
What is teachers' work?

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Teaching is impossible. (Shulman – 1983)

Abstract

This paper asks why conscientious teachers are chronically overloaded. Its central claim is that a failure to recognize the distinction between the formal and material elements of the concept of teaching provides a main part of the answer. An analysis of the *Norms and Standards for Educators* shows how, by failing to distinguish between the formal and material elements of the concept of teaching, it projects a conception of teaching which contributes to the overload of schoolteachers. The paper then contrasts the *Norms and Standards* with *A National Framework for Teacher Education – 16th June 2005*, which puts a formal definition of teaching up front. The latter part of the paper moves to a discussion of the functions of schools, and proposes that both caregiving and the teaching of the young are crucial in our context; with caregiving becoming increasingly salient in the light of poverty and the HIV and AIDS pandemic. But we need to pose the question of whether caregiving should be regarded as part of the formal work of teachers, or whether others should be employed for this work, enabling schoolteachers to focus more sharply on their defining function.

The job of teachers is to teach

But Shulman tells us that teaching is impossible. If this is true then we have a bizarre situation. Most of us here (and thousands of others) have devoted our lives to an impossible activity, and many of us have spent years of our lives on the (impossible) task of trying to teach others how to engage in an impossible activity!

Surely Shulman can't mean what he says? After all he himself had the reputation of having been a teacher of some note and, surely, this included teaching? Perhaps his statement that teaching is impossible is merely a polemical device to emphasize something else?

Of course this is the explanation. Here is the quotation in context:

Teaching is impossible. If we simply add together all that is expected of a typical teacher and take note of the circumstances in which those activities are to be carried out, the sum makes greater demands than any individual can possibly fulfil.¹

What we need to notice here is Shulman's easy conceptual slide from the word 'teaching' to the word 'teacher'. His first sentence says that *teaching* is impossible, but the next sentence refers to all that is expected of a typical *teacher*, and the circumstances in which teachers work. So he really must mean that given current (USA 1983) expectations of teachers and the circumstances in which they work it is not possible for them to teach. But perhaps this is a parochial comment about teachers' work in the USA in 1983? Perhaps the situation is different in other places and at other times?

In the dark ages (South Africa 1962), when I first began my career as a teacher I was soon so overwhelmed by the work that I ceased to have any life outside of teaching. My training had somehow conveyed to me a conception of teaching that proved to be impossible in practice, and a source of constant professional guilt. I had gained the idea that good teaching involved being responsive to each of the individual pupils for whom I was responsible – to get to know their quirks and uniqueness and to gear my teaching to those. In particular I had been taught that a key element of successful English teaching was for each pupil to write at least one piece each week, and for me, as their teacher, to comment in writing on their individual efforts so as to provide sensitive formative feedback to each budding author. Had I been responsible for, say, fifteen pupils I suppose these tasks would have been feasible, and I might even have had a few hours left over for a personal life of some kind. But I was teaching seven classes, with an average of 35 pupils in each – a total of some 245 pupils. Even to learn all their names was a major task – never mind being responsive to all their individual uniqueness and providing well-targeted feedback to each of 245 written pieces each week.

And, then, in preparing this paper, I came across a website² about a National Agreement in the UK, signed by employers, government and unions in January 2003, called 'Raising Standards and Tracking Workload'. This Agreement was an 'acknowledgement' that schools have to deal with a number of issues, amongst which were:

¹ Lee S. Shulman (1983) 'Autonomy and obligation – the remote control of teaching' in *The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco (2004) p.151.

² www.teachernet.gov.uk/remodelling

- Workload is the major reason cited by teachers for leaving the profession;
- Over 30% of a teacher's working week prior to the National Agreement was spent on non-teaching activities;
- Teachers generally had a poor work/life balance.

At the heart of this Agreement is a concerted attempt to 'free teachers to teach' by transferring to support staff administrative and other tasks not intrinsically related to teaching. 'Cutting unnecessary burdens on teachers is essential to ensuring a valued and motivated teaching profession.'

These are three examples, at 20-year intervals, in vastly different places, of a widespread problem: conscientious teachers are constantly chronically overloaded. But what causes this problem, and why does it remain stubbornly unresolved?

Let's go back to the beginning. The job of teachers is to teach. This seems obviously true and quite straightforward. It is probably true although it is not at all straightforward.

When Shulman tells us (1983, p.151) that teaching is impossible he is thinking of teaching as necessarily embedded in the accidents and contingencies of "expectations" and "circumstances" (context?) In my early days as a teacher I was overwhelmed by my work because of a disjunction between the conception of teaching with which I was working and the number of pupils in relation to whom I was attempting to embody that conception. And the UK project of 'Raising Standards and Tracking Workload' assumes that we are quite clear about which activities are 'non-teaching activities', and about which burdens are 'unnecessary burdens on teachers'. The ringing cry that we need to 'free teachers to teach' has considerable appeal – but it all depends on what we mean by 'to teach'.

Our problem is that we are here embroiled at the intersection between a concept of what it is to teach and the institutional and other contextual realities of the situations in which those whose professional task is to teach try to carry out this activity; or the intersection between the idea of teaching and the roles and responsibilities we ascribe to those employed as 'teachers', and the conditions in which they are expected to carry out these roles and responsibilities. And it is difficult, as the example of Shulman's slide from 'teaching' to 'teacher' shows, to disentangle these two strands in our thinking. And it is especially difficult if we are skeptical about 'theory' or 'abstract concepts' and are taken with the 'practical' idea that 'learnerships' provide the royal road to learning how to teach.

Teaching in South Africa

It is sometimes claimed, that in post-1994 South Africa we have developed a bold and imaginative (a ‘magnificent’) set of education policies – admired across the world. But our problem is lack of ‘implementation’. Why do we have this problem? Who is to blame?

Well, in the first place we have some educational institutions (at all levels of the system) that remain stuck in Apartheid traditions and have not yet embraced ‘transformation’. Thus, for example, they persist in implementing exclusionary admission policies and ‘non-democratic’ modes of management and organisation.

But, in the second place we have thousands of deficient schoolteachers, teachers who do not have the competences, or perhaps the willingness, to implement our policies capably. Educational change depends on what teachers do and think,³ but we have a huge problem when such a high proportion of our teachers have not yet accomplished the ‘paradigm shift’ they need to if they are going to be competent implementers of our fine policies.

It is not that we have not made considerable efforts to overcome these problems. We have, for instance, prioritised the issue of educational management. We have offered many ‘workshops’ for education managers, and literally thousands of ‘educators’ are signed up for Advanced Certificates, Honours degrees and even Masters’ degrees⁴ in the field of educational management. Indeed in some cases the offering of education management programmes has proved to be a lifeline for Faculties of Education in the face of declining numbers of recruits for initial teacher education programmes. And in respect to teachers, we have devoted massive human and financial resources to overcoming their ‘deficiencies’. We have concentrated on training, or retraining, maths-science-technology teachers, and poured a king’s ransom into this field. Over the past years we have ‘released’ teachers from their normal duties for a week at a time to attend ‘workshops’ focussing on accomplishing the needed ‘paradigm shift’⁵ and training them in the ‘implementation’ of the Revised National Curriculum Statement. But although

³ M.G. Fullan (1991). *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. London: Cassell, p.117.

⁴ We must keep at bay the thought that a reason for the popularity of such programmes amongst teachers is that they aspire to find a career path that will provide a route out of teaching and into ‘management’. (We all want to be ‘managers’!)

⁵ A ‘paradigm shift’ in a week!

we can claim some successes,⁶ we don't seem to be moving very fast,⁷ and while we persist in intoning the inspiring slogan, 'The Right to Quality Education for All', we are faced with the haunting thought that the quality of schooling for, perhaps, 80% of our population might actually have deteriorated over the past decade.

Let's take a quick tour through some elements of education transformation in South Africa. At the bottom stands Outcomes-Based Education – OBE – originally marketed as **the** (only) alternative to 'Apartheid education'.⁸ At the root of OBE is the entirely sensible idea that the way to assess the success of any teaching is in terms of its 'outcomes' for learners. What matters at the end of the day is what the learners learn. But this sensible idea is suffocatingly wrapped in a range of other matters, which piled on top of each other, take the workload of teachers towards impossibility.

Teaching needs to be freed from of the dominance of 'textbooks'. Teachers themselves need to design learning programmes, sensitive to their learners and responsive to their contexts, and develop appropriate resources and other learner support material, in order to achieve the nationally mandated learning outcomes. It is, after all, 'obvious' that there can be different 'learning pathways' to the same outcomes, and teachers need to map out suitable pathways for their own learners. 'Process' is all-important, and the old-fashioned emphasis on 'content' is merely a hangover from pre-OBE paradigms, especially 'Apartheid education'.

There is then the nightmare of 'continuous assessment' – known as CASS by the *cognoscenti*. The idea is that teachers need continuously to track the progress of their learners in order to provide them with constant 'formative feedback' – that is feedback that will enable each learner to understand how to improve their progress towards the pre-specified learning outcomes. CASS is often considered as a 'supplement' to 'formal examinations' – and this is reflected in the use of 'year marks' in computing the final grade for a course. In some cases CASS is understood as a more reliable form of assessment of learner achievements than high stakes 'summative examinations', and indeed that it should replace these hazardous examinations. There are, of course,

⁶ See DoE *An assessment of 10 years of education and training in South Africa* available at <http://education.pwv.gov.za>

⁷ Because we should be deeply ashamed of them, we need to bury in a little footnote the devastating results of the TIMSS studies and the depressing indications of the Grade 3 and Grade 6 systemic studies.

⁸ Wally Morrow 'Scripture and practices' in *Perspectives in Education*, 19(1), March 2001.

hazards in the case of CASS as well. Frequently ‘continuous assessment’ turns out to be little more than an unbroken stream of tests, projects and exercises that merely spread the misery – learners are constantly under the burden of knowing that everything they do will be ‘assessed’ and might have consequences for their eventual ‘success’. And teachers tend to be driven to such frenzy about ‘assessment’ and ‘portfolios’ that they have little time to ‘teach’. But these hazards, we say to ourselves, are likely to be the product of teachers’ not understanding the true purpose of CASS; with more ‘workshops’ and training we can overcome them.

And then there is ‘learner-centred education’, another half-truth. Of course any effective teaching needs to take account of the learners for whom it is intended. But what does ‘take account of the learners’ encompass? On the one hand we know that it is useless to try to teach quadratic equations to learners who do not yet have a grasp of the number system; or to teach computer literacy to a learner who thinks that a laptop is a kind of dance. But it is also true that teaching becomes, if not useless then at least less likely to succeed, if the learner is suffering from the trauma of having recently lost a parent to AIDS, or whose friend has been abducted on the way to school, or who comes from a household so destitute that they are lucky to get something to eat more than twice a week. This list could go on. The question is, does ‘learner-centred education’ imply that ‘teaching’ includes taking account of the detailed conditions and circumstances of the personal lives of learners? And what happens if a teacher has not one pupil⁹ but a couple of hundred?

And, then, we need to think about the conditions in which a high proportion of schoolteachers in South Africa try to teach. The HIV prevalence rates, the Poverty Index, the levels of adult illiteracy and widespread unemployment, the lack of functioning and maintained school buildings and equipment, the failure of the delivery of stationery and books, the breakdown of school feeding schemes, the increasing linguistic and other diversity of pupils, never mind the levels of gang-related activities, are not merely statistical abstractions to be included in Annual Reports of government departments. They are indicators of harsh and inescapable realities faced by many schoolteachers on a daily basis. The miracle is that any teaching takes place at all.

⁹ J.J. Rousseau can be regarded as the inspiration for 250 years of thinking about ‘child-centred education’ – at least in the Western World. *Emile* is premised on the idea that there will be a ‘Tutor’ for each pupil (a 1:1 Pupil:Teacher ratio!), and he adds, for good measure, that: “A tutor is not bound to his charge by the ties of nature as the father is, and so is entitled to choose his pupil. . .” (As quoted in W. Boyd (1956). *Emile for Today*, London: Heinemann, p.20).

The Norms and Standards for Educators and the inflated role of teachers

The *Norms and Standards for Educators*¹⁰ remains the ruling policy for teacher education and the recognition of qualifications for the purposes of employment in education. But it entangles the two strands of our thinking – a conception of teaching, and the roles of those employed as teachers – and, partly due to that, inflates the work of teachers beyond the capacity of all but the exceptionally talented and obsessively committed. Let's examine the evidence.

The *Norms and Standards* announces that it will use the word 'educator' to refer to the full range of employees in the education system:

The term *educator* in this policy statement applies to all those persons who teach or educate other persons or who provide professional educational services at any public school, further education and training institution or departmental office. The term includes educators in the classroom, heads of departments, deputy-principals, principals, education development officers, district and regional managers and systems managers (p.9).

We are already in trouble. The homogenising of these different roles in the education system – from teachers to district managers – occludes the central role of teaching¹¹ in any education. The phrase 'educators in the classroom' – which, presumably refers to teachers – assumes that teaching takes place only 'inside classrooms'. And more corrupting than these troubles is the use of the word 'educator' for the diverse employees of the Department of Education.¹² The trouble here is that this move completely smudges the word 'education', disperses its moral aura and deprives us of our chief justification for committing a significant percentage of our public resources to schooling.

Thinking, now, of teaching, consider the way in which the *Norms and Standards* has generated a conception of teaching, articulated in terms of 'roles', which has seeped into the whole education system:

¹⁰ *Government Gazette* #20844 – 4 February 2000.

¹¹ "Teaching is and has always been at the centre of all education and educational reform." Shulman (1992) "Research on teaching" op. cit. p. 364.

¹² I once argued (at Wits during the 1970s) that the Transvaal Education Department should, for the sake of conceptual clarity, be called the Transvaal Department for the Administration of Schooling – it was doubtful whether it had anything to do with *education*.

The policy describes the *roles*, their associated set of *applied competences* (norms) and *qualifications* (standards) for the development of educators. It also establishes key strategic objectives for the development of learning programmes, qualifications and standards for educators. These norms and standards provide a basis for providers to develop programmes and qualifications that will be recognised by the Department of Education for purposes of employment (p.9).

Seven roles are specified:

1. Learning mediator
2. Interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials
3. Leader, administrator and manager
4. Scholar, researcher and lifelong learner
5. Community, citizenship and pastoral role
6. Assessor
7. Learning area / subject / discipline / phase specialist.

(pp.13–14)

These roles are “meant to serve as a *description* of what it means to be a competent educator” (p.13).¹³ The roles are elaborated in “a manner appropriate for an initial teaching qualification”, first, in a brief description on pp.13–14, and then in considerable detail on pp.15–22, in terms of three interconnected kinds (p.10) of *Applied competence – Practical, Foundational, and Reflexive*.

But this ‘description of what it means to be a competent educator’ is lethally ambiguous. It is attempting to do at least two logically distinct things at the same time: to specify the requirements of an employee of the Department of Education – something like a high level ‘job description’ – and to provide a formal definition of teaching (educating?) These two different things are run together as if there is no significant difference between them. Earlier in this paper I noted Shulman’s ‘easy conceptual slide’ from the word ‘teaching’ to the word ‘teacher’, and here we have a related problem.

Let’s provide ourselves with a little bit of technical terminology to help us to articulate the problem.¹⁴ We can distinguish between the *material* and the *formal* elements of a concept. The ‘material elements’ refer to the ways in which an object or action may vary without ceasing to be an object or action of

¹³ I am struggling to try to imagine how these roles apply in the case of district managers and others who work in ‘departmental offices’. Learning mediators? Designers of learning programmes? Researchers? But perhaps I have a weak imagination.

¹⁴ Julius Kovesi (1967) *Moral Notions*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. See p.4.

a particular kind: the 'formal element' is the reason we provide for saying that it is an object or action of a particular kind. Without the formal element we would not know how to specify the material elements – a list of the material elements presupposes the formal element.¹⁵

Kovesi introduces this distinction in relation to those pieces of furniture we call 'tables'. The material elements of tables are 'any characteristics in which the object may vary without ceasing to be a table'. Thus, the materials out of which we construct tables, their shape and whether they have three legs or four are the material elements of tables. By contrast the formal element of tables provides us with 'an answer to the question of why we call a large variety of objects "tables" and refuse the word to other objects.'

Using this terminology we can now say that the 'description' of 'what it means to be a competent educator', which is central to the *Norms and Standards*, fails to distinguish between the formal element of teaching, and its material elements. And this failure carries enormous consequences.¹⁶ What the *Norms and Standards*, in effect, does, is to provide a list of some of the possible material elements of teaching (in terms of the seven roles and their elaboration) and presents it as a formal definition of teaching. And this is one reason why that description comes across as utopian.

A formal definition of teaching (one which specifies its formal element) is not context-specific; material elements are necessarily rooted in specific contexts. But the 'description' of 'what it means to be a competent educator' is context blind, and this is one reason why it leads to the overload of teachers.

The 'seven roles' ignore the reality of the conditions in which the majority of teachers in South Africa work and, in this way, inflates the conception of their workload. For a conscientious teacher this characterisation of their work is likely to be a source of acute professional guilt as they struggle to cope on a daily basis; 'it makes greater demands than any individual can possibly fulfil'. Similarly, it ignores the manifest differences between the institutional contexts in which teachers work. The work of a teacher in an efficiently organised and

¹⁵ We can note that the United Kingdom National Agreement 'Raising Standards and Tracking Workload' simply *assumes* that we know what the formal element of teaching is.

¹⁶ Consequences for the workload of teachers, and the status of teachers as members of a profession.

functioning school¹⁷ is very different from the work of a teacher is a dysfunction or barely functioning school. The ‘seven roles’ seem to be assumed to be the roles of each individual teacher, and there is no suggestion that there might be a division of labour in an institutional setting which allocates these different roles to different individuals.

Careful readers of the *Norms and Standards* might now point out that it contains another set of distinctions, which show that it acknowledges the difference between a concept of teaching and the job descriptions of departmental employees. In the initial characterisation of Role No.4 we find that “The educator will achieve ongoing personal, academic, occupational and professional growth . . .” (p.13), and in Role No.7 we find a reference to “professional or occupational practice” (p.14). Subsequently, in the section on the Qualifications Framework (p.23 ff) we find that “Although the B.Ed. (Honours) must include some specialisation and focus on research, the nature of these will vary depending on whether an academic, professional or occupational focus is chosen.” And that the purpose of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education is “to accredit advanced and specialised occupational, academic and professional study”. (p.25) But these ‘distinctions’ remain at a rhetorical level; they are not reflected in the ‘seven roles’ nor used elsewhere in the *Norms and Standards*. They do not provide a conceptual framework for the discussion, and, if anything, they further reinforce the idea that there is no significant distinction between the idea of teaching and the ‘job descriptions’ of employees of the Departments of Education.

To clarify what is at stake here consider the difference between the two questions: ‘What is waitrons’¹⁸ work?’ and ‘What is (medical) doctors’ work?’

There is little mileage in trying to provide an abstract answer to the question ‘What is waitrons’ work?’ We have to ask: Which waitrons? Where? In different situations the job descriptions of waitrons is likely to be vastly different. In one restaurant or hotel waitrons might be required to set the tables, in another they might be required to bring the food to the tables, in a third they might be required to open the wine bottles, but not bring the ice bucket, etc. The question, ‘What is waitrons’ work?’, cannot be answered in ‘general’ terms – we would need to consider the various job descriptions of waitrons in various contexts.

¹⁷ One, for example, that has a timetable on the first day of school, in which the absenteeism of teachers is rare, in which there are school ‘traditions’ which ensure a modicum of orderliness, and the work of teachers is supported by an efficient administrative system.

¹⁸ I assume that this audience will know that for gender sensitive reasons the word ‘waitron’ has replaced the gendered words ‘waitress’ and ‘waiter’.

By contrast we can very well provide an abstract (context-blind) answer to the question: 'What is (medical) doctors' work?' We have a conception¹⁹ of doctors' work (we have some sense of a formal element here) that is not embedded in particular contexts. The work of doctors is to do what they can, in the light of their knowledge of medicine, to contribute to the health and flourishing of those who are ill, injured or diseased. Unless a doctor is doing this, in whatever circumstance she finds herself, she is not doing (medical) doctors' work. We can, of course add, that in specific contexts – say in a hospital – there might very well be other work that doctors will need to do depending, for instance, on the availability of nursing staff and perhaps even equipment.

The question now is: Is the question 'What is teachers' work?' logically more like 'What is waitrons' work?' or 'What is (medical) doctors' work?'. Despite its being context-insensitive, and doffing the cap to 'academic, professional and occupational practices', the *Norms and Standards* treats teachers' work as logically more akin to waitrons' work than to (medical) doctors' work. The baby has been thrown out with the bathwater; Departments of Education, as the employers of teachers, can define teachers' work according to their requirements as employers,²⁰ and, by a stroke of luck have a ready answer to the failures of policy implementation.

A National Framework for Teacher Education and the practice of teaching

In the opening section of this paper I mentioned the widespread problem of conscientious teachers being constantly and chronically overloaded. And then posed the question of why this problem remains stubbornly unresolved. One main claim in this paper is that a failure to recognise the distinction between formal and material elements of the concept of teaching provides at least part of the answer. In our teacher education programmes and elsewhere we repeatedly define the work of teachers in terms of its material elements and, because we think we are providing a formal definition, we ignore the restraints of the contexts within which teachers are expected to teach.

¹⁹ This conception is *not* a generalisation from observation.

²⁰ For pragmatic reasons they had better take account of what the teacher unions say.

The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education, called A Framework for Teacher Education in South Africa – 16th June 2005,²¹ was an attempt to overcome this problem. In the very first recommendation there is an articulation of the formal element of teaching:

Recommendation A1

Retrieve the word ‘teaching’, understand it as the practice of organizing systematic learning, and relocate it at the heart of how we think about, plan and organize the education system.

There are a number of points to make here. One is that there were those in the Department of Education who objected to the words ‘retrieve’ and ‘relocate’. It was said that these words unjustly imply that the Department had lost sight of teaching and did not prioritise it in their planning or recognise that it is the core function of any schooling or education. But we do not need to pause at this dispute as there are more important things to bring to light.

Teaching is characterised as a practice. This carries some weight. To call something a ‘practice’ is to locate it in a history and a tradition; practices are not invented by individuals and anyone who engages in a practice must acknowledge that the standards of success and excellence are neither ‘subjective’ nor imposed by those with institutional and systemic power. They are interpersonal standards agreed by those in the community of practice.

And it is characterised as ‘the practice of organizing systematic learning’.²² The word ‘organizing’ does not imply anything specific about how or in which setting this organizing is to be done; it is conceptually tied neither to ‘classrooms’ nor class sizes nor to any particular ‘teaching methods’. It might, for example, include preparing learning material, but it might not; it might include live performance in front of a group of learners, but it might not; it might include using a textbook, but it might not; it might include ‘continuous assessment’, but it might not; it might include using the telephone or email, but it might not, etc. The word ‘organizing’ leaves unspecified these material elements – and it is thus, clearly, part of the formal element of the practice of teaching.

²¹ Available at <http://education.pwv.gov.za>

²² The point of the phrase ‘systematic learning’ is to emphasize that the practice of teaching is not the business of transmitting bits of information – that is a task that is amply fulfilled by the technological accompaniments of the ‘information explosion’. Teachers are into a hiding to nothing if they conceive of themselves as in competition with mass media. The practice of teaching is a practice that centres around the design of learning programmes that foster the gradual development of competences that cannot be learnt in an instant.

Along the same lines, to say that teaching is ‘the practice of organizing systematic learning’ leaves entirely unspecified whether it is individuals or teams that engage in this practice. Individual teachers can teach, but so can teams of teachers making various contributions to a shared goal. And this, again, shows that what we have in view here is the formal element of teaching as opposed to a specification of its material elements.

Teaching is not impossible, but it needs to be differently pursued in different circumstances. But we make it impossible if we ‘define’ it in terms of its material elements while ignoring the actual conditions in which teaching is expected to take place.

The second recommendation brings teachers into view:

Recommendation A2

Accept that professional teachers are the essential resource of the education system, and configure our programmes of teacher education (IPET and CPTD)²³ and support systems to reinforce the professional competences and commitments of teachers.

The key thing to notice here is that ‘teaching’ and ‘teachers’ are located in separate recommendations – there is no ‘easy conceptual slide’ from ‘teaching’ to ‘teachers’. Teaching is a practice, and professional teachers are those ‘with the educated competences and abiding commitments to engage successfully’²⁴ in this practice. An adequate answer to the question: What is teachers’ work? must necessarily include a reference to teaching, but in particular contexts it might include other things as well.

The reason for this is that, unlike the work of waitrons, the work of teachers must be within the boundaries of the formal element of the concept of teaching. Unless someone is doing something that exhibits some characteristic or characteristics of what is involved in organising systematic learning they are not doing teachers’ work, but something else – perhaps the work of clerks, administrators, policemen, counsellors, welfare agents, social workers, gardeners or sports coaches.

²³ Initial Professional Education of Teachers and Continuing Professional Teacher Development.

²⁴ *A National Framework for Teacher Education in South Africa – 16th June 2005*, p.6.

The functions of schools, and teachers' work

Part of the reason for the heavy workload of teachers revolves around the functions of schools in our society. We can say that the constitutive functions of schools are, broadly, to provide both teaching and caregiving for the young.²⁵ There are some views of teaching that do not clearly distinguish between these two functions, but we need to insist that, although there is a sense in which the two functions are related to each other, they are not the same. Organizing systematic learning might, in some ways, involve seeing to the preconditions of learning, but we can rapidly run beyond the boundary of the formal element of the practice of teaching.

The 'traditional' model of schools assumes that the young live in secure family settings. Such settings were assumed to include literate (middle class?) members, and to provide reliable shelter, nutrition, clothing, emotional support, cognitive stimulation, monitoring of health status, protection from violence, etc. And in such an ideal situation the 'caregiving' functions of schools can be secondary relative to their 'teaching' functions; the need for 'caregiving' is likely to be limited to relatively rare cases. And, partly for this reason, it could be assumed that 'teachers' would, by and large,²⁶ take on the caregiving functions of schools in addition to teaching.

But in our context the caregiving functions of schools need to be dramatically expanded. The reasons for this are obvious to most of us in this audience. They include the disruptions of community safety nets as urbanisation proceeds apace; the increasing rarity of two-parent nuclear families with two or three offspring; the increasing proportion of orphans and vulnerable children in our schools; the high levels of adult illiteracy; the increasing emmiseration of the already poor; the high levels of unemployment; the disastrous impacts of the HIV and AIDS pandemic; the increasing levels of violence and lack of safety in the streets; etc. In many instances it is already the case that teachers are so overwhelmed by these 'caregiving' functions that they have precious little time and energy to devote to teaching.

²⁵ We might add that other functions of schools are as symbols of access to the modern world and, in some cases, to be the only stable institutions in disrupted and destitute communities. But my story would become excessively complicated if I tried to include these additional functions.

²⁶ There were, typically, other employees in the school who could take on some of the caregiving functions. Sometimes there were school 'nurses', and in many cases (as still happens in many schools and universities to this day) people employed, for example, as secretaries provided a sympathetic ear for students in difficulties.

The question for us as a society is whether, if we understand schools as 'welfare institutions' for the young, we expect teachers to be responsible for this function in addition to teaching? Is part of our answer to the question: What is teachers' work? that it includes caregiving for the young?²⁷

If we cast our mind back briefly to the United Kingdom National Agreement – 'Raising Standards and Tracking Workload' – we can notice that at the heart of that project is 'freeing teachers to teach', and their main issue is to free teachers of 'administrative and other tasks not intrinsically related to teaching'. While in our context we need to agree that we should develop strategies to reduce the administrative tasks of teachers, perhaps, as in the United Kingdom, by employing competent administrative clerks to do this work, this is only the tip of the iceberg of the current workload of a great number of our teachers. Our context forces on them a range of labour-intensive and energy-consuming responsibilities not 'intrinsically related to teaching'. Given the cost of educating and employing teachers, perhaps we need to consider whether it might not be not only cost saving but more effective on both counts, to employ in schools people whose job will be to be responsible for the caregiving functions of schools.

Learning to teach

Any teacher education programme²⁸ is based on two presuppositions, linked to each other: (i) an answer to the question: What is teachers' work? and (ii) a particular idea of the schools or other institutions in which the students will seek employment.

We can again go back to the beginning. The job of teachers is to teach. And this implies that the principal task of teacher education programmes is to teach their students how to teach. But we are now in a position to see that this involves developing an understanding of both the formal and the material elements of teaching; both a constitutive conception of teaching and a set of suggestions for how it might be embodied in a range of contexts and conditions. A teacher education programme that fails to devote sufficient attention to both of these elements is to that extent deficient.

²⁷ We can notice how we have come around again to one of the dimensions of 'learner-centred education' – but this time perhaps we should drop the 'education'.

²⁸ Learning to teach, like learning to read, has no finish line. Learning to teach involves an initial phase – usually, but misleadingly, called 'pre-service teacher education', but it also involves on-going professional development – usually, but again misleadingly, called 'in-service training'. 'Teacher education' encompasses both.

The Departments of Education themselves (reinforced by the *Norms and Standards*), and indeed even many higher education institutions which provide teacher education, have a strong tendency to argue that the only justifiable answer to the question: What is teachers' work? lies in faithfully preparing teachers for the roles they will be required to undertake in schools, especially the 'implementation' of the Revised National Curriculum Statement. And the fashionable idea that 'learnerships' are the royal road to learning how to teach appears to be based on the same answer. But this, as we can now clearly see, is to understand teaching in terms of its material elements. And this is a trap. If my class is 'too big, or the stationery has not been delivered, or there are no desks for the learners, then teaching is 'impossible' and I might as well stay away from school or sit in the sun with my fellow teachers and complain about the corruptions and inefficiency of the Education Department.

Programmes of teacher education typically assume a relatively stable schooling system with relatively predictable roles for teachers in that system. Thus, they train teachers for specific phases of the school system or specific 'learning areas' while ignoring the fact that once they get a job in a school they are likely to have to teach in whichever phase or 'learning area' the school has a gap. In addition the school curriculum – even the Revised National Curriculum Statement – is a transitory organisation of knowledge that can change quite unpredictably. So, unless we think of our teacher education programmes as providing teachers with a deeper understanding of some field of knowledge – deeper than the current school curriculum – we are setting them up for frustration and failure in their professional careers.

A principal shortcoming of most teacher education programmes²⁹ is that they fail to reflect a distinction between the formal and the material elements of teaching. They, thus, tend to define teaching in terms of a favoured set of teaching methods that presuppose particular facilities, conditions and resources. If students remain mired at this level, the level of the material elements of teaching, they are unable to develop their capacity as professional agents. And unless the students come to an effective practical understanding of the formal element of teaching – a non context bound conception of teaching – they are unlikely to be able to develop the flexible competences which will enable them to teach, no matter how unpromising the contexts and conditions may seem. The key question that those learning how to teach need to learn how to answer is: How can I organize systematic learning in *this* context and *these* conditions, whatever the context and conditions are?

²⁹ This was a central shortcoming of the programme to which I was subjected many moons ago, and is a feature of almost all of the teacher education programmes with which I have had some contact.

If we continue to muddle the formal and the material elements of teaching we will continue to produce teachers who will be faced with a suicidal workload, and lack the professional autonomy and flexibility that is and will increasingly be required in the rough and volatile world in which we try to achieve the ideal of providing quality education for all.

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