

Supporting Teachers to Enhance Students Success in the USA and South Africa

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Abstract

Teachers have become the major topic of discussion, occasionally blamed for students' poor performance, failure, and poor implementation of new reforms. This paper explores and discusses the recent issues with which teachers in the United States of America and South Africa are confronted, including teacher layoffs, abolishment of teacher tenure, evaluation of teachers by their students' tests score, teacher lack of support, deteriorating school condition, and mixed messages over what teachers should do. In discussing these issues, the paper raises many questions and concerns and argues that too much of a pressure on teachers will not necessarily bring the desired outcomes, but rather be the recipe for disaster of our education system. To conclude, it proposes some suggestions to be considered in order to change the current status quo and yield the desired results.

Key Words: layoff, teacher tenure, support, failure, education system, school condition

Introduction

Schools are complex systems made up of parts with greater interdependence than earlier believed (Leithwood and Poplin, 1992). Leithwood and Poplin (1992) argues that failure to acknowledge this complexity is the second reason for the predictable failure of educational reforms. According to Ginott (1972) teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle, as he observes, is that at times they accomplish this impossible task (p.15). Teachers have been blamed for students' poor performance, failure, and poor implementation of new reforms (Soske, 1992; Rothstein, 1999). Soske (1992) indicates that some reform movements view teachers as part of the obstacle in achieving successful educational reforms. She argues that the teacher-blaming syndrome is clearly a women blaming phenomenon, which is a feminist issue as more women are in teaching. To delineate the teacher blaming syndrome, Sanchez (May 10, 2010) ask if when schools are failing and students are not learning, who is responsible. He states that the answer these days appear to be teachers as most of the current educational reform focus is on making them accountable for their students' performance.

This paper explores and discusses some of the issues that confront teachers in two countries, the United States of America and South Africa. Jansen (2006) contends that the parallels between South Africa and the United States run deep. In his chapter, *The Ties that Bind: Race and restitution in Education Law and Policy in South Africa and the United States of America*, Jansen highlights both the parallels and the differences. Ball (2000) note that these two countries have experienced similar histories of social, economic and educational inequalities and now they both perceive the state of education for economically disadvantaged population to be in crisis. Ball argues that both countries have the potential to learn a great deal and to teach others a great deal as they strive to prepare teachers in a global society.

Although a comparative study between the United States of America and South Africa may sound inappropriate, we posit that there are some critical lessons to be learned from such a comparison. The United States is a first world country and one of the most advanced countries in science, technology and sheer economy production on the one hand.

On the other hand, South Africa is recognized as a fast developing country with a fledgling democracy. It has been democratic since April 27, 1994 and has a population of about 49.99 million (Statistic South Africa, 2010). Its GDP is about \$286 Billion (Trading Economics, 2011) and has a 24% reported unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2011 (Statistic South Africa, 2011). The US has been democratic for more than 230 years now, a population of over 310 million and has a GDP of \$14.256 Trillion (Trading Economics, 2011) with 9.2% reported unemployment rate (Trading Economics, 2011). According to Lam (1999), links between education and the distribution of income has long been fundamental to research on the economics of inequality. He argues that theoretical models and vast empirical evidence points to a large explanatory role for schooling in the distribution of income, especially the distribution of labor earning. It is with this belief that we mention the economic status of these two countries in this paper.

Regarding education system, the US has a decentralized education system based upon the federal Constitution, which reserves power over education to the states and local authorities, and to individual schools and institutions of higher education. US Education is compulsory for all students until ages sixteen to eighteen depending on the individual state. Education follows a pattern similar to that in many systems (USNEI, 2008). Early childhood education is followed by elementary school, middle school, high school, and then tertiary education. Much of the control of American public schools lies in the hands of each local school district. Thus, the federal government does not operate public schools but each of the fifty states has its own Department of Education that sets guidelines for the schools of that state. Public schools also receive funding from the individual state, and from local property taxes. Most high school students graduate at the age of seventeen or eighteen-years-old. Postsecondary education includes non-degree programs that lead to certificates and diplomas plus six degree levels: associate, bachelor, first professional, master, advanced intermediate, and research doctorate. Adult and continuing education, plus special education, cut across all educational levels. In the US there are about 4500 higher educational institutions (HEI) that include Universities, Colleges, and junior colleges. The regulations and curriculum for HEI are monitored and often funded (total funding runs into billions of US dollars every year) by the US Department of Education.

Parallel to the US, the South African Constitution declares that all South Africans have the right to a basic education including adult basic education and further education, with the government obligated to make this education available and accessible. This is done through investing in education. The country provides education through two ministries: the Basic Department of Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training. The Department of Basic Education comprises of the General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET) bands. Under the South African Schools Act of 1996, education is compulsory for all South Africans from the age of seven (grade 1) to age 15, or the completion of grade 9. The GET band also includes Adult Basic Education and Training whereas the FET band spans from grades 10 to 12, and also includes career-oriented education and training offered in other Further Education and Training institutions – technical colleges, community colleges and private colleges. In South Africa the central government provides a national framework for school policy, but administrative responsibility lies with the provinces. Power is further devolved to grassroots level via elected school governing bodies, which have a significant say in the running of their schools. The Ministry of Higher Education and Training is responsible for tertiary education up to doctorate level, and technical and vocational training. It also oversees the numerous sector education and training authorities as higher education is also offered at hundreds of private institutions, which are registered with the Department of Education to confer specific degrees and diplomas.

Issues that confronts teachers

Teacher layoffs

Recently, several states in the USA have been warning teachers and their unions about the looming and planned teacher layoffs since 2010. This move is envisaged to be one of those terrible times in the teaching profession. The National Council on Teacher Quality (2010) indicates that statistics from the Bureau of Labor estimated that nearly 60,000 teachers were laid off in 2009, a crisis that could be the same in 2010 based on the state budget gaps and deficit projections, including the federal stimulus funding already spent.

Due to the fact that several states have not laid teachers off for many years, the move apparently is not fully known regarding the kind of repercussions it will have on the profession. Sam Dillon (*New York Times* March 30, 2011) reported that the New York mayor painted a gloomy picture with the numbers of teachers who have already been laid off. Dillon notes that despite this picture the mayor can still avoid many of those teacher layoffs. Sonya Langford (*The News Tribune*, February 13, 2011) highlights that in 2010 the Legislature passed legislation that commissioned teacher evaluation pilots across the state. More than 30 school districts are working to develop strong, research-based evaluation systems that help principals and teachers improve. Fourteen other districts are using effective, tested evaluation tools to strengthen the quality of teaching and teachers.

Critics of the teacher layoff move have raised several concerns including the impact that this will have on student performances as it will require reshuffling of the staff members. Some have argued that it will cause an annual reshuffling of staff members and some teachers will be forced to change school, grades levels/subjects, creating a chronic instability that educators call “teacher churn” (Dillon, March 30, 2011). Dillon reports that school superintendents raised their concerns that this move hurts the school cohesion; it undermines student achievement, and ruptures the relationship with the parents. Many argue that it will lead to the loss of many young talented teachers as they usually use the “Last In First Out” (LIFO) model, also known as “Last hired, first fired” in these layoffs. Additionally, it will erode the hard-won diversity in the teacher corps. Also argued is that teacher layoffs will have greatest impact in schools that are in the poorest neighborhoods, which are schools with the highest concentration of Black and Latinos, often having the least experienced teachers.

The discourse about teacher layoff has created many divisions. Some groups argue that the teacher layoffs should not solely employ the LIFO model but should also focus on the senior members of the teaching staff. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality (2010), “proponents of basing teacher layoffs on seniority alone say the process is more objective and thus fairer. No judgment or discretion is needed. Seniority-based layoffs also protect those who have invested the most time in a school district, rewarding teachers for their loyalty, and are sensitive to employees who may find it difficult to find a new job late in their careers.” The other argument raised is that laying-off senior teachers will save a lot of money as they apparently have higher salaries than the new cadre of teachers, and lead to more jobs (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2010). It has been opined that many senior teachers are not prepared to adopt the 21st century teaching and learning approaches recommended by the ongoing new reforms. Thus, laying them off is justified as they sometimes resist the desired change (Sempowicz, 2008; Sikes, 1992). The National Council on Teacher Quality (2010) argues that the assumption that a seniority system produces the best results for children, under the assertion that the most experienced teachers have greatest impact on student learning has yet to be proven true. A conclusive body of research finds that teachers in their third year of teaching are generally about as effective as long-tenured teachers. Nevertheless, some advocates disagree as they argue that even the promising new cadre of teachers requires some mentoring and guidance that can mainly be offered by the veteran teachers. An example of what happened in Cleveland, Ohio, after teacher layoffs has been cited to allay the negative repercussions of the planned move. Bottom line “the churn caused by teacher layoffs can be extremely disruptive and hurt students’ achievement” (Michael Casserly).

Sonya Langford (*The News Tribune*, February 13, 2011) argues that if anything, we should be training more eager, motivated educators to teach in classrooms where children can receive the individualized attention they need and deserve. Speaking about the House Bill 1609, Langford asserts that the bill discourages people from entering the teaching profession, because instead of encouraging them to grow and improve their teaching skills, it pits one teacher against another. She added that the bill does not improve class size, prevent teacher layoffs, and does not protect new teachers from layoffs. It does not help teachers improve their skills. This bill does not resolve funding issues and does not allow for local decision-making. It absolutely does not encourage collaboration in professional learning communities that we know improves teacher effectiveness.

Abolishment of teacher tenure

Teacher effectiveness has recently come under a great scrutiny and has triggered a hot political debate in many states. Discussion regarding the abolishment of tenure has been gaining some momentum. Consequently, a number of states including Colorado, Florida and others have recently passed Bills to abolish teacher tenure. Whereas other states such as Ohio, Maryland and others have lengthened the number of years teachers have to wait before becoming eligible for tenure.

Different schools of thought have and are continuously going toe-to-toe on the issue. One school of thought believes that teacher tenure is a necessity for the teachers as it protects them from unfair lay-off. The group that argues **for** teacher tenure believes that K-12 teacher tenure does not protect them from being fired, but rather guarantees that the dismissal will be for a cause (NPR: Alan Greenblatt, 4/29/2010). Alan Greenblatt states that the advent of tenure was meant to protect teachers, in the olden days, who were often fired for reasons that had nothing to do with their work. This was especially when a new political party came to power or principal wanted to offer jobs to friends. Thus, the states passed the law in order to protect good teachers from arbitrary actions. Cited by Alan Greenblatt, Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers union argues "Due process is necessary in order to avoid the type of abuses of the past. It's very upsetting that in 2010, under the guise of improving schools, we suddenly get rid of protections from firing teachers for inadequate or wrong reasons."

However, the other school of thought that is **against** tenure believes and insists that tenure hurts the students as it is hard to fire incompetent teachers. It is believed that "tenure has proved to be just a horrible barrier to getting rid of that small percentage of teachers who are just not effective" (Alan Greenblatt, 4/29/2010). *The New York Times* recently quoted Michelle Rhee, who was Chancellor of the Washington Public Schools as saying that "tenure is the holy grail of teacher unions, but has no educational value for kids; it only benefits adults. If we can put veteran teachers who have tenure in a position where they do not have it, which would help us to radically increase our teacher quality. And maybe other districts would try it, too." It has also been argued that "What's become so problematic about tenure is that it's awarded almost automatically, without regard to performance in student learning" (Alan Greenblatt, 4/29/2010, NPR).

Evaluation of teachers by their students' test scores

Reports about how ineffective teachers has become abound nowadays. According to Diane Ravitch (2011: *The New York Times*) the cause of this attitude towards teachers was the result of the No Child Left Behind which declared that "Any school that cannot reach that utopian goal will eventually be declared 'failing,' with dire consequences, including firing the staff and closing the school." Diane Ravitch believes that the assumption behind this punitive approach is that poor student performance is caused by incompetent teachers and principals, despite the fact that decades of social science show that family income is the most reliable predictor of test scores.

Reports from various states speak to the proposal of teacher evaluation move that is being planned and undertaken by some states in the US. This comes at a time when most teachers still feel that their evaluation is unfair (Bivona, 2002). Donna Gordon Blankship (*Associated Press*: 3/13/2011) reports that more nuanced teachers evaluation systems are being developed at least partly in response to the Federal Race to the Top competition for school dollars. To give teachers and principals a more useful feedback, Blankship reports that the new system will grade them on a four-point scale, with pilot being underway in some districts. In Washington, all the districts will be required to adopt the new system envisaged to start in the 2013-2014 school year. So far eight criteria will be used to evaluate teachers, though the specific descriptions explaining what these mean and how to tell if an individual has succeeded will be left up to the individual district.

The criteria will include: high expectations; effective teaching practice; recognizing individual student learning needs; focus on subject; safe and productive learning environment; use of multiple student data elements to modify instruction; communication with parents and the school community and collaboration. The motion has also be seconded by the National Council on Teacher Quality {NCTQ} (2010) which maintains that given the fact that student progress depends most on the quality of the teachers to whom they are assigned, the council proposed that teacher performance should be a factor in any layoff. The NCTQ asserts that students' needs should be paramount when considering how best to handle employment decisions, and that the academic costs of laying off teachers without attention to classroom performance are too onerous. Boyd, Lankford, Loeb and Wyckoff (2010) contend that layoffs determined by a measure of teacher effectiveness result in a more effective workforce than would be the case with seniority-based layoffs.

Lack of Teacher Support

Though South Africa may seem safe from the above issues confronted by the US teachers, several unique issues plague their system. These issues include the continuous lack of teacher support necessary for the new reform implementations in many provinces in South Africa (Bantwini, 2010; Bloch, 2000).

Bantwini and Diko (2011) note that teacher complains about not receiving support from their local district agents who are tasked to assist them in some of their school needs. This is despite the South African National Treasury (2007) message that “investing in people and ensuring that skills development complements employment creation are critical platforms on which to build future prosperity.” The South African curriculum literature contends that scores of teachers has huge challenges with content knowledge of the subject they teach (Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2007). This issue has been attributed as contributing to the poor student performances and low pass rates. Studies shows that teachers, especially from the Black communities characterized by low socio-economic status, those who received their teaching qualification during the Apartheid era mostly have content knowledge deficiencies an outcome of the education they received under the Apartheid regime (Bantwini, 2010; Fiske and Ladd, 2004).

Aggravating the situation is that the post-Apartheid curriculum mirrors the constitutional emphasis on equity and human rights; requiring teachers who are ready and able to deliver it. According to Fiske and Ladd (2004:154-55), the new curriculum instruction reflect the *social values that define the new South Africa* - peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism, and democracy. Thus the new curriculum fosters the universal access and common expectations for all learners. It stand as a statement of what all citizens of the new South Africa should know and be able to do as workers, citizens, and fulfilled individuals. The content of the new curriculum had to be *non-authoritarian* and be *delivered in a democratic fashion*. Fiske and Ladd note that instruction in the apartheid era had been universally teacher-centered and emphasized rote learning rather than critical thinking and open-ended problem solving. Instead, the new curriculum focuses on the child, promote active learning, and give each learner some responsibility for the shaping of his or her own education. Thus, the implementation of this curriculum requires teachers who received effective teacher education; which cannot be said about most teachers in South Africa. Highlighting some of the issues, Angie Motshekga (DoE, 2011) the South African Basic Education Minister mentions argued that South Africa needs “Teachers who are confident, well-trained, continually improving their capabilities, committed to giving learners the best possible education and enjoy job satisfaction due to decent conditions of service.” Additionally she noted “we also have challenges to surmount. For instance, we still have a high percentage of learners leaving the system without having mastered the necessary knowledge and skills. More worrying is the fact that these challenges are more prevalent among learners from poor and rural communities.”

Bloch (2000) contends that South Africa is a country on the brink of expanded growth; however, the current production of high-level skills is insufficient to meet the stresses and demands. He notes that teachers have suffered the most from the effects of policy overload and the failure to ask crucial micro-level questions as to what could enhance classroom success. In addition, Bloch mentions that many skilled teachers were lost during an ill-advised retrenchment process. This has also resulted in low morale among the teachers, making some quit their jobs and take offers in countries like England, Saudi-Arabia and other more developed countries. Even those who are still in the system, research shows that many have expressed desire to leave the profession for other jobs, while some contemplate retirement (Bantwini, 2010).

Deteriorating school conditions

Seventeen years after South Africa became a democracy, the issues of inequality in various provinces and schools still haunt the country. Natrass and Seekings (2001) note the inequality in the post-apartheid South Africa as driven by two incomes gaps: between an increasingly multiracial upper class and everyone and between a middle class of mostly urban, industrial, or white-collar workers and a marginalized class of black unemployed and rural poor. These authors argue that a reduction in inequality will require a more egalitarian educational system. Nevertheless, Bloch (2000) observes that many township and rural schools have been described as sinkholes where children are warehoused rather than educated. Based on this observation, Bloch views education as “contributing to marginalization and inequality rather than social advance and cohesion for many, especially the poor and rural.” In his observation, Bloch argues that education is failing to make the grade in a way that particularly impacts on poor, rural and township schools. To drive the point home, Bloch estimates that for 60-80% of children, education reinforces marginalization, condemning them to a second-class economy of unemployment and survival. Clearly, the picture drawn by Bloch is scary and an indication of a serious problem.

Nearly twenty years into democracy, a large number of schools, especially in poor provinces such as Eastern Cape, Limpopo to mention a few, have schools that struggle to attract teachers. In these schools, the few teachers they have are overloaded with teaching loads as well as extra-curricular activities.

South Africa has recently seen a plethora of public servant strikes. Teachers are among those public servants who have on several occasions embarked on a national strike leaving behind all those students from the previously disadvantaged communities, who are the ones mostly affected. Research and reports continuously shows that safety in schools has also been another issues confronting teachers (Bantwini forthcoming).

Confusion over what teachers should do

In South Africa, the dawn of democracy in 1994 came with new demands for social change. Since this advent, teachers have been bombarded by reforms after reforms and one new educational policy after another. The South Africa Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga (DoE, 2011) recently argued that in the South African situation, demands for education reform continue to be informed by the need to address and redress the legacy of apartheid and segregation. The minister noted that as education stakeholders and politicians review policies and develop strategies for improving quality, their historical context demands that they also consider the question of equity. Despite the stated progress, teachers complain about the confusing messages they receive in regard to the reform, an element that necessitate support from their education department. These new developments have been accompanied by a strong and harsh criticism of their work and mostly referring to the students' poor performances or failure in their end of the year examination as well as in the international comparative studies. The media as well as some high-ranking government officials have openly degraded teachers to people who hardly know what they are doing. This unfavorable discourse mostly has coincided with teachers' dissatisfaction with their salary leading to national teacher public strikes that have left many students, especially those from the low socio economic background without teachers in classrooms.

Implications for education in these countries

Common among the issues that are confronting teachers from both, South Africa and the United States of America, is the concern about students and their education. Citizens who are concerned about the future of their children mostly believe that it depends on the education they receive. So whether teachers are laid-off or evaluated, the primary intention is to improve the schooling system in general. Obviously, this is a very fair, reasonable and responsible concern. However, some of the questions that need to be interrogated in this process include the assessment of whether the actions taken under the auspices of saving/improving children's education are yielding the desired results. Also, what are the implications of these actions on teachers, students and education as a whole in these countries?

Bloch (2000) contends that it is imperative that we acknowledge the complexity of education. He argues that everyone who has been to school thinks that they have the solution yet education is deeply embedded in history, the social and economic past as well as the present. This all means that solutions cannot be simple and also implies that there are no quick fixes. Bloch argues that unraveling this puzzle will take much work, thinking, organizing, and great efforts to build consensus and direction around core priorities. This is truly so because many of the problems are hardly of schooling's making but they all have impact on what happens in the classroom, and are all areas that may be difficult terrains for decisive intervention by educational authorities, certainly acting in isolation. Similarly, students' poor performances and failures cannot be solely blamed on the teachers.

Students spend at most eight hours with the teachers while they spend the rest of their time away from the school. Thus, there are several factors that come into play when it comes to students' performances. Sarason (1990) contends that the failure of educational reforms rest in large measure on existing power relationships in schools, relationships among teachers and administrators, parents and school staffs, students and teachers. As they note, school administrators must focus their attention on using facilitative power to make changes in their schools employing transformational leadership skills. Transformational leadership is viewed as leadership that facilitates the redefinition of a people's mission and vision, a renewal of their commitment and the restructuring of their systems for goal accomplishment (Roberts, 1985).

Literature indicates a growing inability to attract and keep good teachers, which results in new technologically oriented industries having a problem finding enough qualified employees (Glenn, 2000).

A factor contributing to this crisis could be the low teacher morale resulting from the several issues confronting teachers in their profession. Morale is viewed as specific human needs and individual perceptions of the environmental sources for the satisfaction of those needs (Coughlan, 1970), vital ingredient in the success of any human enterprise (Rempel and Bentley, 1970). According to Rempel and Bentley (1970), teacher morale is influenced by many personal and situational factors and is multidimensional in nature. When teachers are bombarded by news that they may be laid off or lose their work anytime or evaluated based on their students' performance, that gravely impact their work performances and morale, a crucial element in their work. Ellenburg (1972) argues that evidence exists which shows that when high morale exists productivity is increased. He notes that literature shows that students' achievement increased under teachers with high morale and decreased under teachers of low morale. He contends that morale affects more than just productivity or student achievement as it assists in establishing the character of a school. In Ellenburg observations, morale is one of the factors which may determine whether a school functions at its best, demanding and receiving the utmost from its students or whether the school plods along happy just to see the passing of another day.

Clearly, teachers need to be supported rather than be labeled especially in the media. In her study, Bivona (2002) found that most teachers are devoted to their job and sacrifice their own time for the sake of teaching. She also found that about 70% of the surveyed teachers reported to dedicate a significant amount of weekend time to lesson planning or grading and that they tend to work beyond their duty. Ellenburg (1972) recommends that administrators should strive to publicly support their staff as much as possible. He notes that private support is valuable and will aid in building teacher morale, however, public support is essential to the well being of individuals and the teachers as a whole. Needless to say, strong school leadership that will endeavor to protect and keep teachers focused is crucial. For example, Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi (2002) note that educators' beliefs and judgments about government intentions may be more or less accurate. They argue that school leaders may be in a position to recover at least some of the teacher commitment even to policy implementation lost when governments use authoritarian strategies. When teachers are confronted by these various challenges noted above, they need school leadership that will ensure a broader range of perspectives from which to interpret the problems or challenges by actively seeking different interpretations, being explicit about their own interpretations and placing individual problems in the larger perspective of the whole school and its overall directions (Leithwood and Poplin, 1992).

It is crucial that teachers are empowered and encouraged to do what is necessary by enhancing skills, district level support, access to materials, to issues such as discipline and time on task as these are some of the common issues in both countries especially in the low socio-economic communities. Thus, we should realize that what teachers do depends on their motivations, capacities, and the conditions under which they work (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). A use of commitment strategy, as Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi (2002) note, would acknowledge the legitimate concerns teachers have about the different types of resources they will need to implement new initiatives.

Conclusion

It is paramount that we acknowledge the depth and the nature of the problems confronting education. And in the process of trying to fix or resolve the issues or challenges confronted we should ensure that we do not destroy the morale of the teachers, as this will have negative impact on the teaching profession. We should also realize that how we treat teachers today might have an impact on the profession tomorrow. Also, of importance is that the teaching profession is not treated as unstable employment as this may threaten and eventually scare away prospective great teachers. We conclude that instead of exercising teacher layoffs due to budget constraints, the government should consider other means such as teacher redeployment to schools that are under staffed. This move will at least prevent the teaching profession from being viewed as an unstable. Moreover, we believe that teacher layoffs that are based on seniority is missing the point as they will lead to a barren profession with few if at all senior to mentor incoming novice teachers. There is no harm in teacher evaluation as long as it is done appropriately. Persistent harsh and unfavorable school conditions equally hurts the very same people, the children, we argue that we are protecting. Lastly, teachers need to be supported in every way possible, for without that support it is unlikely that they will succeed in their mission to educate future citizens.

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