

Why so little about teachers?

Laurence Wright

Many must have noticed that in all the fervent, anxious discussion about our education crisis, in the print media, on air, and online, hardly anyone mentions teachers.

The debate is all about textbook delivery, mud schools, water and electricity problems, toilet provision, on site security, overcrowded classrooms, corruption, recalcitrant unions, the digital divide, getting parents involved, inadequate subject advisors or principals, and generally poor management, organisation and oversight.

These issues are undoubtedly there, and very important. But even if everything else were put right, we are still wholly reliant on the calibre of our teachers to ensure good educational performance.

Consider the needs of your own child. You can try for a good school, in a good area, but when that child walks into a classroom what matters more than anything else is the education, training and motivation of the teacher he or she finds there. Most children do not have the luxury of choice – they must attend the local school – where everything depends on the teacher.

Yet apart from moves towards ‘inspecting’ teachers, or assessing their suitability as exam markers, or incentivising them through prizes and awards, who is considering the systematic in-service education and training of teachers? We take for granted that our teachers have been properly educated and trained so that they can realise their ambition of becoming inspiring, knowledgeable, and successful teachers. Is this true? We have many very fine teachers; but we also have many who struggle to teach the curriculum because they themselves never received an adequate education.

This is not about ‘beating up’ on teachers, criticising them, or adding to their burdens. It is asking a serious question about their initial education, their subject knowledge and proficiency, and the quality, depth and consistency of the educational support and enrichment offered to teachers during their years of service. Not short, random pull-out seminars (often of doubtful quality) are what is required, but genuine, discipline specific, ongoing educational enrichment and support.

Educational theory and pedagogy should be up to date, but it is subject content and theory that especially need renewing. The subject base has to be revitalised for every teacher and imbibed for its own sake. Disciplinary knowledge needs refreshing on a regular basis. If uneven professionalism among teachers is at the heart of our educational problems, then we are better off admitting this, being open about it, than we are by pretending that addressing all the ancillary issues will fix our ailing education system.

What we need to see is thorough in-service re-education and training of our teachers becoming a lead project in every province. Universities, not just Education Faculties, throughout the country must come to the party, in addition to the Department. Some academic departments do accept the responsibility, but many consider schooling too far removed from their academic preoccupations to warrant adequate and proportionate attention. University departments should consider their responsibilities to their own disciplines in the school system. Seriously.

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