TEACHERS CANNOT TEACH – IF TRUTH BE TOLD!

In 1994 I had the privileged to visit schools in Zimbabwe. Visiting one of the “very best” urban grammar school in Harare the advantage compared with the rest of Harare schools was stark. I recall the comments amongst the South African delegation that “we will not allow this to continue in South Africa”. Twenty years on and the reality is it has been so difficult to equal the playing field.

I attended a seminar on mind power many years ago. The most fundamental lesson learnt was “that thoughts are power forces”. And so are the perceptions and opinions of the dominant worldview neo-liberalism manipulating “public opinion”. Let me repeat its views of South African learners, teachers and schools. The schooling system is failing, black teacher cannot teach and the progressive teachers union is complicit.

The past two years I had the pleasure to visit schools in all nine provinces, rural and urban schools, small and large schools, meeting teachers and school managers collecting data on curriculum implementation, classroom practices and instructional leadership. In cases the conditions under which learning and teaching take place are horrendous. I recall the urine smell hanging in the air, no basic services or failed infrastructure and the large classes **BUT** a strong will and determination to continue with the learning and teaching process. Teachers are teaching, learners are learning and managers are managing.

Turning back the clock of 300 years of underdevelopment by colonialism, slavery and apartheid is not going to happen overnight. Certainly not within 20 years. Given the great costs of building infrastructure balanced against other social needs the government of the day makes difficult choices. When learners, teachers and schools are judged the indigent and contextual factors are glossed over by “public opinion” because it keeps reminding the privileged of our past and plays on the conscience of their affluence.

Twenty years into our constitutional democracy and the Independent and ex-Model C schooling sub-system has failed South Africa dismally. Relatively small in size and growing exponentially these schools own by proxy the best public infrastructure money can buy, human resource provisioning which outclass by far that of the state, school fees equalling the best in the developed world and poaching the best skilled human resources in poor communities. This aberration resulted in the skewed labour market in education, alienation and contributed to the breakdown of social cohesion in poor schools. The poor simply cannot compete with the wealth of the affluent. Skills development bodies remind us daily that South Africa lacks the high level of technical skills to increase the size, scope and depth of the South African economy. At first the question was asked where these skills will come from. Readers are reminded that education is largely an investment in the future with an average return of investment after 09-15 years, sometimes more. Given this reality it is expected (not exclusively) that the schooling sub-system of the affluent to make a larger positive contribution to the lack of high level of technical skills. Twenty years down the line and they have failed us.

In my visits to schools I have come across learners that struggle to read in English but account of themselves fluently in their mother tongue. It saddens me when the tide of “public opinion” is so negative and a-historical in judging our learners, teachers and schools. I have seen a different truth than the misinformation of the collaboration of the dominant worldview. I have seen hope and not despair; I have seen a sense of duty amongst teachers and learners; I have seen teachers and learners walking the extra mile because that is what their country expects of them. Not giving excuses but maximize opportunity against all odds. I have seen a government at work.

South Africa has 392 000 teacher in the public school system, 256 000 are members of the South African Democratic Teachers Union. “Public opinion” view SADTU as part of the problem in schools. Absurd! It is like saying that more than 75% of the world’s population are delusional fools for believing in God because they present no proof only faith. How arrogant a view?

SADTU had a National General Council on 25-27 October 2013 with the theme “***Organise and Empower Education Workers to Deliver Free Quality Public Education and Build Socialism” and passed very progressive resolutions about learners, teachers, and assessment, schools and school principals***. For two days teacher representative of more than 65% of teachers in South Africa presented mandates and debated the best for our schooling system.

Are these actions not noble and in public interest? Now that is the truth that needs to be told!