

Sadtu's revolution must not forget Teacher X

Just over a year ago, I wrote an article in appreciation of a remarkable teacher.

It was never to be published. I met TeacherX at the 2011 Congress of the Southern African Association for Learning and Educational Differences in Cape Town.

"From Inclusion to Belonging" was the theme of the conference. It is not enough, the conference theme implied, that a pupil be admitted to a school.

Once admitted, the pupil must also experience the best possible educational growth. Dedicated, caring and professional teaching in a well-governed and managed school makes such growth possible. TeacherX lives and works in such a learning environment.

I remember his quiet, self-effacing manner.

It somehow made his presence loom even larger. His personal power seemed to lie in this calmness.

His quiet yet confident voice evoked conviction. His thoughtful face conveyed warmth, care, honesty and sturdy conviction.

I felt he spoke to me not so much with his voice but with the entire dignity of his person. I trusted him immediately.

"I have been teaching at XXX High School for 35 years," he began to tell me, although I had not asked him any question.

"I do not care much for money," he went on with more unsolicited information. "I care more for the children and spend a lot of time with them." As TeacherX continued, I sensed someone in search of a listening ear. I gave him two.

"Today, before you can become a principal of a school," he continued, "you must have at least a master's degree. At the entrance level, you cannot stand before a classroom armed only with a matric certificate.

As you advance more in the teaching profession, you need to obtain higher qualifications.

“And you must constantly deepen your knowledge and practice of teaching through attending conferences regularly. This must be a requirement.”

I exclaimed silently to myself as my wife did vocally, with exactly the same words, when I told her about TeacherX: “So, we still have such teachers!”

“I am a member of the Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Support Group of Southern Africa,” TeacherX revealed.

“My goal is to bring the work of this organisation to my township. The way we treat our children tells me that we would approach them with more understanding and sympathy if we had more knowledge of, and insight into, their learning difficulties.”

“So,” I asked, “what happens when you find that a pupil cannot concentrate in class and that this difficulty may have something to do with attention deficit and hyperactivity?”

“First, you must observe the child closely and then if you are sure you need to, get professional advice. Then you interact with the parents of the child. Usually, they are surprised and then grateful, sometimes feeling guilty that they could have been more understanding of their child.”

So, we still have such teachers!

At this point, you may be sufficiently interested in TeacherX to want to know him. Here is why I have never, and cannot now, reveal his name, and why my article on him languished on my computer.

“Why, despite 35 years of experience,” I asked him, “did you not apply to be principal of your school when the position became vacant?”

“I wished to, could have and many wanted me to.”

After a brief, agonised silence, TeacherX continued: “But I preferred to spend more time with the school children. Otherwise, I would have to

spend a great deal of it responding to trade union demands.”

He was referring to the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (Sadtu).

So, while TeacherX opted to continue to shower the school children in his care with enormous teaching experience, a Sadtu member, less qualified, less experienced, was eventually appointed as the new principal. TeacherX now works under him.

When I showed TeacherX the draft of my article, he was happy with it overall, but uncomfortable with comments about him and Sadtu. It was risky. It would open him up to unpredictable reactions. I understood.

I then faced a list of untenable options. Do I leave out his name? No! TeacherX deserves the full reward of public acknowledgment.

Do I leave out the explicit reference to Sadtu on the issues at stake? No. TeacherX’s experience with Sadtu was an important context to his professional practice.

I wrestled with the article, trying several angles of approach, but no subsequent version measured up to the integrity of the original piece. At every effort, the internal coherence of the piece cracked under the pressure of concessions external to it.

In the end, I declared a truce between TeacherX’s real concerns and my writing instincts. He was the better judge of his situation. I had no right to complicate it for him.

The profile on him, with a sense of its own “truth”, would remain “a file” in my computer.

Both of us would be disappointed, while Sadtu flourished.

I have never forgotten TeacherX. How was he doing? I have asked myself many times. Perhaps I was subliminally uneasy about our truce. The sense of unfinished business has tugged at me.

Further reflections on the state of education in our country have now drawn me back to TeacherX.

I am prepared to live with his anonymity. After all, this is no longer a profile on him. My current focus has gone beyond TeacherX and Sadtu in a particular school.

I am thinking about teachers such as TeacherX and organisations such as Sadtu in the generality of the challenge of education in a constitutional democracy such as South Africa's.

But I will name Sadtu. It is an organisation with a strong public presence, hugely more powerful than any one teacher.

TeacherX's fears of Sadtu were real. The trade union is capable of harming him, even violently.

Television has shown in the past how teachers who had heeded Sadtu's call for strike action assaulted, in front of school children, teachers who had not.

Sadtu members, "workers of the mind", were in this instance effective in teaching violence. TeacherX and others like him took note.

But Sadtu does have its own story too. It is a story of humanistic aspiration, of a dream to create a teaching and learning environment commensurate with the challenge of building a new society. Established in October 1990, with 1994's democracy within reach, the organisation had a vision.

It pledged, among other things, "to encourage the development of the aesthetic aspects of the learner's life and to help promote his or her educational, spiritual and physical developments". The dream of TeacherX!

It pledged "to foster an esprit de corps among teachers and education workers in education, and to promote and to maintain high standards of ethical conduct, professional integrity and efficiency in the promotion and maintenance of standards of teaching and learning".

The dream of TeacherX! These are noble dreams that many, even in Sadtu, will agree are still far from the reach of the organisation, even in the schools they control both as "workers of the mind" and as managers.

The state of education in the Eastern Cape is an undeniable if lamentable example.

TeacherX is a decent man. So I believe too are the majority of men and women in Sadtu.

But both TeacherX and Sadtu, working in schools all over the country, have reached a dead end. Both, in two divergent directions, have settled into untenable comfort zones.

While TeacherX sought to achieve his dream professionally in an environment with severe limitations, Sadtu drifted away from the professional "esprit de corps" of their heady intentions.

Their declarative quest for socialism was not accompanied by a concrete definition of its educational content and its concomitant professional practice.

To date, Sadtu lacks a programmatic imperative to achieve its socialist educational vision. As a result, its character as an organisation began to be defined by the political activism of the annual wage demand.

While TeacherX and his colleagues excelled professionally in their isolated nodes, enjoying only a notional community of practice, Sadtu members on the other hand enjoyed a real and growing benefit of community and solidarity.

The power of that benefit has grown exponentially across the land in proportion to the relative powerlessness of unorganised or disorganised teaching professionals.

Sadtu has five strategic goals. It has reasonably, albeit with some irony, achieved three: "effective servicing of union members", "ensure effective worker unity" and "ensure delivery-based organisational excellence". In all these, Sadtu diligently serves its members.

The other two goals are in the distant realm of achievement: "ensure a learning nation through involvement of our members" and "build socialism through the development-orientated nation state".

Community and solidarity are desirable, positive values worthy of nurture and preservation. But they can run dry and be corrupted by a lack of overriding professional purpose, which is a significant context against which to determine meaningful wage value.

In an environment of impoverished professionalism, how does the wage sought annually express the value content that should meaningfully justify it?

But there is something else that can corrupt community and solidarity: too much power.

Sadtu has effectively captured a large portion of South Africa's schooling system.

Yet it is this portion of the system that requires the greatest and most urgent transformation: the townships of South Africa and its rural hinterland where the biggest talent pool of the country's population is born and nurtured.

Schools in those localities have become fiefdoms of a trade union organisation with a power to which not even the national government has an answer.

The country's educational future is then held hostage to a powerful teachers' union.

A government of a political party is in turn held hostage to the union's voting power, which the party needs to stay in government.

In choosing to exercise limited functional ownership of the national vision of education, the government has abdicated its primary responsibility by shifting it to an entity that has voting power, but demonstrably little functional commitment to education, and no accountability to the broader society beyond its own members.

A result of Sadtu's power is thus the powerlessness of committed teachers. And unorganised social and professional interests like theirs may unwittingly be contributing to organised formations like Sadtu becoming power-wielding monstrosities.

TeacherX is a citizen and a professional with good intentions, but he has no political power.

To support his professional interests, and secure their sustainability, TeacherX has to build or be part of an organised power base.

TeacherX needs community and solidarity. Then more schools, more pupils, more families can benefit from his care.

A thriving democracy requires that organised interests be the mechanism to achieve social balance.

Relatively uncontested organisations such as Sadtu, the ANC before Cope, the now more effective DA and Taxi Associations are unpractised in yielding to external pressures.

They become habituated to having their way, such that their way becomes, in their powerful eyes, the only way.

They then begin to suffer from an undeveloped self-corrective impulse.

The impulse of self-correction becomes a skill when it is tested constantly against the corrective positions of others.

In real life there are many ways. Each organised formation in a thriving democracy contributes its own ways to the field, from which the public, through various forms of public deliberation, can make choices.

So who in South Africa is driving the vision of national education towards the achievement of its goals? Arguably, no one in the scenario just drawn!

Here we get to the central challenge before both TeacherX and Sadtu. Sadtu is not an organisation of evil people who have no interest in the greater social good and its achievement through education.

Rather, Sadtu is a strong organisation in a weak democracy in which a relatively low number of participant citizens have organised themselves to compete democratically with its vision.

Inactive citizens give birth to a dominant party democracy that then spreads itself throughout the nation in a plethora of uncontested fiefdoms

of power that cumulatively snuff the life out of the form of democracy voted for in 1994.

TeacherX and Sadtu need each other. But first they have to find each other.

That requires the deepest dialogue possible. Then perhaps the dialogue can be expanded to include parents, leaders of community-based institutions and representatives of young people, who all have an interest and a stake in the schools in their community.

Perhaps the real TeacherX, who triggered this reflection, and Sadtu, in their particular school, can find a way towards this much-needed dialogue. Maybe they can begin to be a model for resurgent aspirations.

In the larger terrain, government must regain its steering and facilitative role, and demonstrably put education as the highest national priority, without which our country cannot achieve the goals of Vision 2030.