

ERSA Research Brief

May 2015

The Effects of Teacher Strike Activity on Student Learning in South African Primary Schools

Gabrielle Wills¹

In South Africa, teacher unions and industrial action are defining features of the schooling landscape. In recent years, schools have seen the most intensive industrial activity among teachers in post-Apartheid history, either in the form of full-blown strike action or 'work-to-rule' behaviour. Consequently teacher unions, and specifically the most dominant South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), have been heavily criticised for their disruptive effects on the general functioning of the schooling system and on student learning. In response South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress, tabled a proposal for the declaration of teaching as an 'essential service' to prevent further losses to schooling days and the general disruptive outcomes of industrial action in schools. However, very little is known about whether teacher strike action has in fact had negative consequences for student achievement.

This paper investigates to what extent industrial action, specifically the intensive strike action of 2007, affects student achievement at the primary school level in South Africa. A cross-subject analysis with student fixed effects is used to control for confounding factors that may bias estimates of strike effects. The advantage of this method is that one controls for all subject-invariant student and family unobservables and examines whether the strike activity of different subject teachers in a school is related to student's marks across those subjects.

The research suggests that there were negative impacts on student achievement of teacher participation in the 2007 public service strike in the poorest three quarters of South African primary schools. In the privileged upper quartile of schools, where strike participation is less common and the duration of strike action limited, little to no negative teacher strike effects were identified. By contrast, in the bottom three quartiles of schools where participation in the strike was widespread, militant and long in duration, strike activity appears to be detrimental to learning. Here a student's performance in a subject taught by a striking teacher was about ten per cent of a standard deviation lower than his or her performance in a subject taught by a non-striking teacher. The magnitude of the effect is roughly equivalent to a quarter of a years' lost learning despite the average strike duration in these schools representing only seven per cent of official school days in a year. Fixed effects estimations also identified larger strike effects for students attending rural as opposed to urban schools and for students who are weaker academically. These results imply that unionization and industrial action may augment existing inequalities in the provision of education in South Africa.

Although it is expected that lost teaching due to strike action would lower student achievement, the across-subject student fixed effects strategy could not control adequately for unobserved teacher characteristics which may inform both a teacher's decision to strike and influence student learning. Application of a technique by Altonji et al (2005) suggests that it is not possible to rule out that the negative strike effects observed in the poorest schools could be due to the confounding effects of omitted variable bias. The strike effect observed may be capturing an aspect of teacher quality

¹ University of Stellenbosch, Department of Economics; Email: gabriellewills@gmail.com

where teachers who strike in the poorest schools maybe more likely to be of low quality than non-striking teachers.

While the size of the negative strike effect is debatable, this research strongly calls into question the role of teacher unions and how their activities are compromising learning in the school environment. Teacher unions in South Africa played an important historical role in fighting for positive transformation in education, but today whether their impact remains progressive is uncertain. Due to SADTU's historical links with the liberation movement and its large membership, they have considerable influence over national policy decisions in education. Beyond advocating for improved pay, benefits and conditions of work, they remain opposed to any national policies implying forms of monitoring or control of teachers' work. Limiting the power of teacher unions to strike through declaring teaching an 'essential' service is only one aspect of limiting negative union interference. Teacher union impacts on learning are likely to extend beyond just lost learning days. More research is required to understand what efficiency implications union interference has had for school functioning in general, particularly in limiting monitoring and evaluation in classrooms and creating barriers for increased accountability in the education system.