Reading 4

Teachers, moral agency, and the reconstruction of schooling in South Africa

Aslam Fataar and Andrew Patterson

Focusing on difficult schools that may share some of the characteristics of the school described in Reading 2, Fataar and Patterson's study looks at how teachers in such schools ***experience*** teaching, how ***they see themselves***, and how ***this influences their practice***.

The article is interesting because it avoids focusing on what teachers or teacher organizations ***say*** about transformation and reconstruction in education, or on how teachers are represented in education department ***policy***. Instead it examines what teachers' ***actual behaviour*** tells us about how they see themselves and their schools, and how this shapes what they do, or don't do, in those schools.

The writers distinguish between two extremes of South African schooling – the ***functional school*** in which the necessary structures and leadership are in place so that systematic learning can take place in an orderly way, and the ***dysfunctional school*** of which the opposite is true. Though most schools have some features of ***both*** these types, the distinction helps us to make sense of the vast differences between schools in this country.

The writers then identify two ***unproductive*** ways in which the staffs and management of ***dysfunctional*** schools typically experience schooling and see themselves. Finally, they analyse three typical ways of coping that teachers may adopt as responses to their experience of working in dysfunctional schools.

Notes

Although the language of this article is more academic than that in the rest of the readings, don't be put off. Read through the article, don't worry too much about any difficult sentences, and focus on understanding the five key concepts mentioned alongside.

This edited excerpt is from Fataar, A. and Patterson, A. 1998. 'Teachers, moral agency, and the reconstruction of schooling in South Africa'. Unpublished paper delivered at the World Conference of Comparative Education Societies, University of Cape Town.

Reading

The 'functional' school

universally respected: respected by everyone in the school

intra-school cohesion: the different departments within the school staff work together

The functional school has the organizational resources, the managerial and leadership capacity, and a sufficiently motivated teacher corps to respond with creativity to change. The learning environment in such a school is shaped by systematic order and a ***universally respected*** set of rules and obligations. Staff politics and educational politics are managed subject to the primary goal of maintaining a healthy teaching and learning environment. Teachers' allegiance to this goal is shaped by ***intra-school cohesion*** and by consensus among the staff, rather than imposed through external political influences. At the functional school parents, teachers, and students conduct themselves according to a shared understanding of their individual and collective roles. They subscribe to such an environment because they believe this holds promise for the school's success, and because this would give comparative advantage to their graduates in later life.

Teachers at these schools are not unaffected by stress brought on by policy changes, but they operate in terms of an institutional culture and a leadership structure that enable adaptation, and the incorporation of innovation. Teachers at functional schools are more likely to experience increased levels of stress that result from pressure brought to bear on these schools by a fee-paying parent community's insistence on quality education. Concomitantly, there is greater attention payed by governing bodies and professional leadership to ensuring that teachers meet these demands. The head and senior teachers may be obliged to take on additional teaching and other responsibilities. The result is that workloads increase.

However, in this environment, the potentially corrosive effect of stress on the individual and institution is limited. The increased workload is spread more or less evenly among the teaching staff. The existence of clear lines of responsibility in the functional school facilitates the management of transformation at the school level. Confusion or ambiguity in the different roles assigned to teachers is minimized. The responsibility for charting the implementation of change falls on the school's management, or on teachers who are delegated or mandated to do this job. Administrative and support structures are effective and the staff meet performance criteria, doing what is required of them. Thus, despite the increased workloads, teachers are positioned to maintain a positive attitude about their jobs and a positive self-concept of themselves as teachers. What could have been a very difficult situation is thus managed successfully, in effect minimizing stress levels of teachers and serving to maintain the school's quality output.

The 'dysfunctional' school

The situation is quite different at the dysfunctional school. Usually, but not exclusively found in working-class non-white neighbourhoods, this type of school is characterized by what has been termed 'the lack of a culture of learning and teaching' (***Chisholm and Vally, 1996***). The impact on the school of youth and gang subcultures operating in its immediate external environment distracts attention from the school's primary function as a learning institution. The school is confronted with having to deal with student welfare concerns emanating, for example, from disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances or disrupted family structures. Through a combination of historical disadvantage, and the impact of working-class and youth cultures, teachers in dysfunctional schools are caught up in the daily grind of survival.

emanating from: coming from; originating from

Students' indifferent or ***apathetic*** orientations to school are shaped by their exposure to attractive youth subcultures and the lack of educational support structures, sport and recreational facilities. High current levels of unemployment and negative perceptions of future employment prospects cause students to discount the value of school attendance as a means of securing jobs. They carry these orientations into the classrooms where their lack of motivation results in disruptive behaviour that impacts negatively on learning. The abolition of corporal punishment, instead of creating a human rights friendly learning climate, has added to the breakdown of order and discipline in these schools. Numbers of teachers feel exposed and vulnerable.

apathetic: lacking in interest or the will to participate actively

The dysfunctional school is characterized by a disorderly, if not chaotic, environment. There are intermittent interruptions in the school's daily programme. Starting and closing times are seldom consistent. The shortened school day becomes more of a norm that an exception. Late-coming by students and teachers is a perennial problem. Bunking by students, who either do not come to school at all, or abscond in the middle of the day, prevents teachers from establishing learning continuity. The ***imperative*** to generate a healthy learning culture is frustrated by the absence of a consistent and stable routine in the student population. In communities with low levels of school experience and adult illiteracy, parents lack confidence to intervene in the school because of their unfamiliarity with the institution, and out of ***deference*** to the academic status of teachers. Teachers are faced with the daunting task of having to innovate and implement system change against this background. There is potential for teachers who conduct their activities in such an environment to be highly pressured (***Weekly Mail & Guardian; 12–18/6/98***).

imperative: strong need

deference to: respect for

To stop here would be to avoid looking beyond the socio-economic context and behind the surface appearance of chaos in many

schools. It is necessary to consider whether dysfunctional schools display consistent patterns of thought or behaviour that represent individual and institutional responses to the new policy demands.

Moral minimizing

Teachers in the dysfunctional school may hold strong negative convictions about the ***tenability*** of improving their school's functioning and about their school's ability to deal with system change. ***Innovations***, they believe, can succeed in their impoverished schools only if preceded by the stabilisation of, and improvement in, the school environment, as well as through vast increases in learning resources delivered by the state education department. It is held that without such prior interventions the innovations envisaged in the South African Schools Act and Curriculum 2005 have little chance of success.

tenability: the ability of an idea to be supported in argument

innovations: newly introduced policies or practices

Having accepted the difficulty of their situation, these teachers view their work in terms of what may be called a 'moral minimizing' approach. This refers to the development among teachers of an identity that is rooted in the helplessness that derives from the apparent impossibility of changing their school contexts. Teachers employ a discourse that ***diffuses*** moral responsibility, where the impoverished environment within which they work is – in many cases – taken to justify minimum participation in schooling processes. This does not necessarily mean that teachers take conscious or deliberate decisions about radically reducing their work output. But decreased commitment is based on their own self-definition as 'victims', which in turn justifies low levels of participation and soft commitment almost as a moral right. Thus, personal moral responsibility has been handed over to the state and is conditional on the state's capacity to deliver.

diffuses: spreads (moral responsibility) so widely that no individual feels responsible

This may be reinforced in the mindset of many teachers who, conditioned by the power of the apartheid state – as virtually omnipotent – believed and still believe that the new state has the same powers, failing to recognize that the new government is constrained by its democratic constitution, the consequences of the negotiated transition, and by the economic constraints of neo-liberalism. The Gauteng Culture of Learning Report observed that there was a '(m)isplaced and disarming hope that the new dispensation at the national and the provincial levels would automatically translate into better schools, (which) accentuated the ***pervasive*** sense of powerlessness and hopelessness' (***Gauteng, 1996:1***).

pervasive: felt in every part; widespread

'Moral minimizing' represents a range of attitudinal and behavioural response sets that individual teachers may adopt as defence reactions to the difficult context to which they are exposed daily at work. It is a way of coping with the stress produced by an historically impoverished environment, and by impending policy change, both of which serve to

compound the normal ***stressors*** associated with the activity of teaching. It is suggested that these patterns that appear to preserve individual integrity and reduce the effects of stress may have ***pernicious*** long-term effects on institutional and personal functioning.

stressors: factors that cause stress

pernicious: extremely harmful

Moral diffusion

The individual coping response of 'moral minimizing' may be reinforced by an institutional coping response within the dysfunctional school that derives from what will be called ***'moral diffusion'.*** This occurs where the management of the dysfunctional school cannot muster the moral authority to recruit teachers into a process whereby the staff as a whole may collectively set and engage with a vision for their school. Years of associating school leadership with political illegitimacy under apartheid have brought about an impoverished mode of school management that is widespread. The role of principal was politically ***tainted*** by ***proximity*** with the apartheid state's political bureaucracy: 'In many school communities, all personnel from education departments – especially inspectors – were rejected. Furthermore, the virtual collapse of the culture of teaching and learning in many urban and rural schools has eroded the confidence of school principals and heads of departments' (***Department of Education, 1996a: 19–20***). Therefore, strong leadership driven by a vision of fundamental school improvement that is found in functional schools is thus ruled out.

diffusion: spreading in all directions, not concentrated

tainted: infected by association with something harmful

proximity: closeness to; association with

The role of principal is shorn of the moral authority to make demands on the staff. In the absence of a legitimate centre from which the ***divergent*** groupings and ***disparate*** forms of self-identification among teachers on a staff could be drawn together communally, senior management and particularly principals of dysfunctional schools are forced to interpret their leadership role as one of mediating between conflicting groups and alliances in the school.

divergent, disparate: quite different

There are three possible responses that teachers can adopt within this management environment, each of which reflects a different means of coping.

In the first place, moral diffusion in school management makes it possible for individual teachers or groups of teachers to ***appropriate*** certain vital functions of the school. They tie themselves to these functions to reinforce their indispensability. For example, one or two teachers normally do fundraising. These teachers may work extremely hard to swell the school coffers – funds that will be spent on various necessary consumable items. On the basis of this work they may influence the way the school is organized. They may dictate policy on financial expenditure and even the use of school time for fundraising. The fundraisers adopt a strategy that enables them to dictate the terms of their participation in respect of what they do and in terms of workload. They may be less con-

appropriate: to take for themselves

sistent in teaching their classes, thereby contributing to unequal distribution of workloads. However, colleagues acquiesce for fear of losing the services of these teachers on the basis of their supposed indispensability.

Other subgroups dominate other aspects of the schools' functioning, ranging from sport and extramural activities, to matric teaching, to teacher union work and controlling religious affairs. Thus, conflicting and non-educational or non-instructive demands are made on the time of staff and students, which can have the effect of reducing the quality of education provided and indirectly raising stress in other colleagues. This is further complicated by staff tension around issues such as religious intolerance, political rivalry, and 'unfair' workloads.

Second, there is a silent majority who disengage, choosing to confine themselves to their classrooms in anticipation of the bell at the end of the day. Under cover of the lack of management coherence and lack of moral authority to make demands on staff, there is no pressure on them to increase their output with a view to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the lack of community leverage to influence the teachers' work permits their diminishing output. A vicious cycle thus operates in terms of which low levels of teacher output lead to low levels of educational quality. This in turn generates a low self-esteem in teachers. While they do not necessarily suffer from increased stress as a response to the new policy requirements, their choice not to respond positively to innovation and change results in their loss of self-worth as teachers.

acquiesce: accept without raising an argument

Third, there is the core of hard-working teachers who may become involved in many aspects of the school. They take on ever-more work as other teachers disengage. They may get caught up in doing most of the social welfare and pastoral work. These teachers are likely to stay absent least, thus having to take over the load of absent colleagues' work. The weight of their contribution is hidden by an inefficient school administrative system that obscures accurate assessment of workloads. They run a high risk of burnout if they stay, but they are also likely candidates for opting out of teaching in search of a better working environment. The seepage of such teachers out of dysfunctional school and into better-run schools – even out of the schooling system – erodes the capacity of the dysfunctional school to deliver quality education.

leverage: here this means power

In the context of moral diffusion, the 'successful' principal is the one who manages to balance contending power groups on the staff. The dysfunctional school therefore 'succeeds' in keeping afloat, but only to the extent that it reproduces the existing school culture. This makes it difficult for schools to implement processes of change, which, in turn, raises the level of frustration experienced by principals.

In certain South African provinces, managerial capacity has been further eroded as a consequence of the teacher rationalization that has

taken place over the last five years where many schools have lost their senior management. Young teachers have accepted accelerated promotion to take up senior management positions without the requisite skills and competencies that might enable them to combat institutional moral diffusion. New managers who were formerly part of some clique or faction on the school staff, and therefore achieved their new-found status through the support of such factions, may find themselves thereby entrapped in systems of patronage and ***cronyism***.

patronage and cronyism: the expectation that favours will be done for those staff members who supported one's promotion; the need to favour one's allies