

Being a Teacher

Professional Challenges and Choices

Section One | Introducing the module

Writers | Mike Adendorff, Mark Mason, Maropeng Modiba, Lynette Faragher and Zandile Kunene

Editor | John Gultig

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Being a Teacher

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1ST EDITION SERIES EDITOR: John Gultig

DESIGN FOR DIGITAL VERSION: Michelle Randell

ILLUSTRATIONS: Andre Plant

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SAIDE

PO Box 31822

Braamfontein 2017

T: (011) 403 2813

F: (011) 403 2814

www.saide.org.za; www.oerafrica.org

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SECTION ONE

Introducing the module

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Why study a module on 'being a teacher'?

1.1

A key role for teachers?

We frequently read in the media today that the role of teachers is crucial to the reconstruction of education, and even to South Africa's survival in a competitive global economy.

Yet teachers who take their role seriously encounter many contradictions. Frequent public calls are made for professionalism, but many teachers are called on to work in conditions that hardly encourage them to see themselves as professionals. Many teachers in recent years have faced the choice of redeployment or retrenchment; many have been designated 'temporary' for years while performing the same duties as other teachers.

Though some teachers have seen reductions in the size of their classes, the experience of others has been the opposite. Many still do not have the most basic facilities – a classroom with a roof, walls or working surfaces for the learners. Progress has been made in reducing inequality in state spending on education, but many South African teachers still have to make do in seriously under-resourced classrooms and schools.

On the other hand, for many committed teachers who try to carry out their duties professionally in spite of these difficulties, a major obstacle they face is the lack of support they receive from colleagues who fail to grasp the importance of professional standards.

Since the advent of a democratic political system in 1994 – and an end to the repressive minority control of education – teachers enjoy more freedom to experiment and teach creatively than they did in the past. But this relative freedom, and the task of transforming education, has brought its own uncertainties and challenges, such as the shift away from teacher-centred and content-based instruction in the classroom.

A new code of conduct and a new appraisal system have introduced unfamiliar forms of quality assurance. These transformations not only represent a transition from South Africa's past, they reflect worldwide trends in teaching administration and curriculum change.

In this context there is at least no contradiction between the need of the *nation* and the need of its *learners* for a body of competent teachers, professionally equipped to educate South Africans, confident of what their roles entail, and secure in the self-esteem that comes from knowing what, why, and how to do what they do well. It is here that this module seeks to play a role.

1.2

What is this module about?

Some key questions

What does it mean to be a teacher in South Africa today?

Does our society really need teachers?

If so, what sort of teachers do we need?

These questions provide the structure for this module. If you have already been teaching for some years, they may strike you as rather pointless. Yet some of the answers may surprise you. Today, as we look back on years of conflict and dissatisfaction in South African education, we face the enormous challenge of transforming our education system. This great task includes turning an entirely new curriculum into a classroom reality. In such a situation, we cannot take for granted even the most basic concepts, in case we repeat past mistakes.

The process of change has been accompanied by a fair amount of turbulence, confusion and controversy. There cannot be many societies in which issues relating to teaching and learning arouse more public attention and passionate debate than ours. Issues of teacher professionalism and morale, order and discipline in schools, and the very nature of the teacher's role in developing the knowledge, skills and values of the young – all of these regularly 'make the headlines'. This module sets out to address each of these issues in ways that will enable you to teach with greater confidence based on deeper understanding. We have also attempted, in Sections Four to Seven, to link this understanding to practical approaches and strategies for teachers.

We have divided the module into seven sections. Each section poses, and provides tools for answering, a critical question that follows from the key questions above:

Section	Critical question	Exploration
Section Two: <i>Being a teacher in South Africa</i>	A challenge: will you become part of the solution to the problems confronting South African education, or will you remain part of the problem?	We explore how teachers' reasons for teaching affect their practice and what forces are at work in the context of South African teaching.
Section Three: <i>Teaching as a profession</i>	What distinguishes professions from other occupations, and what forms of professionalism will help teachers in their efforts to serve learners?	We compare teaching with other professions and occupations. We examine what forms of professionalism are most appropriate in teaching. We look at threats to professionalism in teaching and the issue of teacher accountability.
Section Four: <i>The teacher's authority</i>	How can teachers regain and maintain their authority in a democratic learning environment?	We explore the nature of teacher authority, rules, discipline, freedom, and punishment. We examine whether true authority is compatible with democracy and freedom.
Section Five: <i>Teachers as 'knowledge-workers'</i>	Should teachers adopt the role of imparter of content knowledge, developer of skills, or facilitator of learner-centred development?	We examine whether this is an 'either/or' choice, or whether there is an alternative. We also explore what we mean by the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'teaching'.

Section	Critical question	Exploration
Section Six: <i>Teachers, values and society</i>	What kind of role should teachers play in influencing the values of learners? Should they attempt to teach values or try to be neutral? On what should they base moral choices and decisions in the classroom?	We explore what we mean by 'values' and examine whether moral values can be 'taught' – whether they are merely a matter of preference or relative to one's culture. How can we choose sound values for the learning environment?
Section Seven: <i>Making a difference</i>	What qualities do teachers need in order to 'make a difference'?	We examine what makes for 'extended professionalism', especially reflective practice, experimentation and risk-taking, and the notion of 'agency'.

Choices

Teachers are required to make professional choices in all sorts of situations. As they prepare or give lessons, relate to parents, and participate in unions or professional associations, teachers make hundreds of decisions, judgements and commitments – all of which involve *choosing*.

Some of these choices are momentary and immediate, others are long-term, and slow to reveal their results. Both kinds may have important consequences for other human beings. This is one of the reasons why this module takes questions about *professionalism* seriously.

So, as you study each section in this module, keep in mind the following questions:

What choices do I have about the various roles I might play as a teacher?

Why do some choices make more sense than others?

What practical challenges do these choices present?

While these questions and this module do not focus on specific teaching strategies, which are the subject of other modules in this series (*Getting Practical* and *Using Media in Teaching*), we have taken care to illustrate each section with many practical examples, and have designed some of the activities and case studies to take you back into the everyday practice of teaching.

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