Providing for teachers who educate in disadvantaged communities in South Africa and the United States

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Teachers have a vital task, but they do not teach in a vacuum. This brief compares the challenges facing teachers in underprivileged schools in two communities, one in the Western Cape, South Africa, and one in Denver, Colorado. The school communities are found to share certain difficulties, and on the basis of the comparison, recommendations are made concerning teacher training, resource allocation and teacher incentives.

Introduction

Education is the foundation that creates a thriving and progressive world. However, without quality teachers, there can be no true educational advancement. It is for this reason that educational policy must be reformed to meet the needs of those instructing within the walls of the classroom. In ideal circumstances, teachers play the pivotal community role of interacting with learners, parents, and administrators. Teachers arguably have the largest impact on the education of the next generation.

This brief will focus on primary and secondary schooling, because learners who cannot read, write, and use basic maths will be hindered for the rest of their lives, and probably will not have access to higher education. This policy brief will examine a community in South Africa and one in the United States (US), to explore the challenges faced by teachers in underprivileged classrooms.

Teachers in Masiphumelele, Cape Town, South Africa

While South Africa was under the system of apartheid, education was systematically segregated, leading to severe inequality between the privileged white population and the rest of the population. Because of this, South Africa inherited a severely under-educated population which, in turn, created an overwhelming challenge for meeting their educational needs.

After the conversion of the South African society to a democracy, Curriculum 2005 was introduced in 1994 to reform and improve the educational system. This approach to education focused on a single, national curriculum for all South Africans, regardless of race, social standing, or economic status. It aimed to balance a central curriculum with accommodating the cultural needs of local communities. The government hoped that this approach would allow for
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flexibility within the system, while simultaneously maintaining a structure of high academic standards for all South African learners.

The South African educational model also included outcomes-based education (OBE), a programme that left teachers with an expectation of what achievement was supposed to come from their classroom at the end of the year. While this was a good practice in theory, it presented problems for the teachers, because there was no set of unified suggestions to create the expected outcomes. In 2010, therefore, the South African Department of Education (DoE) dropped the OBE programme. Today, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) is in the process of being implemented at the level of primary and secondary education, offering books and curriculum options which provide more detailed guidance for teachers on how to teach and assess by grade, subject, and term. Only time will tell if this update will improve overall learning and test results, as well as attracting new teachers to the profession. Overall, there is a dire need to increase the number of graduates who go into the teaching profession.

Performance of learners in economically disadvantaged areas of South Africa remains alarmingly low. The low pass rates of learners in South Africa can be gleaned from the 2012 report of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR). The report states that after 11 years of schooling, only 10 per cent of learners could pass the mathematics section of their matriculation exam. For the purpose of this policy brief, the teachers in the township of Masiphumelele will be the focus. This community of more than 38 000 residents is situated outside of Cape Town near the suburb of Fish Hoek. The sheer number of residents in this township has led to overcrowding of the area’s only school, which has created a frustrating and difficult situation for the learners and hampers their educational growth. Teachers sometimes fail to show up for work, or spend the class marking assignments, leaving their learners without guidance within the classroom. Permissive contexts such as these have severe ramifications for the learners. Because of the lack of a structured, encouraging environment, learners feel little motivation to put effort into their own educational advancement. The lack of interest on the side of both the learners and the teachers has led to a toxic environment where education consistently fails. The classrooms themselves are bare, perhaps because teachers move between different rooms instead of having one classroom to call their own and settle into. Additional issues facing teachers in the classrooms of Masiphumelele revolve around the fact that many of the teachers are under-educated themselves, struggling to teach in English and failing to explain the reasoning behind correct answers. The latter points to a possible gap in the teacher’s knowledge of the material, and certainly a lack of training on how to best teach material through critical thinking instead of rote memorisation. Interactive teaching methods need to be implemented before the arrival of additional textbooks can be useful to a school.

The morale of teachers is understandably low when the learners cannot keep up with the lessons. Teachers in the school are too often impatient and fail to encourage discussion of classroom subjects or other important aspects of their learners’ lives. When teachers feel assured of their own position as a facilitator of learning, they are more likely to let go of strict hierarchical interactions and are able to show respect for their learners. For instance, they ask about their lives and ultimately build stronger relationships, while gaining the ability to tailor the teaching methods of the curriculum to make them relevant to the learners’ experience. This scenario, coupled with ‘consistent classroom management,’ paints a picture of the desired authoritative teaching style, which has been shown to be more effective than the all-too-common permissive style. Often, too, a school principal is seen as solely responsible for performance, but teachers need to be given the opportunity to validate their own role as leaders who are working to develop the very minds of the next generation.

Teachers in the Denver Public School System

The call for educational reform across the US is not a new one. Education is something that affects everyone, because of mandates set forth by federal law that state that children must remain in school until they are 16 years old. Therefore, it is understood that all citizens of the US have had to deal with education in one form or another. The educational system allows for the federal government to set the basic educational standards for both primary and secondary schools in all states. However, in order to maintain a balance of power between the local and national governments, they allow the state to control the construction of the curriculum used in the schools.
Theoretically, this system should be a satisfactory compromise between federal and state interests in the education of their constituency. As it presently operates, however, the US system is largely failing both learners and teachers, especially in inner-city and rural areas. The arrangement has raised issues, because the state does not distribute funds equally among the various school districts. There are 64 of these districts around Colorado, and they experience varying degrees of economic support from both the local and the federal government.

This inequity is especially evident within the Denver Public School system (DPS). The biggest school district in Colorado, it serves the needs of over 78,000 learners and employs over 4,500 teachers annually. Disparities in allocation of school funding within the same district have only been aggravated by the recent economic recession, which forced school boards across the country, including Denver, to take money away from all schools, but particularly from those schools that the state considers to be ‘underperforming’.

From 2008 to 2013, the DPS consistently cut funds from educational endeavours because it received substantially less funding from the state budget. The state, and indeed the rest of the country, was experiencing financial strain because of the fluctuating economic climate, and education was one of the first sectors to feel that burden. Extra-curricular programmes, including those centred on music, physical education, and the arts, as well as after-school programmes, were cut from schools because they were seen as an unnecessary expenditure.

As the financial situation became more dire, teachers who taught core subjects also experienced new hardships. Class sizes grew and resources were taken away from the teachers, with school boards and administrators leaving the teachers to spend their own money on basic necessities of the classroom. Textbooks were out of date, and the technology within the classrooms was lagging far behind the technological advances of the world outside. Perhaps more disturbing than anything, was the fact that quality teachers within the DPS system were now in real jeopardy of losing their jobs because of the economic instability that had invaded the educational system.

Denver, as well as other cities around the country, has been thrust into the midst of a critical teacher shortage within public schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), roughly eight per cent of teachers in the American public school system changed professions during the 2007–2008 school year, while another eight per cent transferred to different schools; this percentage has remained consistent in recent years. Reasons for their departure include under-funded programmes, too little support from their administration and from their local state government, and a lack of respect for the profession. Even more alarming is the rate at which younger teachers are leaving the profession or, worse, forgoing a career in education at all. This is due partly to the fact that education no longer seems a viable career option for young graduates because the educational system is so dysfunctional. Over 40 per cent of young teachers leave the profession within the first five years because they are dissatisfied and disillusioned with the job; they decide to pursue another career, or they are laid off because of budget cutbacks.

This lack of job security for teachers is something that the DPS and the state of Colorado have tried to reconcile through the legislative process. In 2010, Senate Bill 10-191 was passed by both state houses. The bill centred on the ways in which educators are evaluated under Colorado law. The ultimate hope is that this bill will help teachers to teach to their highest standard by instituting annual evaluations for all teachers that will measure the growth of learners within the classroom based on the teacher’s effectiveness in teaching the subject.

Programmes like Teach for America (TFA), an arm of the organisation AmeriCorps, recruit recent college graduates. The organisation then intensively trains the future teachers on different methods of teaching to prepare them for the challenges they will face when teaching. Core members of the TFA team sign on to work in underprivileged schools for two years and then are compensated at the end with the promise that the organisation will pay for graduate school if the member wants to further his or her own education.

While programmes like TFA and legislation like the Senate Bill 10-191 are steps in the right direction, they are not doing enough to provide for the teachers who are already in the classrooms, like those employed in the DPS. More support needs to be granted to teachers so that they can help their learners reach the highest standard of learning. In order to truly give teachers the opportunity to succeed in the classroom, more needs to be done, both within the school community and in the larger society as a whole.
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Recommendations

This policy brief has detailed several problems within the educational infrastructure of both the South African and US models. While we recognise that there are differences between these two communities and the problems that the teachers face, the categorical needs of teacher training, resource allocation, and teacher incentives apply to both contexts.

1. Teacher training: current and new teachers

- In both communities, improving teacher qualities through workshops that highlight the importance of creating an encouraging, authoritative environment where learners are not rushed and the teacher appears approachable and interested in the lives of the learners is necessary to create a productive learner population.

- For South Africa, creating an organisation based on the US model of Teach for America would benefit the teachers and learners of the country. This could be done by recruiting recent college graduates, giving them proper training, and then placing them in communities with which they have a connection. This community connection would give young teachers a vested interest in the education of their learners because they would have a deeper connection to their learners.

2. Resources

- In both countries, funding and school supplies must be equally allocated across socio-economic divisions to ensure that all teachers have access to the teaching tools they require, and can teach standard and special programmes that will not be cut.

- In both communities, opportunities must be provided for distributed leadership, in which there is an atmosphere of respect between principals and teachers, and the combination of school boards and staff meetings, which encourages open lines of communication through democratic consultation.

- In South Africa, teachers need to be given their own classroom to encourage a sense of ownership, which leads to embellished walls and a better teaching and learning environment.

3. Teacher incentives

- In both communities, incentives must be given to existing teachers and to entice new ones to enter the field. While financial incentives should be considered, there are also other forms of incentives based on cultural norms that may have more of an impact than money. These could include according teachers status and respect within the community, as well as community awareness of the importance of teachers and their need for job security.

Notes and references

2. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.