How are our Teachers? What teachers and others can do to improve the current situation

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In the wake of Graeme Bloch's (2009) gloomy analysis of the state of education in South Africa, *The Toxic Mix*, it would be difficult for anyone to deny that there is a crisis in education in our country. Bloch presents some examples of good practice and the DBSA co-ordinated Ten-point programme of the Education Roadmap[1] which includes a focus on teachers' conduct and accountability for their learners' performance, qualifications and continuing development, as ways to improving quality in our system.

It is my opinion that recognition of the centrality of teachers is the key to improving the quality of the education system. Teachers are both the problem and the solution. Therefore I believe it is important to understand how teachers experience their work.

In this article, firstly, I reveal how teachers are through the use of metaphors. Some convey incredible drive and tenacity while others emphasise the loss of meaning they experience as they struggle for survival in an education climate largely hostile to the achievement of quality educational goals. Secondly, I propose an alternative for teachers to the pit of despair: I suggest that teachers harness the power of their energy and sense of purpose and adopt a conception of professionalism known as democratic professionalism which is accompanied by an activist professional identity. Finally, I propose a few ideas for action by activist citizens in our democratic society.

How are the teachers?

Teachers' metaphors[2] for their experiences of their roles and responsibilities reveal a teacher and teaching identity that is both powerful and fragile. Many teachers describe their identity and teaching experiences in positive, hopeful images that express high ideals for themselves and their profession. Other images reflect teachers' demoralised state and convey cynicism, despair and a belief that their work is fruitless. The instability and ambivalence of teacher identity is reflected truthfully in the single metaphor: "A teacher is a yo-yo, sometimes up and sometimes down. Teaching is sometimes rewarding and sometimes frustrating". Even within the strong, positive metaphors there lurks a, *but*.

Many of the images reflect teachers' powerful and aspirational beliefs about their role and influence. They convey what teachers ought to be, want to be, and

need to be in order to experience fulfilment in their work. Teachers are leaders in society whose work, views and values are respected: "a preacher", "a king" and "a hero". A teacher succinctly expresses all this in her metaphor, "a teacher is a pillar of the nation". Identities are vibrant and powerful. They focus on leadership and releasing of potential: "The bright comet that leads the way for shooting stars". Added to these ideas is the quite old-fashioned but very widespread belief that teachers are special because not everyone can be one: "A teacher is God's creation"; "A teacher can't be made; a teacher is born"; "teaching is a calling"; a teacher is "priceless".

The developmental and at the same time protective and caring role that teachers play in the lives of their learners is often expressed. The teacher who sees herself as "the warm sun" implies that she is essential for growth as well as providing comfort and security. Each day learners anticipate her impact on their lives. She does not scorch or burn harshly but is warm and supports a congenial atmosphere for development. She is very important; without her, growth is retarded. Teachers frequently see themselves as parents, the responsible ideal kind, performing the role of inducting the young into the adult world: "I think I am a parent, a hardworking person, dedicated to help the young people grow". Teachers' roles extend to "pastor, social worker, parent, mother, doctor, nurse, know-all, all in one". They offer support, security and refuge: "I am like Church Square, if you have trouble, you come to me, I'm always available!"

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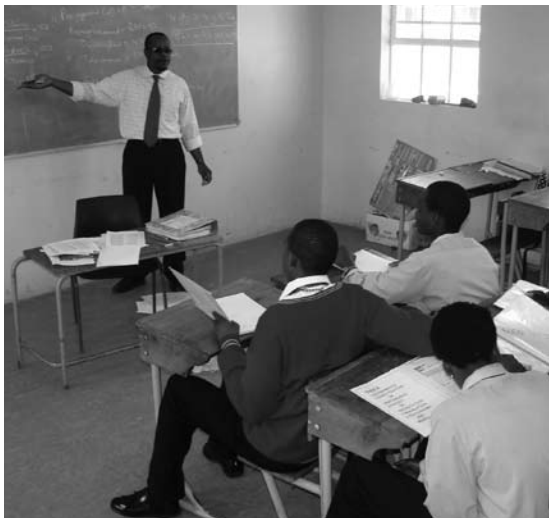
The metaphors also focus on teachers' primary task of conveying knowledge from one generation to the next and stimulating curiosity, creativity and thinking — "knowledge information tanks", "stimulator" and "bringer of light". One teacher sees herself as "like a magician", a professional, with particular knowledge that she manifests in a live and attention-holding performance that has an amazing outcome (the lesson).



Courtesy of Samancor.

"Sometimes I feel like a magician, trying to pull understanding and passion out of a hat. The response from the crowd is flattering, but there is always the tension of 'will it work?' I'm not saying my teaching is based on subterfuge or tricks, rather it is revealing the magic of literature to the audience who hopefully will never be quite the same afterwards. Whereas the magician sends the audience home baffled by his/her cleverness, as teachers we get to unmask the magic and make it accessible to all, thus hopefully spreading it!"

The teacher identities shown above show that these teachers are confident in their ability to achieve the purposes of education. They feel they have the knowledge, a sense of purpose and the drive to accomplish, trustworthiness, consistency and resilience to persist in the face of difficulties. They are supportive of, and empathetic towards their learners. Considerable strength is evident.

In contrast to this are the metaphors that indicate that this strength is constantly threatened by processes in the teachers' environment that deplete energy and fracture identity.

The metaphor, "a shining diamond lost in the sand" depicts the teacher as a person of value, a jewel, that ought to be treasured, but the reality is that the jewel has been (carelessly) lost. The worth of teachers is no longer appreciated. In the description, "I sometimes feel like the Energiser Bunny but eventually the battery

runs out and needs to be re-charged" we see an extremely busy, energetic and enthusiastic teacher. She identifies the amount of energy required to do the job and the reality of the potential for exhaustion, excessive stress and burnout, amongst the most committed. The depletion of the energy source is evident also in the metaphor provided by an older, somewhat disillusioned teacher who says: "I used to be something else. Now I am a sinking ship".

When the teacher sees himself as an "office worker" or a "policeman" and adds that he is thinking of changing careers "because teaching is not as enjoyable as before" he identifies two of the current endemic problems in schools that consume teachers' energy. Firstly, the paperwork and administrative overload burdens all teachers and distances them from what they perceive as the real work of teachers, namely, interacting with children, thus undermining their sense of purpose and meaning. This heavy workload and the helpless feeling of incompetence and futility that results when one is unable to deliver all that is required, is seen in the description of teachers' work as "pumping wheels that do not get full". Secondly, learners' lack of respect for authority and the breakdown of values in society have resulted in general indiscipline and, in many schools, outright chaos and total dysfunctionality. Teachers attribute this lack of respect to the emphasis on learners' rights rather than on their responsibilities. The teachers' identity as a respected and worthy authority figure is routinely trashed.

When one adds to these feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness, the experience of teachers being confused, de-skilled and displaced because of what they term "OBE", meaning the total package of curricular change, one understands the teacher's cry that "they must stop changing things, like changing underwear". The professional identity of teachers is fractured when they experience their work as meaningless and they feel unable to achieve what they believe are the goals of education. Their sense of purpose and worth are critically undermined to the extent that their commitment diminishes and they give up caring because they feel so ineffectual.

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It is important to have answers to the question "How are the teachers?"

it is clearly not desirable to have schools staffed by teachers whose professional identity has reached such a crumbled state. Writers and researchers recognise that teachers are central to the education process and therefore to improvement in the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. The system is virtually powerless to influence what really happens behind the classroom doors. Carnoy states that "the role of teachers is pivotal" for realising improvement in the quality of education outcomes[3]. Fullan supports this: "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and complex as that"[4]. In addition, the 1966 Coleman Report (in the USA) identified teachers' characteristics as the most influential factor on learners achieving results better than those expected for their social class[5]. We must do things differently.

Teachers can help themselves: Democratic Professionalism

I believe that teachers need a new conception of teacher professionalism and professional identity to cope in the current reality. I propose that they adopt what is termed an activist teacher identity[6] and practise democratic professionalism.

"Democratic professionalism"[7] and an "activist identity"[8] are particularly suitable for South Africa at present because "democratic professionalism" is "rooted in principles of equity and social justice"[9] and is suited to accomplishing quality improvement because of its transformative influence[10]. This conception of professionalism relies on the assumption that teachers are highly skilled and knowledgeable and therefore able to exercise professional judgment[11]. In South Africa this assumption holds true generally for teachers educated at a well-resourced university or a good college of education. Regrettably, however, this may not be true for the majority of African teachers who because of the apartheid policies did not benefit from quality pre-service education. These teachers are aware of their shortcomings and plead for additional in-service education to close the knowledge and skills gaps. Democratic professionalism seeks to "improve the nature of teachers' work and to entrench teacher autonomy[12]"[13] and to build alliances between teachers and other members of the school workforce, external stakeholders, community, parents, and learners[14].

Democratic professionalism promotes the open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible; faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems; the use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies; concern for the welfare of others and the "common good"; concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities and an understanding that democracy is not so much an 'ideal' to be pursued as an "idealised" set of values that we must live by and that must guide our life as people[15].

An activist identity requires teachers to move from seeing themselves as objects and victims of educational change imposed by external agents and view themselves as agents of change and transformation.

The activist identity that goes with this enables teachers to see themselves as agents of change, proactive in bringing about improvement rather than helpless victims of constant new reform strategies[16]. This, I argue, will restore and strengthen teachers' fragile professional identity. An activist identity includes the following characteristics — autonomy based on knowledge and accountability for actions; life-long learning; membership of a professional learning community; commitment to improving achievement for all learners; reflective practice, collegial and collaborative teamwork; critical and creative thinking; not reproducing the same social curriculum; exercising leadership; modelling the right way every day. A passive, submissive teacher identity does not resonate with the powerful metaphors teachers suggested.

Democratic professionalism encourages a collaborative culture where the teacher's responsibility extends beyond his or her own classroom to other learners, schools, colleagues and the broader profession. An activist identity requires teachers to move from seeing themselves as objects and victims of educational change imposed by external agents and view themselves as agents of change and transformation. Teachers need to have a vision of what is possible and what ought to be and then take the action that is necessary to achieve their vision. They should address issues which affect their daily work, such as raising the professional standards for themselves and their colleagues, insisting on professional courtesy and respect from departmental officials and other stake-holders, eliminating obstacles to the effective implementation of the curriculum, and demanding improvement in the condition and resourcing of schools.

Teachers in schools where democratic professionalism flourishes claim to believe and practise the following:

- We respect one another unconditionally;
- We are all learners;
- We are all leaders;
- We really care;
- We share;
- We risk and we speak out;
- We support one another;
- We jointly glory in the success of another;
- We jointly suffer when another fails;
- We are a single team therefore we do not compete with or blame one another;
- We are committed to continuous improvement;
- We are a professional learning community.

Teachers in the classroom believe civil society can help them improve the quality of education outcomes for all learners

Teachers would like all sectors of society to apply pressure and take action that demonstrates commitment to education as a first priority in our country. This includes re-building respect for the profession, promoting teaching as a worthy career of choice and encouraging the best of the best to become teachers. People who engage in the education debate may wish to ask themselves whether they encourage their own children to take up the teaching profession.

To sustain recruitment and retain teachers their remuneration needs to be brought more in line with other graduates, not only at entry level but in mid- and late-career. This bullet needs to be bitten because as the McKinsey Report (2007), "How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top", concluded:

> 1) the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of teachers, 2) the only way

to improve outcomes is to improve instruction, and 3) achieving universally high outcomes is only possible by putting in place mechanisms that ensure that schools deliver high-quality instruction to every child.[17]

Teachers want parents (or other adults, in the absence of parents) to be partners with them and to support them in their work. This would include teaching and reinforcing values that are supportive of education such as, respect for authority and organisational rules, a responsible attitude, and a belief in the value of effort. It is also important for parents to find out what their children do at school each day and what must be done for homework. Parents, both mothers and fathers, should become involved in the activities of the school.

The African saying that it takes a village to raise a child is most appropriate.

Adults with time to spare during the school day and in the afternoons could volunteer their services at primary schools to help children whose parents are insufficiently educated, too busy or absent, to help them with homework, listen to reading or coach an extra-curricular activity. The whole community needs to take responsibility for its children and make sure that they are attending school. Whole-scale truancy would be impossible if adults in the community reported this and forced children back to school. The African saying that it takes a village to raise a child is most appropriate.

Corporate entities could as part of their CSI adopt schools and channel expertise to support them in their non-educational functions, for example, financial management, fund-raising and resource and asset management, thus freeing teachers to attend to their core business.

Members of civil society should keep themselves well-informed of educational issues and be critical participants in the education debate. They should lobby their representatives in government to ensure that the education system is funded at the level necessary to bring about improvement gains in outcomes as well as to provide the support necessary to achieve this.

A society is judged on how it treats its children. Our children need teachers who will equip them for 21st century citizenship and a society whose values and actions support this endeavour. Let us not fail them in this obligation.

NOTES

1 Bloch, G., 2009, The Toxic Mix, (p. 156)

2 Metaphors were collected from teachers at five diverse schools in Gauteng in the course of my M.Ed. research (2007) and from participants at the World Teachers' Day celebration in Kimberley (2009).

3 Carnoy (1999) (p. 79).

4 Fullan (2001) (p. 115)

5 Mayeske, 1973

6 Sachs 2003

7 Whitty, 2006: 14; Sachs, 1999: 7

8 Sachs, 1999: 7

9 Sachs, 1999: 7

10 Whitty, 2006: 14

11 Wits EPU, 2005: 8

12 Professional autonomy does not imply absolute freedom and independence of any form of control. Hoyle and John (1995) describe professional autonomy simply as "the relative freedom enjoyed by practitioners in making and implementing choices regarding their professional practice". It is "constrained" autonomy: "Practitioners do not have licence, but have a licence" which is based on "demonstrated competence and is conditional" (p. 78).

13 Wits EPU, 2005: 8

14 Whitty, 2006: 14.

15 Beane and Apple, 1997: 6-7 in Sachs, 1999: 7

16 Sachs, 1999: 7

17 p. 40

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