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A culture of teaching

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In this brief article, Professor Morrow states strongly that teachers are central to the transformation of education and the reconstruction of society in South Africa. But in order to carry out this role, teachers themselves must rediscover their special professional responsibilities, and come to see themselves as agents, not as victims.

This article revisits the view that teachers are key agents in any schooling system, and that the reconstruction of education in our country will require teachers to discover or rediscover their responsibilities as teachers.

What underlies this view in this context is the following idea: even accepting that the primary causes of the education crisis are to be sought in the political realm (the ravages of apartheid), it is unrealistic and naïve to expect that a political settlement is going to resolve it. The crisis itself, and the struggles to which it has given rise, have led to a profound deterioration of some of the very basic conditions for any viable teaching to take place at all. In a range of educational institutions across the country there is such disintegration that it is unrealistic to expect that projects such as restructuring the governance of schooling, increasing the salaries of teachers, and resourcing of the system more adequately, are going, on their own, to enable us to overcome the crisis.

For teachers to discover or rediscover their responsibilities is clearly not merely a matter of individual teachers 'trying harder'. Many committed teachers have been defeated not so much by the 'state' or the 'system' as by the climate of demoralization and cynicism that has spread amongst both teachers and learners, and by lack of support, and sometimes even direct opposition, from their colleagues. The word 'culture' captures the idea that retrieving teaching will have to be a collective project.

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Notes

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The decay of institutions of learning has been accompanied by many teachers losing a sense of the distinctive kind of service they should be offering to the community.

constituting responsibilities: the defining responsibilities that make someone a teacher and not something else

malaise: an unhealthy inability to act

teachers losing a sense of the distinctive kind of service they should be offering to the community, leading to a serious impoverishment of the understanding of the *constituting responsibilities* of teachers. In despair some teachers have embraced the image of themselves as exploited workers and, while this might be understandable, even in some sense true, it is in direct conflict with the idea that teachers are decisive agents in the constitution of formal learning.

Without being unsympathetic to those many teachers who work in appalling conditions and struggle to maintain their practice against overwhelming odds, we need honestly to face the unpalatable fact that there are also many teachers who have given up even trying to fulfil their responsibilities as teachers. While we can explain this in terms of our political history and the high proportion of young teachers who are themselves products of apartheid schooling and years of struggle, we are now faced with the acute problem of how to cure this *malaise*. It is a problem of how to connect teaching to our ambition to reconstruct our society, of how to achieve committed and enthusiastic engagement in the practice of teaching with a sense of its social and political significance [...]

Teachers need collectively to discover their special responsibilities. These range from constructing and defending a climate of safety and tolerance in schools, as a basic condition for maintenance of the orderliness that is needed for systematic learning to be possible, to [...] discovering how to enable access to knowledge for the learners we have in the situations in which we teach them. That teachers will not be able to do this without encouragement and support from communities and officials, does not detract from their *own* pivotal role.

The education crisis will be with us for much longer than it needs to if we do not discover how to create a culture of professional teaching.