

Disrespecting teacher: The decline in social standing of teachers in Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the declining levels of respect for teachers in two communities in Cape Town, South Africa. Education has been identified as a key area of reform and redress, but a critical skills shortage and under-resourced schools are hindering progress. Data from current and former teachers illustrate how the social and institutional capital of education is being replaced by a focus on economic capital, undermining the prestige of teaching as a career. These problems reflect trends elsewhere in the world and require action to prevent further shortages in education.

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1. Introduction

In a British household where both parents were teachers, I was told from a young age “never go into teaching—it’s not worth it”. The use of teachers as scapegoats for poor student performance, problems with youth behaviour and other social ills by politicians, policy makers, the media and the general public had, my parents felt, undermined the status of the profession. The perception of teaching as a stressful and undervalued career contributes to shortages of teachers in the UK which the government has attempted to address through financial incentives and an advertising campaign under the slogan “Those who can, teach”.

This paper will consider whether these challenges are reflected in South Africa and concludes with the notion that rather than “those who can, teach”, those who can, don’t teach. Moving beyond complaints of pay and conditions, stress and poor student behaviour as key factors dissuading people from becoming teachers, shifts in local concepts of respect are shown to discourage applicants. An overall decline in the respect standing of teachers is exacerbated by shifts in the factors upon which respect is constructed more broadly in which economic capital has gained greater importance compared to social and institutional cultural capital. These changes pose challenges to the recruitment and retention of teachers in South Africa.

Informed by 12 months’ fieldwork conducted between September 2004 and September 2005 in and around Cape Town, South Africa, this article utilises participant observations and interview data

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from with teachers at two secondary schools situated in formerly Indian (Moonglow High) and coloured (Sun Valley High)¹ group areas, as well as with former teachers. Student attitudes were discussed in informal situations and through focus groups and questionnaires. During these interactions it became clear that many of the challenges and processes experienced in the formation and expression of identities were related to the notion of “respect”. Changes to the construction of respect in global and local society were brought into sharp contrast within the school environment.

The use of racial identifiers in South Africa has a long history associated with colonial and apartheid oppression. The use of these terms here is consistent with post-apartheid government usage of the terms African, coloured, Indian, and white for the purposes of employment, equity and redress. Beyond the legislative realm, however, these identities have also remained as social constructs and categories that are deployed in everyday experience, often grounded in the continued racialisation of residential space.

2. The historical context

South African education has been characterised by inequalities and racial segregation since the early years of white settlement, when the Dutch Reformed Church led public opinion against multi-racial schooling. Although missionaries provided schooling to coloureds and freed slaves, over the next three centuries the primary focus of educational development was the white community.

After 1948, apartheid policies reinforced racially segregated education “for one’s position in society” (Verwoerd, 1954, p. 15) resulting in differential educational development (Pillay, 1990, p. 30) and a legacy of inequality. With the end of apartheid, one national and nine provincial Departments of Education were created. Post-apartheid government spending on education remains comparatively high, at 5.3% of GDP and 18.5% of total government spending in 2002 (Watkins et al., 2005).

3. A global challenge

Teachers have traditionally been well regarded in society. Social change, economic development and

increasing flows of global financial and cultural capital affect the construction of respect. A growing preoccupation with economic capital has eroded the social capital and respect standing of teachers.

Globally there has been a “professionalisation” of education. Teachers have become footloose human capital and, as with other skilled professionals such as doctors and nurses (Hammett, 2007), are a commodity in demand able to move between states—usually to richer states. The shortfall of teachers in South Africa presents challenges for addressing skills shortages, facilitating economic development, poverty alleviation, and achieving social redress. The expansion of quality education provision has been hindered by teacher attrition and recruitment.

There is a growing shortage of qualified teachers in South Africa. In 2006, the state employed 354,469 teachers although there had been a 4.1% shortfall on the annual demand for 14,615 new and replacement teachers over the previous five years (Kraak, 2003, p. 671). Added to this, nearly three-quarters of teachers in the Western Cape have considered leaving the profession due to low morale, heavy workloads, low job satisfaction, and better employment opportunities elsewhere (Hall et al., 2005). Research in Australia, New Zealand, England and the USA highlights similar complaints about pay, conditions and policy decisions (Scott et al., 2001), and the negative impact of social disruption upon teachers symbolised through expanding responsibilities and an erosion of professionalism.

Pachler (2001, pp. 63,73) has noted that teaching in the UK is viewed as “a comparatively badly paid job” characterised by poor student behaviour, strained relations with parents, increasing bureaucracy and workloads, negative media coverage and a sense that teachers “feel insufficiently valued and perceive there to be a lack of status”. In working-class communities of Macassar, Hanover Park and Rylands in Cape Town, teachers feel their status has been undermined and the respect the profession commanded is disappearing. With the economic capital accrued through teaching viewed as inadequate, the loss of social capital further reduces the respect standing of the teaching profession.

4. Explaining respect

Central to the definition of respect is “a stress on economic independence, on orderliness, cleanliness” (Goodhew, 2004, p. xviii), cast as the antithesis of

¹The names of schools, teachers and students have been changed due to requirements of the Western Cape Education Department.

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