

Unions back NECT in professionalisation of teaching

One of the key pillars of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) is the professionalisation of teaching - an area of particular interest to South Africa's teacher unions, all five of which are active participants in the NECT.



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In interviews with spokespersons from these unions - the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the Professional Educators Union (PEU), the Suid Afrikaanse Onderwys Unie (SAOU), the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) and the Public Servants Association (PSA) - some common themes emerged relating to the unions' attitudes towards the NECT, and what they believe are the crucial elements needed to achieve professional excellence.

Educators ought to be conscious of their role

All five have a similar understanding of what professionalism means with reference to teaching and active programmes to help their members to raise their professional standards. They'd like to see their professional body, the South African Council of Education (SACE), becoming an autonomous regulatory and certificatory body, run by professional teachers themselves, in the same way that medicine, engineering, accountancy and other professions maintain standards, discipline and continuing professional education in their own governing bodies. "Our core values emphasise professionalism," says Ben Machipi, General Secretary of the PEU. "It's a broad term to define: we'll say that the profession has been professionalised when educators are conscious of their role; namely to teach. They must also know that they need to be life-long learners; they must continuously develop themselves as teachers."

Mugwena Maluleke, General Secretary of SADTU, is very clear on the requirements for professionalism. "Teachers must take seriously their responsibility for creating a true learning nation which is critical to advancing human development," he says. "Such requires high-level and continuous awareness by all teachers of the need to be patriotic and to promote our country's development with an unending vigilance. We require more focus on the content delivered to the learners entrusted to us."

At present, the Minister of Basic Education has the right to appoint many of the directorate of SACE. The unions take up the rest of these positions. Many teachers would like to see that changed. "We're not saying the minister is doing a bad job," explains Chris Klopper, CEO of SAOU, "but if we are to be a profession, the body needs to be in the hands of teachers. A professional is a person - or a body of people, like doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers - who are held in high esteem in society. I don't think teachers are held in that esteem. A professional is also disciplined; they exact discipline on their own members. Their subject knowledge is beyond reproach. If those requirements aren't met, society develops a progressively negative perception of a profession."

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NAPTOSA goes further. They believe that professionalism has to begin at the recruitment phase - before teacher training

even begins. "Teachers who make a difference are passionate; we need to find those recruits with a passion for teaching, not ones who just see it as a job and a salary," says Henry Hendricks, Executive Director of NAPTOSA. "I think we also need to educate South African society - and the world in general - about the importance of teachers. Treating the profession as 'a joke' - as it was described in a recent headline - or undervaluing them with the attitude, 'Those who can't do, teach', is not helpful. We'd like to see our teachers acknowledged as a national treasure, and valued as such. Of course for this to happen, teachers will have to earn this respect through their behaviour"

Which is not to say that these unions are blind to the problems of underqualified and poorly trained teachers - a legacy of the Apartheid era - or the few rotten apples who are indeed "just in it for the salary" and don't live up to the required standards and ethics. But as representatives of the educators working at the coal-face, they know how many teachers do strive to be dedicated professionals. "SADTU as an organisation is committed to crafting a new teacher for the new South Africa; one who has clarity of the national vision and presents him or herself as social actor, community leader, and a shaper of the nation; and does so in his or her personal and collective capacities," says SADTU's Mugwena Maluleke. The teacher unions are also fully aware of the obstacles that even passionate, highly skilled teachers face.

Many of these obstacles - such as school infrastructure, security, classroom overcrowding, etc, are the responsibility of the state to fix, and they don't expect the NECT to usurp those roles. However, they feel the NECT can be enormously effective as a facilitator and a catalyst, working alongside government to ensure that it delivers on its clearly stated intentions regarding its role in infrastructure provision; that unions and SACE do their part in continuous professional development, that parents, learners and whole communities become actively involved in the governance of their public schools; and encouraging business to continue its funding of the NECT (which is matched rand-for-rand by government).

Focusing on a common enemy

"The NECT draws on the same spirit that drew people together against apartheid - by focusing on a common enemy," says Machipi from PEU. "We need to share our ideas collaboratively, to benefit everybody and not leave anybody behind."

"The NECT must not assume responsibilities that are the government's," says Hendricks from NAPTOSA. "Teacher training, for example, is not their responsibility; it's a responsibility of the state. The unions and SACE must still take responsibility for continuous professional development of their members. But the NECT does have a very important co-ordinating function; to bring together disparate groupings of stakeholders who, over many years, have been pumping money and effort into education separately, but creating a 'silo' effect, with no co-ordination. The NECT can bring together both the resources - financial and logistical - and the players."

In SAOU's view, "The NECT needs to assist us by focusing on those areas that are not covered by other forums, and on the principles defining a professional body. About 140,000 of our teachers nationally are unqualified or underqualified - we need a plan to address those issues. We'd also like to get away from the 'one size fits all approach' - as if a top-functioning urban school has the same needs as an underfunded rural school. We have to protect the performing public schools while we raise the standard of the rest of the system."

The unions agree that three of the biggest challenges the NECT must help all stakeholders address are the standard and method of teacher training (and continuous professional development once they have qualified), security and discipline in schools (some pointed out that many teachers have to go to work - unarmed, by law - in schools where hundreds of lethal weapons are confiscated every year), and teacher remuneration.

"Advocacy as to what the system needs or doesn't need is important," says Klopper from SAOU. "Advocacy around legislation - the NECT needs to provide objective, professional input based on sound independent research into best practice globally, not political ideologies. Political ideology pre '94 is what got us into trouble, and we need to beware of falling into a similar trap now. We need to take a look at the best systems in the world, like Scotland or Finland or South Korea, and implement what works for them."

The PSA's Deputy General Manager Manie De Clercq agrees. "The most important thing we have to achieve if we are to successfully professionalise teachers is to depoliticise the profession. We also need to separate the bargaining council work from the work of professionalisation. The unions should be bargaining with the Department regarding pay and conditions of employment, and an empowered and independent SACE must be held accountable for professionalisation."

It's going to take a decade to turn this around

All union spokespeople also supported the concept of World Teachers' Day on 5 October, but believe that in the South African context it needs to be expanded - to teachers' month, or even teachers' decade. 'It's going to take a decade to turn this around, so we have no time to lose,' comments De Clercq from PSA.

"The problem is that a vicious cycle develops," adds Hendricks from NAPTOSA. "Research has shown teachers are leaving training institutions without sufficient knowledge in content or didactics ('how' to teach, as opposed to 'what'). Our teacher training institutions are accepting students - no disrespect intended - from the lower echelons of applicants; students who barely passed maths and science - and they're training to teach our potential scientists and engineers, when they themselves lack the knowledge. Many teachers with poor skills in numeracy, for example, end up teaching in the foundation phase - Grade R to Grade 3. That's when learners are supposed to learn the basics, the grounding in numeracy - and many of their teachers aren't qualified to provide that grounding. There are also not enough teachers being trained to teach in the vernacular at foundation phase - you get the best results, at that age, teaching in the home language; that's how fundamental concepts are best understood. The department needs to deal with recruiting those teachers, but the universities also need to have the faculties to train teachers in the vernacular, which they often don't have."

"The employer must also play a role in taking care of the well-being of the teachers in terms of the conditions in which they are expected to perform," concludes Machipi from PEU. "As much as we appreciate World Teachers' Day, it is gradually losing its meaning. It doesn't help to say, 'We appreciate the role you play; you are driving the mother of all professions' once a year, and then have nothing happen between each World Teachers Day. We're hoping the NECT will be able to provoke actions that show that appreciation, rewards that go beyond just 'recognising' us - to a material token of that recognition and respect. Let's walk the talk."

The NECT aims to raise our standards of basic education through dialogue, partnership and action between all stakeholders - government, teacher unions, parents, learners and their communities, and big business.