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How do we know teachers are competent?

COMMENT

JONATHAN JANSEN



Tests should be introduced and licences issued to certify the competence of our educators

A young American filmmaker was recently assigned 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 ...with considerable success.

What struck her 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 a grade where poor children have one shot out of poverty - the matriculation examination - nobody cared whether the filmmaker could even teach English at the level required.

The recent furore over the licensing of teachers, a random idea (not a policy, yet) dropped into a breakfast meeting by Education Minister Naledi Pandor, has drawn predictable responses. The teacher unions resisted this casual idea with a ferocity not seen since the days of the tempestuous former minister in this portfolio, Kader Asmal.

The main goal of licensing teachers is to ensure that every learner has a competent teacher; it is as simple as that. Every parent

desires this simple competence for their children.

Middle-class parents get 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 whomever shows up to teach.

It would be wonderful if we could claim that every beginning teacher who graduates from university is automatically competent to teach. For graduates of some of our universities, this is a reasonable assumption that must also be tested. But our main problem is the thousands of teachers currently in the system for whom we have absolutely no evidence of their competence. These are not only the tens of thousands of teachers who remain un- or under-qualified, but also those who hold meaningless teaching certificates gained from former colleges of education which became, with some notable exceptions, warehouses for high school graduates with weak academic preparation.

The unions correctly claim that the emphasis should be on developing teachers. That, however, 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. They make a distinction between certification and competence.

I find it strange that we subject learners to hundreds of tests and examinations over the course of their 12 years of schooling, but balk at the idea of doing this for teachers.

I also find it strange that we recently subjected university programmes to intense examinations by accreditation bodies, and even shut down some of these programmes because of incompetence - but fail to extend this scrutiny to teachers. And I find it strange that other professions - from law to accounting to medicine - have stringent tests of competence to establish the ability to practice, but we do not do this for teaching. Teaching will remain an under-valued profession unless and until it demands the same, or even superior, standards of compe-

tence 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 which 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 we should do three things. First, give the less-than-competent teachers two years to demonstrate their ability to teach; a conditional license might be awarded to them. Second, invest teacher development in a highly focused manner on those specific 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 or not. I do not think this is unreasonable.

■ Professor Jonathan Jansen is the Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria. Carol Lazar is on leave.