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# Why we need licences for our teachers

**A** young American filmmaker was recently assigned to teach an English matric class in Nyanga township, Cape Town, on an emergency basis because there was no permanent teacher.

She set aside her film project on schools and agreed to teach the Grade 12 class, in a depressed environment, with considerable success.

What struck her, she recalls, was that not once in many months of teaching did anyone put their head into the classroom to determine whether she could even teach.

In other words, in a grade where poor children have one chance to escape poverty - the matric exam - nobody even gave a damn whether the filmmaker could teach English at the level required.

The recent furore over the licensing of teachers, a random idea (not a policy) mentioned at a breakfast meeting by Education Minister Pandor, has drawn predictable responses.

The teacher unions resisted this casual idea with a ferocity not seen since the days of former minister Kader Asmal.

On the face of it, it's a puzzling response - until you realise what teacher licensing will mean for unions who make their millions (and their salaries) out of teacher membership.

The main goal of licensing teachers is to ensure that every pupil has a competent teacher. It is as simple as that.

Every parent, rich or poor, desires this simple competence for their chil-

They should prove they are qualified and competent to teach South African children, writes  
**Jonathan Jansen**

dren. The middle class parent gets this anyway, by sending their children to schools where the achievement track record tells them they will find competent teachers, at a price. The unionists, as we know, send their children to these same high-achieving schools. Poor parents, of course, do not have this option, and find themselves the victims of whoever shows up to teach, even if it is an untested American teacher trained in filmmaking.

It would be wonderful if we could claim that every teacher who graduates from university is automatically competent to teach.

For graduates of some of our universities, this is a reasonable assumption. But our main problem is the thousands of teachers currently in the system for whom we have absolutely no evidence of their competence to teach in their subject specialisations.

These are not only the tens of thousands of teachers who remain unqualified or underqualified, but also those who hold meaningless teaching certificates gained years ago from former colleges of education which became, with some notable exceptions, warehouses

for high school graduates with weak academic preparation and without a chance of finding their way into university-level training or the open job market.

The unions correctly claim that the emphasis should be on developing teachers.

But that cannot be an argument against teacher licensing. With or without a licensing system, we need to invest heavily in the professional development of teachers; smart nations, in the most successful economies, do that. But they also license their teachers.

I find it strange that we subject pupils



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to hundreds of tests and examinations during their 12 years of schooling, but balk at the idea of doing this for teachers.

I also find it strange that other professions - from law to accounting to medicine - have stringent tests of compe-

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tence to establish the ability to practice, but we do not have this for teaching. Teaching will remain, in my view, an under-valued profession unless and until it demands the same, or even superior, standards of competence from its practitioners.

The one thing we know for sure is that South Africa has two education systems - a small, high-achieving system for the racially mixed middle classes and a large, underperforming one for the black poor. We also know that the crucial variable that distinguishes these schools is the competence of the teachers. Or do we?

The only way to put this question to rest is to establish the baseline competence of every teacher in every school in South Africa.

With this information, drawn from multiple assessment instruments, we should do three things.

First, give the less-than-competent teachers two years in which to demonstrate their ability to teach; a conditional licence might be awarded to such teachers.

Second, invest in teacher development, focusing on those areas in which the targeted teachers need to raise their performance.

Third, test for competence again after two years, and make a decision as to whether this teacher should be allowed to teach our children, or not.

I do not think the poor will find this unreasonable.

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