Chapter 70
Democratic Citizenship Education in South Africa:
Can We Trust Our Teachers?

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ABSTRACT

Underscoring the immense educational policy reform which accompanied the emergence of a democratic South Africa is an emphasis of the (re)alignment of rights, justice, and equitable access. It soon became apparent that, although educational reform aligned itself with notions of democratic citizenship education, inadequate attention was being given to, on the one hand, the capacity of teachers, and on the other hand, the willingness of teachers to assume responsibility for their roles as facilitators of citizenship education. The concern of this chapter is to consider the role of "the teacher" in relation to educational policy. Secondly, attention is given to the types of interventions availed to teachers in their roles as the facilitators of democratic citizenship education. The chapter concludes by showing that not only has educational policy reform been remiss of "the teacher," but it is also this inattention that continues to undermine the democratic agenda within schools and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

It would appear that both existing in-service and newly qualified teachers are sufficiently unaware of and inadequately unprepared to respond to the sheer depth of responsibility that is placed upon them in nurturing learners as democratic citizens. While definitive measures have been in place since the onset of democracy and the promulgation of the National Education Policy, Act No. 27 of 1996, for teachers to be facilitators of a democratic project, scant attention has been given to who these teachers are. Again, while attention – albeit limited and scattered – has been given to teachers in relation to curricular reform, educational leadership reform as well as school-based governance reform, barely any attention has been given to the identities, knowledge and understandings of teachers in relation to conceptions of democratic citizenship education. Critically, inasmuch as teachers are unaware of and under- or unprepared – not to

mention, unwilling – to embark on the practices necessary for the teaching and modelling of democratic citizenship education, the same can be said of most teacher education programmes, which continue to conceive of and approach pre-service teacher training in an insulated and detached manner. In this regard, there appears to be a general unawareness of the critical challenges facing not only education, but also citizenship in South Africa. These, according to the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (Department of Education [DoE], 2007), include the legacies of apartheid, the poor content and conceptual knowledge among teachers and the acute shortage of qualified teachers, as well as learners' poor academic performance. To address these challenges, the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development (DoE, 2007) recommends that teacher education programmes should incorporate situational and contextual elements that will assist teachers to develop competences to enable them to deal with diversity and transformation.

Increasing incidents reported in the media, however, suggest that teachers remain ill-equipped to deal with the myriad complex issues and challenges with which they are confronted on an almost daily basis. To be unaware of the legacies of apartheid, for example, is to lack an understanding of severe oppression and marginalisation, which continue to feed into the psyches and self-esteems of teachers and learners, alike. Similarly, when references are made to situational and contextual elements, these elements infer unprecedented socio-economic conditions of poverty, poor parental involvement, substance abuse and violence, on the one hand. On the other hand, these elements encompass serious challenges in managing diverse classroom and school settings in terms of race, culture, religion, language, ethnicity and class. All of these elements converge to provide some insight into deeply intricate constructions of citizenship, and hint at the impending controversies awaiting teachers in South African schools. One therefore finds as Farber and Wechsler (1991, p. 36) note, that although teachers start their careers with the hope of being agents of change and of making a difference in the lives of their learners, many of them face unprecedented challenges, ethical dilemmas and vulnerabilities, leaving them to feel a "sense of inconsequentiality".

The peaceful nature of the transition from an apartheid state to a democratic state, at times, belies the mammoth task involved in realising such a profound evolution. Underscoring the immense educational policy reform, which accompanied the emergence of a democratic South Africa, is a profound emphasis on a (re)alignment of rights, justice and equitable access. At the centre of the far-reaching changes, which included the desegregation of schools, complex curricula reform, and the decentralisation of educational leadership into school-based management, was an overriding emphasis on the cultivation of a democratic citizenship education. Certainly, the idea that schools ought to be responsible for the cultivation of sound citizenship is not new. Dewey (1937, p. 409) is well known for claiming that schools have a role "in the production of social change". Similarly, Giroux (1995, p. 6) is emphatic that –

[P]ublic schools must assist in the unending work of preparing citizens for self-governance in an evolving social environment. Through the public schools, learners can be taught the values and skills necessary to administer, protect and perpetuate a free democratic society.

These views notwithstanding, Mattes and Denemark (2012, p. 2) report that South Africa is one of the few countries in the world where demand for democracy does not increase with levels of education. This, they continue, could be ascribed to the history and nature of education in the country. Whether or not it ought to be the sole responsibility of schools and, by implication of teachers, is of course another worthwhile debate – but not the focus of this chapter.

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