenophobia. Despite decisions and statements by political parties on xenophobia, at the level of ordinary people, there is a constant threat of xenophobic violence. Bateman (2011) describes xenophobic experiences of foreign doctors and the lack of support from some local colleagues. Bateman (2011:788) quotes one doctor:

I was ready for the risk of violence and other problems, but not exclusion by colleagues whom we came to help out with the

shortages. It's not an outright xenophobic attitude – more like ignoring you in a group speaking their own language or not informing, involving or supporting you.

Laher's (2009) study of African immigrants in Johannesburg also found that feelings of realistic threat increased prejudice. Sharp (2012) cites the example of day labourers in Cape Town and the constant squabbles that erupt between locals and foreigners. At this level, the basic survival instinct makes people react violently. Similarly, in the school situation, when job and survival are at stake, foreign teachers face the full brunt of the local teachers and communities. There is a gap in the literature concerning xenophobic experiences of teachers in South African schools. Osman's (2009) study of xenophobia as experienced by immigrant learners in inner city schools of Johannesburg contains some accounts of foreign teachers experiences of xenophobia, however, these accounts are of teachers observations and experiences of xenophobia amongst the learners and not as experienced by themselves.

Theoretical Background

Many theories can be used to explain the basis of xenophobia. The two theories most relevant to this study are the psychologically postulated theories of Integrated Threat and Scapegoating. In the Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan 2000), four major components of threats are felt by one group in relation to another. *Realistic* threats endanger the well-being of the group and can include fear of harm or a decline in quality of life; *symbolic* threats are threats that are seen to be threatening the group's culture or place in the wider society by challenging or undermining accepted norms; *intergroup anxiety* occurs when two groups come into contact and relates to fear over the ability to communicate positively and effectively; *negative stereotyping* are ingrained attitudes and responses to members of another group that mediate contact, set expectations and that can hamper the process of mediation (Harrison & Peacock 2010). By examining the responses from the teachers, it was evident that these four concepts were experienced by the sampled teachers in various forms.

People sometimes use prejudice and discrimination to express hos-

tility arising from frustration. This is referred to as scapegoating (Osman 2009). When people become frustrated in their efforts to achieve a desired goal, they tend to respond with aggression. The source of the frustration is unknown or too powerful to confront, so a substitute is found to release the aggression (Osman 2009:17). According to Harris (2001), in Osman (2009:18), the phenomenon of xenophobia in South Africa may be explained using the scapegoating hypothesis. This theory posits that foreigners are responsible for limited resources like jobs and education. The underlying factor (poverty and violence) is directed towards foreigners because of the perception that they commit crimes and take away jobs meant for South Africans. This is used as a convenient scapegoat for those experiencing the reality of hardship that has worsened since the arrival of Zimbabweans into South Africa (Osman 2009:18).

The Study

The study was conducted in the Capricorn district of Limpopo province, South Africa. Limpopo province is the northern-most province which borders Zimbabwe and Botswana. Due to its proximity to Zimbabwe, many foreigners from Zimbabwe cross over the border to work and study in South Africa. The languages spoken in the northern parts of Limpopo province are familiar to Zimbabweans, especially those who live close to the border.

The qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyse data. Interviews were conducted with teachers from the Capricorn district (which is located at the centre of the province). In total, 14 teachers were interviewed. They were purposively selected from the teacher population in this district. Only Zimbabwean teachers were chosen as their experiences form the crux of this inquiry. A semi-structured interview was used. The interview focussed on their experiences as foreign teachers in South Africa. A descriptive account of their experiences are presented and discussed below.

Findings and Discussion

As all the teachers interviewed were from Zimbabwe, this is not unusual in the Limpopo province since there is a large presence of Zimbabwean teachers ever since the political and economic problems began in that

country. Many professionals sought refuge in South Africa and took temporary teaching jobs in rural schools. This explanation is supported by the period that these teachers have been in South Africa. The range of years spent in South Africa is from 3 to 17 years with one teacher at 3 years, two at 4 years, six at 5 years, three at 6 years, one at 8 years and one at 17 years. Most of the teachers (9) arrived in South Africa 5-6 years ago during the economic melt-down in Zimbabwe. Of the teachers in the study, 13 knew of other foreign teachers who were teaching in South African schools. The Zimbabwean teachers prefer to spend time with colleagues from their own country (10) even if they are not in the same area, as opposed to interacting with local teachers. The reason given was that they share similar experiences with teachers from their own country.

Of the 14 teachers in the study, 8 experienced xenophobia in a direct way. Some Zimbabwean teachers were attacked because of the language they speak, they are fluent in English. The local learners show disrespect towards them because a black person is not expected to speak English. They ask questions like: 'why are you speaking English when you are black?' Learners also showed the Zimbabwean teachers disrespect while they were teaching and threatened the teachers when disciplined for bad behaviour. The Zimbabwean teachers also felt unrecognised in meetings when they wished to express an opinion. In addition, conversation in meetings is exclusionary because they use a local language in official communication and meetings which cannot be understood.

When it came to promotion, they were also excluded. One Zimbabwean teacher cites a case of where he acted in the position of principal for two years, however, when the post was finally advertised, the SGB of the school refused to appoint him citing a reason that he is a foreigner and cannot relate effectively with their culture. The working environment sometimes shows traits of xenophobia especially in the allocation of posts at schools; posts occupied by foreign teachers are often switched in order to save the jobs of local teachers. They also felt threatened with job loss because of their Zimbabwean nationality.

Another common problem encountered by the Zimbabwean teachers was the allocation of a heavier workload on the basis that they are foreigners and would not complain. Zimbabwean teachers also had to listen to conversations attacking their country and utterances to indicate that they

should go back and work for Mugabe. Locals also made verbal utterances that they will one day leave South Africa because they are foreigners.

Unlike acts of xenophobia in the general community where extreme forms of violence are used and people face the threat of losing their lives, for teachers the threats are more subtle and relate primarily to their job security. This 'realistic' threat is what the Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan 2000) refers to. One other significant finding was the use of local languages as a means of excluding the foreigner, surprisingly even at meetings. Generally, the greatest threat that foreign teachers face is losing their jobs. This is well known by the local teachers and they use this to exploit the foreign teachers as their experiences suggest. Zimbabwean teachers were also found to carry a greater workload compared to local teachers with 9 teachers reporting that they were given additional work due to their foreigner status.

Nine teachers also reported that they were called names in local languages. Name calling is a common practice in local communities. All the teachers reported that they often found themselves excluded from discussions where the local languages are deliberately used to exclude them from conversations. This type of behaviour suggests that the local teachers either see them as a threat or are not willing to engage in conversation with them. In a school environment, exclusion such as this makes it difficult for the foreign teacher to fit in. Schools are supposed to be places where respect for all kinds of people is taught. Disrespect shown to Zimbabwean teachers both by local teachers and learners do not auger well in a young democracy. The majority (9) of the teachers also had experience of situations where cliques were formed that excluded Zimbabwean teachers. The Zimbabwean teachers (9) also felt non-acceptance by other teachers in the school. Feelings of non-acceptance or rejection affect the emotions of a person and have implications on the psychological well-being of the foreigner.

The Zimbabwean teachers did not only experience xenophobia themselves, they also reported that close friends and acquaintances who are fellow Zimbabweans had similar experiences, some of which are listed below: being forced to leave after working for only 21 days, until that point, nine foreign teachers in almost five years have left the school; attending interviews and not being appointed despite being placed as the highest ranked candidate for the job. The reason for the rejection was also openly

stated - that the school was going to be dominated by foreign educators. One Zimbabwean teacher cited a case where her friend was fired because a local individual with lower qualifications wanted the job. In one case, when a foreign principal wanted to appoint qualified staff to occupy a vacant post, the local teachers strongly objected saying that he was trying to make the school foreigner-dominated. Some cases became very tense; one teacher cited a case in Johannesburg, where a house belonging to a Zimbabwean teacher was burnt because the locals felt that Zimbabweans are taking their jobs.

Two cases were also cited of friends of the Zimbabwean teachers who were working in other provinces in South Africa. The first quote indicates the extent of the challenges faced by Zimbabwean teachers –

my friend in the Eastern Cape was forced to move out of a house he was renting when the community was driving out foreigners; the community did not consider him as a teacher of their children; actually the department saved him by giving him alternative accommodation.

The second case involves paying money in exchange for a job:

My friend was teaching in Pretoria (Braazaville) during the xenophobia attacks in Pretoria. She was given an option to give them money or leave the place. To secure her job she gave them the money they demanded.

The above accounts focus on the treatment of Zimbabwean teachers by the community and the schools. As the examples depict, foreign teachers do not have many options when it comes to demands placed on them by the schools or the community. Very often, they comply with the threats simply because they want to keep their jobs. These quotes also provide evidence of the threat that the locals face in relation to Zimbabwean domination. They are afraid that their schools will become foreigner dominated if they employ more Zimbabwean teachers. What is ironic is that in the scarce skills subjects like maths, there are a limited number of qualified local teachers available. So the Zimbabwean teachers are actually providing great value to local schools, especially in rural areas.

Zimbabwean teachers do not feel safe in South Africa for the following reasons cited by the respondents: the community does not protect them as teachers of their children, easily taking sides against them when there are xenophobic attacks; foreign teachers are always looked down upon despite the services they offer; there is a lack of job security; they do not know the feelings of those around them and therefore find it difficult to feel safe; at any onset of violence, foreigners are targeted.

Zimbabwean teachers were also asked to state some of the observations that they made concerning what they considered xenophobia: sometimes foreign teachers are blackmailed into supporting personal ambitions of school managers on the pretext that if they do not do so, their contracts would not be renewed; some teachers are hostile because they do not accept that they are not performing and are not willing to work harder; some teachers do not accept that foreign teachers are here to help students, they believe they are here to take their jobs. Again, the threat of losing their jobs is a constant concern of foreign teachers. It seems that this is a well-known fact, since the local teachers and school managers exploit this vulnerability in the Zimbabwean teachers.

The interviews concluded with comments and suggestions made by Zimbabwean teachers about xenophobia and what should be done: Zimbabwean teachers are ‘punching balls’ for such matters as running errands for the school principal, whilst local teachers may refuse to do this, Zimbabwean teachers are just instructed to run errands; Zimbabwean teachers invigilate more hours than local teachers and afternoon sessions are a part of their invigilation routine; Zimbabwean teachers are expected to reach higher targets in pass rates in order for their contracts to be renewed; xenophobia limits what one can say or do to develop education; xenophobia should not be practiced because it will impact severely on learner performance in South African schools; xenophobia does not create a safe environment and reduces productivity of foreign teachers due to fear of reprisals if they perform well; xenophobia must not interfere with the school system since this has a negative effect on student performance; Zimbabwean teachers need to be protected for the sake of the students since they teach well and produce good results; Zimbabwean teachers should be treated like all other educators and enjoy the same benefits and privileges; xenophobia is counterproductive and a crime against humanity more especially when an

African attacks another African, it hinders transfer of skills that are lacking in the receiving country.

These insights by Zimbabwean teachers indicate their commitment to education. They provided suggestions for ways in which improvement can be made into the schooling system so that foreign teachers can become a commonplace in South African schools. They can be seen as providing essential services in areas much needed by the education system, for example, they can teach in rural areas where the quality of education is often called into question or they can provide expertise in scarce skills subjects that seriously compromises any education system.

Recommendations

- Teachers from Zimbabwe should be treated with the dignity afforded to a professional anywhere in the world.
- Acceptance of Zimbabwean teachers by local communities should receive more attention especially during the recruitment phase so that all parties understand the crucial role that these teachers play in the education of South Africa's children.
- Local teachers should be more accepting of Zimbabwean teachers and develop a positive attitude towards the commitment that they display to the teaching profession.
- Zimbabwean teachers should be treated fairly in schools where they teach and not be used as 'scapegoats' to reduce the workloads of local teachers.

Conclusion

In summary, this article examined the experiences of Zimbabwean teachers in schools of the Capricorn district of Limpopo province. The findings indicated that Zimbabwean teachers do experience xenophobia within the schools where they teach. The greatest threat that they face is job security. They are constantly made to feel that they need to perform better, take on

bigger workloads and do other tasks that local teachers do not want to do in order to secure continued contracts. Local teachers, students and community members use local indigenous languages to exclude foreign teachers. Due to sporadic xenophobic violence and attacks across South Africa, Zimbabwean teachers are on constant alert. Xenophobia has become a more serious threat for Zimbabwean teachers in recent times and South Africans need to change their attitudes towards these teachers who are providing an essential service for local children who are in dire need of the skills they bring into this country.

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