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The Status of Teaching as a Profession in South Africa

Abstract

Using ten universally accepted criteria for a profession and following the Structural-Functional Model of professionalism, this study evaluates the status of teaching as a profession in South Africa. The study found that policies and structures have been put in place since the beginning of the new millennium to enhance the professional status of teachers. The study nevertheless highlights numerous obstacles hindering the professionalisation of teaching in South Africa.

Introduction

South Africa spends 18.5% of its annual budget on education. Yet, the education system remains in a poor state of affairs (Modisaotsile, 2012). Statements, such as ‘South African schools indeed dysfunctional’ (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 2); ‘South Africa’s education crisis’ (Spaull, 2013, p. 1); and ‘schooling in South Africa is a national disaster’ (Bloch, 2009, p. 58) are not uncommon when academics and laypersons talk about schooling in South Africa. Countless reasons for the failure of schooling in South Africa, among other things the lack of professionalism among teachers, have been identified (Bloch, 2009; Spaull, 2013). At an education conference, Jakes Gerwel said that ‘teachers have a social and moral obligation to reclaim their profession and restore its dignity’ (*The Teacher*, 2001, p. 3). In 2013 the Public Service and Administration Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu called for the ‘restoration of professionalism in teaching’ (in Mabaya, 2013, p. 24). If South African teachers have put the teaching profession in disrepute, the profession will fail its learners, especially those living in poverty stricken areas. It is therefore important to determine if and to what extent South African teachers have responded to the challenge to ‘reclaim’ and ‘restore’ teaching as a profession.

Using universally accepted criteria for a profession (De Vos, Schulze & Patel, 2005; Ingersoll & Perda, 2008), and following the Structural-Functional Model of professionalism (Emener & Cottone, 1989), this paper evaluates the status of teaching as a profession in South Africa.

Discussion

Criterion: the credentials of a profession

Professional work involves highly complex sets of skills, intellectual functioning and knowledge that are not easily acquired and not widely held. Entry into professions requires a licence, which is obtained only after the completion of an officially sanctioned training programme and passage of examination (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008).

In 1984 70% of black teachers in South Africa were inadequately qualified (Jacobs, 1989). Since the demise of apartheid steps were taken to restructure and improve teacher qualifications. The majority of teachers in South Africa did not

have a four-year teaching qualification at the turn of the century. According to 2000 statistics 23.9% of the teaching corps was below the Required Education Qualification Value (REQV) 13 benchmark qualification (*cf.* Heystek & Lethoko, 2001). In order to address this problem, the Department of Education (DoE), teacher unions and teacher training institutions worked together to develop a new qualification framework. This led to the introduction of a four-year teacher training qualification and the prerequisite that all newly qualified teachers must hold a degree. All teacher training was moved from teacher training colleges to universities. Numerous upgrading courses were developed and introduced by universities to give teachers the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications. Despite these opportunities, the situation regarding un- and under-qualified teachers has not improved. In 2013 there were 7076 unqualified teachers on the DoE's payroll. These are teachers who have only Grade 12, a school qualification. There were also 2642 under-qualified teachers in the country, who have completed Grade 12 and who only have one or two years of tertiary studies under their belts (The Midrand Forum, 2013).

Criterion: specialisation

Ingersoll and Perda (2008, p. 111) write that 'professionals are not generalists, amateurs, or dilettantes, but possess expertise over a specific body of knowledge and skill'. In line with this criterion the *Norms and Standards for Educators* (RSA, 2002, p. 13) specifies that teachers should be a 'learning area/subject/discipline/phase specialist'. To strengthen the subject and pedagogical knowledge of teachers the 2011 *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* made a Bachelor of Education Degree or Advanced Diploma in Teaching (both NQF level 7) the minimum teacher academic and professional qualification in South Africa. The policy document specified clear requirements and guidelines for teacher qualifications and learning programmes which were to address the poor content and conceptual knowledge among South African teachers (De Clercq, 2013).

Investigating the phenomenon known as 'out-of-field teaching', the extent to which teachers are assigned to teach *subjects* which do not match their fields of speciality and training, De Wet (2004) found that it is not uncommon for secondary school teachers in South Africa to teach subjects outside their field of specialisation. According to De Wet (2004, p. 157) these teachers' teaching is characterised by 'a lack of academic and professional knowledge and diligence'. The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ, 2007 in Spaull, 2013) tested Grade 6 teachers' knowledge of Grade 6 Mathematics. An analysis of this data shows that many South African mathematics teachers have below-basic levels of content knowledge, with high proportions of teachers being unable to answer questions aimed at their learners.

Criterion: the induction of new practitioners upon entering the profession

In addition to initial formal training, professional work often requires extensive training for new practitioners upon entry. Such training is designed to pick up where pre-service training has left off. The objectives of induction programmes are to aid new practitioners to adjust to the environment, to familiarise them with the realities

of their jobs and to filter out those with substandard levels of skill and knowledge (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008).

Legislation in South Africa requires that schools play an active role ‘to ensure that there is skills development within their teaching cohorts’ (Dale-Jones, 2014, p. 1). Yet, induction programmes for novice teachers are a rarity, and if they take place, they are usually unplanned and informal (Botha, 2011). As a result ‘newly appointed teachers get a reality shock at the discrepancy between the theory (ideals) and the practice (reality) of teaching ... teachers are left alone to either swim or sink’ (Botha, 2011, p. 411).

Criterion: continuous professional development

Beyond both pre-service training and mentoring for beginners, most professions usually require ongoing in-service development and growth throughout their careers. The supposition is that achieving professional-level mastery of complex skills and knowledge is a continuous process. Professionals should continually update their skills, as the body of technology, skills and knowledge advances (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008).

According to the *Norms and Standards for Educators* (RSA, 2002, p. 13) South African teachers should strive to achieve ‘ongoing personal, academic, occupational and professional growth through pursuing reflective study and research in their learning area, in broader professional and educational matters, and in other related fields’. The 2007 *National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development* (NPFTEd) gave conceptual coherence to the teacher education system, and committed the DoE to support continuing professional teacher development (CPTD) activities. The NPFTEd document specifies that teachers have to accumulate a minimum of 150 CPTD points every three years (De Clercq, 2013). The 2011 *Integrated Strategic Planning for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa* set aside funds for the establishment of national and provincial teacher development institutes, district teacher development centres and the establishment of ‘professional learning communities’ (De Clercq, 2013, p. 46). Steps have been taken to operationalise the CPTD system. A total of 6500 principals and their deputies have, for example, signed up for participation in the South African Council of Educators (SACE) CPTD system in 2013. The DBE also signed a memorandum of agreement with teacher unions to facilitate the achievement of CPTD targets (DBE, 2014). The underlying principle for CPTD is that ‘teachers, individually and collectively, will have a high degree of responsibility for their own development’ (Steyn, 2010, p. 214).

Criterion: authority and autonomy

Professionals are seen as experts in whom considerable authority is vested and professions are discernible by a large degree of self-governance. Professions exert substantial control over the curriculum, admission and accreditation of professional training schools, set and enforce behavioural and ethical standards of practitioners, and exert control over who their future colleagues are to be (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008).

Consecutive post-apartheid curriculum initiatives, i.e. Curriculum 2005, the Revised National Curriculum Statement and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy

Statement (CAPS) were all led by ‘experts’. Continued criticism against the progressive Outcomes Based Education approach and its revision led to the introduction of CAPS in July 2010. According to Msibi and Mchunu (2013, p. 25), CAPS was a ‘teacher-proof’ approach towards curriculum implementation reducing the work of teachers to ‘mere technicians’. De Clercq (2013, p. 47) similarly writes that teaching in South Africa has been ‘de-professionalised’, with ‘greater regulation and intensification of teachers’ work, and assumptions of a compliant teaching force that had to be tightly monitored’. Teachers are not even allowed to develop their own worksheets and the right to set their own examination papers (depending on whether or not a school is classified as a ‘targeted’ or ‘under-performing’ school).

Criterion: service orientation

According to De Vos et al. (2005) professionals are supposed to serve the interests of clients and the community and not, in the first instance, their own. It can be argued that a lack of service orientation among South African teachers is illustrated by numerous teacher strikes (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001), high rates of teacher absenteeism (Modisaotsile, 2012), and formal complaints lodged at the SACE against teachers for the misappropriation of school funds, fraud, theft, conduct unbecoming, and sexual abuse, including rape, of learners (SACE, 2013). When teachers strike or are absent from school without a valid reason, sexually abuse learners or enrich themselves at the cost of others, their interests become more important than the interest of their clients (learners and parents).

Criterion: professionals belong to a formal professional council

A profession restricts its practices to a professional group that projects a strong group consciousness, which gradually develops into a professional culture sustained by formal associations wielding strong power over members of the profession, and even over training departments or schools embedded at universities (De Vos et al., 2005). The SACE, a statutory council for the teaching profession, was established in terms of the South African Council for Educators Act (Act 31 of 2000). In terms of section 5(a) of the aforementioned act the Council has to promote, develop and maintain the professional image of the teaching profession (RSA, 2000). The establishment of the SACE can be seen as an effort to professionalise teaching in South Africa.

Criterion: a generally accepted code of ethics

A code of ethics is ‘a set of ethical principles that embody personal qualities and life-style habits that are expected of practitioners of the specific profession’ (Mosogo & Taunyane, 2009, p. 5). The SACE’s *Code of Professional Ethics* (2002) lays down rules regarding acceptable relations between teachers and the learners, colleagues, parents and SACE. According to SACE (2002, p. 151), adherence to the code of ethics is not optional and ‘any educator who breaches the Code is ... subject to the disciplinary powers and procedures’ of the Council. Since the first hearing of the disciplinary committee of the SACE in March 2002 until 31 March 2013 the SACE has received 3044 complaints against teachers, 339 hearings were held, resulting in 150 indefinite striking-offs and 113 other sanctions (SACE, 2013).

Criterion: competitive compensation

Professionals are usually well compensated and are provided with comparatively high salary and benefit levels throughout their working lives. The assumption is that given the lengthy training and the complexity of knowledge and skills required, comparatively high levels of compensation are necessary to recruit and retain accomplished and motivated individuals (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). Salaries have, however, been a recurring complaint among South African teachers (Heystek & Lethoko, 2001; Mabaya, 2013). The need to investigate and perhaps adjust teachers' compensation was acknowledged by government in 2013. A presidential remuneration commission was set up to look at 'how public servants are rewarded, with the first phase focusing on educators' (Mabaya, 2013, p. 24).

Criterion: prestige

The professions are high status, high prestige occupations. They are respected and coveted. Research on the relative prestige of selected occupations finds that teaching is worldwide less prestigious than law, medicine and engineering, but more prestigious than most blue-collar jobs, such as truck drivers, and pink-collar workers, such as secretaries (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008). Heystek and Lethoko (2001, p. 223) find that teaching is held in low esteem in South Africa. Teachers are often the scapegoat for the crisis in South African schools (Steyn, 2010; Wilkinson, 2015).

Conclusion

Following the Structural-Functional Model of professionalism, this study has endeavoured to determine whether or not teaching is a profession in South Africa. The study has found that policies and structures are in place to enhance the professional status of teachers: the minimum point of entry into the profession is a four-year qualification. Ample opportunities have been created since the beginning of the new millennium to help un- and under-qualified teachers to obtain qualifications adhering to the REQV 13 benchmark. The 2011 *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* specified requirements and guidelines for teacher qualifications and learning programmes to address the poor content and conceptual knowledge among teachers. The importance of mentoring, induction and CPTD are acknowledged by education authorities. The establishment of the SACE and the publication of the *Code of Professional Ethics* are important milestones on the road to professionalise teaching in South African.

Despite these important milestones in reclaiming and restoring teaching as a profession, there are still un- and under-qualified teachers, as well as teachers who lack subject and pedagogical knowledge in front of classes. Whereas mentoring and induction programmes are either lacking in some schools or informal and unplanned in other schools, CPTD is in its infancy. Curriculum development took away teachers' autonomy, reducing them to 'technicians'. The study has also found that South African teachers lack prestige and do not receive competitive compensation. The failure of teachers to restore the dignity of the profession is highlighted by a lack of service orientation by some teachers, despite a code of ethics that embodies the qualities of a professional teacher.

Reclaiming and restoring the status of the teaching profession in South Africa will not happen overnight. Policies and structures are in place. It is time for all 'great South African teachers' (Jansen, 2011, p. 1) to stand up, lead by example and reclaim and restore the dignity of this once proud profession.

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