

Reading 5a

Teachers want what students need

Randall van den Heever

In addition to needing teachers who are really motivated to help South Africa's learners to grow and develop, it is often suggested that what our society needs is an improvement in the standard of professionalism among all our teachers. In this section we explore many of the difficult questions related to teacher professionalism, including the matter of what professionalism means to different people, and what it may or may not exclude (for instance, teacher strikes).

The following two excerpts present the views of the leaders of two major teachers' organizations as they expressed them in 1994. They are extracts from brief articles commissioned for a publication that attempted to describe and discuss the education scene in the first year of South Africa's new democracy. Since 1994, the relationships between the major South African teachers' unions (and their positions on important issues) have been modified somewhat (listen to representatives of SADTU and NAPTOA on Part 2 of the audiotape that accompanies this module). However, the essential differences that the two leaders express below have shaped the approach of the two major organizations up to the present.

Teachers are both professionals and workers and there is no inherent conflict between their rights, on the one hand, and their responsibilities, on the other.

SADTU contends that the trade union rights and professional responsibilities of teachers are two sides of the same coin. The union therefore does not regard professionalism and unionism as two mutually exclusive

This edited extract is taken from van Den Heever, R. 1994. 'Teachers want what students need', in F. Sonn, (Ed.). **DSA in Depth. Reconstructing Education**. Cape Town: DSA. (When he wrote this, Randall van den Heever was the General Secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers Union – SADTU.)

Notes

Reading

concepts [...]

SADTU is therefore as busy with professional work as it is committed to union work. The union accepts that teachers have responsibilities as well as rights. Teachers have the responsibility to teach, and have an obligation towards their students to provide the best possible education experience for them in the classroom. Similarly, teachers have the right to bargain and campaign collectively for an improvement of their service conditions and benefits [...]

Historically, the state as employer gave teachers a raw deal in South Africa. In order to keep teachers in check, the state glibly used the concept of professionalism as a tool of blackmail. Because teachers were 'professionals', they had to refrain from 'unprofessional' activities, such as collective or mass action and strikes. In these arguments the interest of the child became a particularly potent instrument of blackmail.

While teachers were trapped in splendid professional isolation, other workers who had unionised themselves advanced far beyond teachers in respect of rights and service benefits [...]

Teacher are workers. They are breadwinners who must ensure that their own children are well fed, clothed, and have an adequate education. As a teachers' union, SADTU is determined to use all the principles and strategies of the labour movement to ensure that teachers are adequately remunerated and that they enjoy the service benefits appropriate to the importance of their profession [...]

Collective bargaining is based on the concept of checks and balances. This implies that employees have certain fundamental rights that are recognized by the employer, but that they also have certain obligations towards the employer. Collective bargaining promotes procedures through which grievances can be resolved effectively and in good faith. If followed democratically and constructively, collective bargaining is a mechanism that promotes labour peace. **Containing** labour unrest in education does promote a culture of learning [...]

containing: keeping something within limits, so that it cannot spread in a harmful way