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EDUCATION CRISIS

Better teaching of teachers is vital

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There is endless discussion about the importance of schooling and the multiple strategies necessary to put right the disastrous situation that we are confronting in South Africa – it includes economic productivity, youth unemployment, skills development, human rights, preparation for citizenship in a democracy, the creation of a reading culture, the results of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) tests, the need for better science and maths results.

The solutions offered are legion – smaller class sizes, more discipline, more financial involvement by parents (privatization), better textbooks, another curriculum revision, the greater use of home language at school, bigger focus on vocational training for work, and so on. It is extremely encouraging that these issues are once again gaining prominence in the national policy debate.

The more frantic we get for illusive solutions the more persistent the call for extreme solutions such as the adoption of business models which see the school as a production line for a vocational preparation, or grasp at strategies that seem to have been so successful in other contexts such as South Korea, Japan or Singapore, where educational expansion and investment have been closely integrated with economic strategies that led to growth and prosperity.

It is a Tower of Babel and since the government and the experts seem to have few solutions – those debating the issues are often tempted to turn to quacks and soothsayers who have little background in the field for a variety of wonderful solutions.

One thing we all agree on whether we are black or white, male or female, DA or ANC or PAC, Pro - Malema or Pro - SACP – is that there is an enormous crisis and that things seem to be getting worse for most students in public schools.

Even the most militant members of the tripartite alliance seem to have stopped blaming it all on apartheid and are calling for a new look at the issues.

To date many of the strategies engaged to leverage teacher performance have related to issues of “efficiency” – to what bureaucrats are pleased to call “time on task.” Whether teachers are in school on time, teach for so many hours a week, mark books and set tests regularly and so on.

All this seems to fit the low expectations ethos. Such a strategy suggests teachers are slackers and they must be forced to work “properly”. Such an ethos will entirely fail to solve the problems of SA education.

As Prof Martin Carnoy (Stanford University) recently pointed out at a seminar in Cape Town, there are other key factors to take into account. These include three intermeshed criteria. The extent to which teachers demonstrate a professional attitude to their work is intimately linked to the degree to which the teachers are able to show they are on top of their subject.

As he remarked, the more teachers know about the subject the more like they are to teach well; and the more they are to be able to develop pedagogic strategies to motivate students.

To most teachers of any substance this makes good sense. How we might achieve such goals? To what extent do the extensive engagements with policy development set out in recent policy

documents provide a roadmap for the development of a system of teacher education which squares with the historical legacies and the current situation of public education in South Africa? What is the capacity of the system – both in terms of public educational authorities and teacher trainers (now almost exclusively done by universities and private providers) to deliver on these proposals?

The neglect of teacher education is apparent at the universities which are having to provide teachers for all parts of the system. University education departments are usually ill-equipped for teacher education. And in this case they are even more problematic in relation to the training of primary teachers as they have had little expertise in the past

.At the best of times, and across the world, universities are poorly placed to prioritize teacher education. Everyone supposes thinks teaching is easy and training is simple, needing limited intellectual ability, and nobody can understand why teacher preparation is so inadequate.

The truth is that competent teacher education for the imparting of skills and critical competencies relating to the major academic disciplines is an extremely difficult task that requires protracted interaction between teacher trainees and student teacher and significant intellectual effort if it is to be at all effective in providing academically prepared and socially committed teachers.

But given the tight financial constrains under which university education departments operate such commitment and the requisite low staff-student rations are just not possible in current circumstances.

On the other hand such university education departments are caught up in the pursuit of academic credibility and the drive for research and publications which provide the sole source of prestige and reward in the university community. This research might or might not be directly associated with the project of teacher education. As the American historian of education, David Labaree puts it in relation to the American context

“Under attack from within and without the university, ed schools have become so caught up in the futile pursuit of academic credibility within the university that they have (for the most part) chosen to turn their backs on the needs of students and teachers.” (David Labaree, *What’s Wrong with Ed Schools* p18)

This is a key element of the situation in South Africa. Our attempts to “upgrade” teachers are often pathetic and those who plan them fail to grasp the fact that the core of the problem lies in shortcomings relating to the fact that the actual knowledge base of teachers is often very poor. This is not due to any fault of the teachers but to the shortcoming of education they received in the past in schools or teacher colleges.

We do not so much need courses in school or classroom management as substantial academic training by academic experts for all the teachers who already hold teaching certificates of one kind or another. And new recruits to the profession need to be properly trained with knowledge that is defined in academically rigorous and internationally recognizable terms. Once they have a clear idea of what it is they need to teach – in terms of content and skills – they will be in a position to motivate their students and improve educational overall.

The School of Education at the University of Cape Town is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year as a key site of teacher education. Of course, given the political realities of South Africa during much of that time it served white teachers. As Howard Philip’s history of UCT demonstrates, for most of its history it was effectively a teacher training college, with low status in the university.

Only during the time of the first professor, Fred Clarke (1911-1929) and from the time of Prof Michael Ashley (from late 1970s onwards) has the School of Education sought to compete in the

academic research field. At the present time it is perched between these two identities in a context where there are three other institutions competing for the same turf. And it needs to pick up on many of the tasks previously performed by the colleges of education.

UCT like all other universities is faced with an immense challenge in regard to the social issues that will shape the nature and quality of our democratic future.

These are complex issues that require serious consideration by government planners and advisors at national and provincial level, by parents and school committees who must cope with the consequences of this situation, and by those responsible for the education and training of the present and future generation of teachers.

Two government initiatives currently provide the space for debate on these issues but there has been surprisingly little attention to these in the media or in public forums. The first is the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa: 2011-2025 published in April by the DBE and the DHET. And the second is the forthcoming DHET policy relating to the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications.

As with the instance of power supply and the national railway network, the years of ANC government have witnessed a dramatic lack of investment in this vital sector. This has been a problem with many countries in the era of neo-liberalism and public sector cut-backs. It has been problematic in societies with long traditions of state teacher preparation where the present free market policy constraints on have put severe limits on social spending.

But in a society like South Africa, with a poorly trained teacher corps to begin with given the legacy of apartheid education, such a lack of investment is nothing short of disaster.

Whichever way we move the cure to the present crisis in education, it must in large part lie with dealing with the issues of the quality, commitment and competency of the teachers. This is something that must be taken up by politicians, community leaders, trade unionists, business leaders and the educational profession itself.

The teacher unions who represent our teachers have a key role to play in setting the agenda. To borrow the language of the market: If we are not prepared to provide a much bigger budget and a more comprehensive plan for good teacher education we will quite simply not get the outcomes we desire.

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