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Directing youngsters towards teaching

CHALKLINES



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In the past two years I have worked very hard to generate enthusiasm among young people for this noble profession we call "teaching". But time after time, I have found young matriculants setting their gaze on becoming accountants, managers or — for the really smart ones — actuarial scientists.

This hurts. Not because I do not realise that young people, especially black matriculants, now have more options than my generation for whom teaching, nursing, library science and the priesthood were carefully circumscribed occupations. But I could not find more than two or three students in any school who would even contemplate becoming teachers. And among those who consider teaching (if you could find them), they tend to be the weaker students in academic terms. Teaching has, indeed, fallen on hard times.

The reasons for this disinterest in teaching are fairly clear to those of us who develop, support and learn from teachers. We have not yet succeeded in creating positive, attractive school and classroom environments for teachers and teaching. No professional thrives in depressing working conditions.

We have succumbed to persistent negative political and media messages about teaching. If the press and the politicians were to be believed, teachers are a hopeless, lazy and incompetent bunch. Well, guess who consumes these messages: young people. One of the main culprits was the television series *Yizo Yizo*; I simply cannot understand how supposedly intelligent producers could believe that persistent images of violence, rape and chaos in any way build pride and attachment to a profession.

And whatever hired economists tell us about teacher salaries, educators in this profession are not well paid. If this were the case, explain the logic of cross-border migrations of teachers not only from Africa to Europe, but from Zimbabwe to Botswana or Lesotho.

But teachers in the profession are not blameless. When I did an informal survey among white student teachers, I found that among the most important influences in their career choice were an outstanding teacher, a predictable teaching schedule and a stable school environment. These things do not cost money; they require effort.

In the end, our ability to make teaching attractive to young people will depend on nurturing, developing and celebrating role models in our profession. This country has produced some of the most outstanding teacher role models of the past 100 years; I think of ZK Matthews, Tamsanqa Kambule, Ernie Steenveld, Cynthia Mpati, Paul Galant and Harold Samuels. Where are the television documentaries on these teachers? The honorary degrees in their name? The dissertations on their achievements? The books on their legacy? These women and men inspired generations, and their stories need to be told and re-told in imaginative ways.

We need to consider other imaginative ways of making teaching attractive again to young people. I propose, at least as a temporary measure, that the government provides substantial bursaries to all young people who wish to become teachers, irrespective of the level of need or the subject of study.

I further propose that we consider paying student teachers to study teaching in the form of a stipend or allowance. Now this will no doubt inflame the unions, among others, but I cannot see the tide changing without dramatic interventions of this kind.

I also propose that student teachers are guaranteed positions in schools for at least

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two years. This would mean some tough negotiations with provincial government authorities, but it can be done.

But there is another side to this equation. Institutions should choose only the most talented and committed students to become teachers; that is, raise the bar so that we stop registering students in teacher education simply because they failed to make it into medical school or the economics faculty. In other words, we must begin to create for the profession a new class of prospective teachers who have the capacity and the commitment to radically transform our schools.

There are few professional acts more complex and demanding than teaching. The nonsense that teaching is about standing in front of a class must be jettisoned from the public mind. Teachers need a profound knowledge of their subject matter. They require an intimate knowledge of learners, and the equally important knowledge of how to teach learners with diverse backgrounds and needs as they move from one class or context to another. Teachers need an in-depth understanding of how knowledge can be organised through the curriculum to meet competing classroom and social demands; they need to have a broad repertoire of appropriate and efficacious assessment strategies. The mindless opinion that "I can teach because I went to school" is what destroys our profession.

In the end, the profession can only become a proud and elevated vocation for young people if we select prospective teachers more carefully, demand more from young people in their student teaching programmes, and make it worth their while to study teaching and become teachers. It can be done.

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