Replaying memories of the past: Reflecting on the South African teachers’ 2010 protest

Alexius Amtaika
Department of Political Studies and Governance, University of the Free State, South Africa.

Accepted 17 April, 2013

The teachers' strike against low salaries and poor working conditions in 2010 invoked memories of the 1980s and 1990s popular resistance against the apartheid government. The apartheid government invoked the state of emergency and outlawed any form of protest or demonstrations. The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa recognises peaceful demonstration as a constitutional right and offers processes to resolve conflicts peacefully. This begs the question: why did teachers embark on violent strikes instead of dialogue? Why did they turn against the government at the centre of the tripartite alliance? This article argues that violent strikes are a continuation of a culture of militancy dating back to the armed-struggle in the 1980s, not only to pressurise the government to accede to the demands of the workers, but also as an extension of contact, dialogue and ideology.

Key words: Teachers, protest, memories of the past, politics, education system.

INTRODUCTION

Replaying memories of the past

In democratic societies, governments allow citizens to express grievances or dissatisfaction through peaceful demonstrations. Workers are allowed by law to embark on strikes when disputes with their employers arise. However, in South Africa the exclusion of black South Africans from the affairs of the state, including socio-economic and political activities, had shut down channels of communication for black people to express their needs and demands to employers. Boycotts, strikes and demonstrations became instruments of resistance in the struggle for freedom against the oppressive policies of the apartheid regime in the period between 1970 and 1994. It was in this context that South African teachers staged their first protest in 1989, mainly to demand the following (Seekoie, 2010): (i) employment of more teachers; (ii) reinstatement of teachers previously dismissed; (iii) reduction of teaching periods; and (vi) salary increase of R500 across the board.

This historic strike was joined by more than 6 000 teachers and marked the watershed in the history of teachers’ unions in South Africa. A year later, in 1990, South African teachers established the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu). Sadtu was aligned to the principles of the Freedom Charter of 1955, which called for the ‘opening up of the doors of learning and culture for all.’ 30 000 members joined Sadtu at its inception. Affiliated to organized labour, Sadtu became the Congress of South African Trade Unions’ (Cosatu’s) education union, partly to spearhead change in the education system in South Africa and partly to deal with the welfare of teachers as workers. Whilst the 2010 protest involved more than one union, the focus of the paper is on Sadtu, the union that was most visible and a member of the tripartite alliance.

In spite of the growth of its membership to an estimated membership of 245 000 teachers between 1990 and
2010, Sadtu’s objectives of fighting for better education for all was overshadowed by interests in party politics and material gains. It became the mobilization machine of political support for the African National Congress (ANC), and was ultimately caught up in the ideological battles of the ANC as it sought to exert its influence on policy formulation. The Mail and Guardian online, published on 27 August, 2010, captured Sadtu’s interest in party politics when it quoted Sadtu President Thobile Ntola:

We will refuse to campaign or support candidate(s) known to be thieves or lazy just because they succeed in manipulating the ANC internal process... When we changed the leadership in Polokwane, we expected it to change policy. If they are not going to change policy, they must also be changed (Rousouw et al., 2010).

This clearly shows that teachers play dual roles: first as educators and second as organizers of political support for the ANC. This partnership, however, did not dissolve the employee-employer relationship between Cosatu and the government. As government, the ANC still remains an employer and Cosatu/Sadtu still remains employees of government. This relationship complicates the alliance partnership. The supremacy of the union’s interests was clearly evident in the causes of the 2010 teachers’ strike, where workers demanded a salary increase of 8.6%, a housing allowance of R1000 and the equalisation of subsidies for medical aid (Letsoalo, 2010). The government had budgeted R11.2 billion for salary increases and R845 million in housing allowances (Letsoalo, 2010). The workers’ demands of 8.6% could have cost the government more than R17 billion for increases and R3.5 billion for housing allowances.

Another complication was the response of workers to the government, which demonstrated a total disregard of their partnership with the government in restructuring the education system. Such sentiments were captured in placards during the strike: “You give us a 7% increase, we give you 7% pass rate”. Clearly such demands reflected the gulf that exists between the interests of the workers and those of the government.

While the 1989 strike was characterised by the conservative professionalism of teachers as elites in their communities, and many ordinary people supported that strike, the 2010 strike was characterised by teachers losing their integrity as professionals. The professional work ethic and exemplary behaviour were replaced by militancy and hooliganism as teachers disrupted classes and threatened their pupils with violence in schools. Teachers also intimidated colleagues who sought to report for work and vandalised school properties. In some schools, preliminary examinations were disrupted or abandoned; in other schools, preparations for the final exams took place in a tense and uncertain atmosphere. Learners who tried to continue studying on their own were chased out of their classrooms. Some Sadtu members were guilty of illegal actions, such as vandalism and ignoring a court interdict. Such behaviour led the Gauteng’s ANC provincial secretary, David Makhura, to label Sadtu’s leadership in Soweto as ‘rogue and ill-disciplined’ (Moeng, 2011).

The above scenario renders credence to the argument that the violent strike of 2010 is the continuation of the culture of militancy that dates back to the apartheid era. Thus, in comparing and contrasting the teachers’ strikes of 1989 and 2010, two issues are brought to the fore: memory and nostalgia. Memory relates and replays the experiences of the 1989 teachers strike in relation or conjunction with the 2010 strikes. Bagozzi and Silk (1983) remind us that memory is multidimensional and encompasses recall and recognition, as well as processes of reconstructing the past. Nostalgia laments and rejects the unruly behaviours of teachers in the 2010 strike in comparison to their conservative professionalism displayed during the 1989 strike. Thus, nostalgia emerges when people reject the present phenomena in favour of an imagined (remembered) past. Christopher Lasch differentiates between these terms thus:

Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer obtainable. Memory sees past, present, and future as continuous. It is less concerned with loss than with our continuing indebtedness to a past the formative influence of which lives on in our patterns of speech, our gestures, our standards of honour, our expectations, and our basic disposition toward the world around us (Lasch, 1991, pp. 82-83).

Thus, we can pull the experiences of the strike of 1989 into the experiences of the 2010 strike as confirmation of teachers’ behaviour and conduct as we attempt to establish a sense of continuity of teachers’ militancy in the democratic dispensation. Such comparison resolutely enriches the present, either positively by justification, or negatively by juxtaposition. With this in mind, we explore the context of the 2010 strike as we remake the past and as the past remakes South Africa as the country continue on its path of redressing the imbalances of the past and catapults the past into the future regardless of empirical accuracy. Thus, we demonstrate in this article a multilayered symbolic use of the past during the 2010 protest, which was a form of “collective conversation” of remembering the past as well as expressing struggles of the present. However, we argue that what was entailed in the strike and statements made in relation to it were representation of both, nostalgia and memory.

The involvement of teachers’ union in politics needs to be assessed for perspective into the 2010 strike. This is imperative because during the apartheid era, teachers had no stake in government and the antagonism between teachers and the government was based purely on the opposition to policies of segregation and a demand to open the doors of learning for all. In the post apartheid era, teachers’ unions form part of the alliance partners of the government through their umbrella body Cosatu. The question is: what are the terms of this partnership? And
how healthy is this partnership?

TEACHERS, POLITICS AND THE ALLIANCE WITH THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS (ANC)

The partnership between the ruling party, the ANC, and Cosatu is often contextualized within the framework of a tripartite alliance that includes the South African Communist Party. These organisations, although separate entities, share a political history of working together towards dismantling the previous South African government's oppressive system. A significant policy that formed the basis and served as an impetus for this process was the Freedom Charter. The ideals of this Charter are: that all groups shall have equal rights; people shall share in the country's wealth; and that there shall be houses, security and comfort for the South African citizenry. These ideals form the basis of the canons of Cosatu and, in particular, its affiliate Sadtu.

In contemporary times, these organisations have voted together, have been open in their support of the ruling party, and have encouraged their members to vote for the ANC since the advent of the democratic dispensation in South Africa. Through the 2010 protest, they sought to remind their fellow member (the ANC) and partner of the political struggle of the ideals of the Freedom Charter. Writing on individual and collective memory, Green (2004) asserts the importance and credibility of both kinds of memory, stating that they converge to advance certain agendas. In the same vein, Bryson (2007, p. 45) points out that there is a strong connection and influence of collective memory on political identity. It is our contention that this shared memory and shared identity has, throughout its history, seen the tripartite alliance working together.

While the 2010 protest was essentially a civil servants' demonstration of discontent with the South African government, there was a relatively concentrated focus on two sectors, that is, education and health. Most discussions and reports accessible to the public concentrated on these two sectors. Television coverage, talk shows and newspapers represented the civil service strike as a health workers and teachers' protest. Some broadcasts referred to the demands made during the strike as 'demands made by teachers and other public servants', as stated in a 29 July, 2010 publication by ionews online. While not endorsing this widely-held perception, the discussion of this article purposefully concentrates on teachers and Sadtu's role in the protest.

Reflecting on one of the most publicised civil servants' protest, we are reminded of the widely quoted statement of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a philosopher and second president of India; 'The past may become either an opportunity or an obstacle. Everything depends on what we make of it and not what it makes of us' (Skyways Airlink Magazine, 2010). At the heart of the 2010 protest, two factors were at play in the relationship between the ANC and Cosatu. Memory was constantly tapped into by both parties, with each party either reminding or disappointed with the loss of memory of comradeship once shared between the two parties.

The South African Sunday Times online articles, published on 18 and 29 August 2010 in the wake of the protest, employ words from the two parties' leadership, Thobile Mtola and Jacob Zuma, which insinuated that each party had forgotten its mandate and/or comradship status. Thobile Mtola, Sadtu's president, seemingly set on reminding the ANC government of similar mindsets once shared by the two parties, said: 'There is total shutdown till the state comes to its senses (our emphasis)'. This statement is concomitant with earlier statements made by Mtola and his colleagues that negotiation processes between the unions and the state had been going on for six months without arriving at any amicable solutions - somehow indicating that the government refused for many months to come to its senses.

In support of those in protest and referring to principles enshrined in the Freedom Charter, the editorial team of The Times, an affiliate news publication of Sunday Times, published an article with sub headlines reading: 'The wealth of South Africa should be distributed more fairly and equally'. In this article the editorial said the state should 'pay teachers for what they must do (and) restore teachers, nurses and other civil servants to the positions (of) respected and valued professionals'. It further stated that the huge salaries of parliamentarians sharply contrast those of ordinary citizens. The article contrasts a cabinet minister's monthly salary of R143 000 to that of civil servants that range, on average, from R7 000 to R13 000.

Although such quotations and references to salaries dominated news reports, the dispute was not solely over pay, but equally the forgotten or unfulfilled collective promises. Collective memory scholars, such as Bryson (2007), Jordan (2011), and Olick and Robbins (1998) are of the view that collective memory studies necessitate the investigation of forgetting alongside remembering as these facets are fundamental to collective memory.

Reacting to the civil servants' protest, in a 29 August 2010 publication of the Sunday Times, Jacob Zuma, the president of both the country and ANC, appealed to civil servants in the same vein as Thobile Mtola, implying that civil servants had reneged on their responsibility and forgotten their duty. Bourguignon (2005, p.63) would refer to Zuma's statement as an effort at keeping memory alive. Zuma was quoted reminding civil servants that:

'We fully understand frustrations caused by the legacy of low salaries, which is something that the democratic government has been gradually addressing since 1994. However, we reiterate that protest actions should be undertaken within the ambit of the law and basic human decency.'
Although this was an admisive statement, its intention of reminding protesters of their responsibility was clear. Whilst on one hand it expressed respect for the legitimacy of the concerns raised by the protesters, on the other hand it articulated disdain for the manner in which some protest actions had been carried out – an indication of a ‘collective forgotten responsibility’ by some civil servants. Zuma found it hard to criticise protesters outright due to a relationship the two parties have shared in the past and continue to share.

The statements made by the leadership of both parties were reflective of memories held by both parties. While discontent with the status quo and untoward behaviour or attitude displayed by members of both parties underpins the statements, they also indicate disappointment that each party demonstrated a loss of memory in relation to the promises and/or expectations of the other party.

The strike went on from 28 July to 23 August, 2010. Relative to the previous public service protests, the 2010 strike dragged on longer and was accompanied by a violence not experienced before. A contributing factor for this was the protestors memories of what had worked for them in previous protests; prolonging and intensifying the protest had previously forced the government to give in to their demands. Denis and Makiwane (2003) state that memory promotes resilience. Although they made this reference alluding to memory in a health-related context, findings from their study support the fact that collective memory and allusion to ‘what was’ provide courage and resilience to carry on. We argue that the 2010 protestors tapped into similar ‘memory reserves’ as indicated in this study, in order to propel them further.

As it took longer to resolve issues related to the strike, tension mounted between the government and public service unions. This ultimately led to an intensification of crossed words. During the earlier days of the strike, statements began with a pleading tone, but gradually, a more confrontational language emerged. This state of affairs raises several questions: what is the impact of political activism in schools? What is the state of education in South Africa? What has changed since 1994, and what has remained unchanged, thus serving as a memory conduit from which protests like the one under discussion have sprung?

THE STATE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA

During the apartheid era, black South Africans were schooled through Bantu Education. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 created a separate education system for black South Africans which relegated them to the class of workers and into the pool of unskilled workers. It therefore became imperative for the new democratic government to open the doors of learning for all and correct the imbalances of the past. When the ANC took
power in 1994, it passed different legislations aimed at restructuring the education system in South Africa. Education was made a constitutional right. The Bill of Rights in Chapter 2 of the Constitution, declares that ‘Everyone has the right to basic education, including adult basic education’ and that ‘everyone has the right to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible’.

Furthermore, the government passed the South African Schools Act of 1996, which made education compulsory for all South Africans from the ages of seven to 15 which corresponds to grades 1 to 9.

The government also increased its spending on education. The 2010 South Africa’s government records on expenditure shows that the South Africa government spent 5.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 20% of total state expenditure on education. This ranks them among the few governments globally that invest huge amounts of resources in education. The increase in spending on education enabled the government to establish no-fees schools nationally. According to the report on non-fee schools in the Ministry of Basic Education, there are about 19933 no-fee schools in South Africa. This suggests that 68% of South African pupils of all public schools do not pay school fees (Ministry of Basic Education, 2011). However, many people who are entitled to send their children to no-fee schools send their kids to schools that require payment of fees, partly due to a perception that public no-fee schools lack ownership and that parents do not take responsibility. Moreover, most resources at these schools are not adequate, resulting in poor results.

The government further introduced the National Schools Nutrition Programme in its drive to improve education. The programme feeds about 7-million schoolchildren every day, especially those attending primary schools in 13 rural and 8 urban poverty nodes.

The above information clearly shows the huge gains made since 1994. Even Cosatu acknowledged such gains in its discussion document presented at the 2011 Sadtu National Conference (SAPA, 2011). In spite of these gains, the major problem remains that good legislation and policies have failed to translate into sound practice and that the imbalances of the past still persist. A recent survey conducted by SAinfo reporter and MediaClubSouthAfrica.com on literacy levels in South Africa found that that illiteracy among adults still stands at around 18%. This suggests that about 9 million adult South Africans are not functionally literate. The survey also found that teachers, especially in black townships and in the rural areas, are poorly trained and that matriculation pass rates in these areas are very low. Concerned, the Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga revealed to the Sowetan online of 10 June 2011 that 172000 pupils in KwaZulu-Natal schools alone were taught by 4 303 unqualified teachers. Similarly, a report released by the KwaZulu-Natal provincial Department of Basic Education revealed that ‘1130 teachers in the province had only matriculation certificates and that 925 had a matriculation certificate with one or two years of further training’. According to the report, these problems were most acute in black schools, contributing to the poor performance of pupils and poor matriculation pass rate.

A survey conducted in 2009 by SAinfo reporter and MediaClubSouthAfrica.com on the racial breakdown of individuals that had a matriculation or higher qualification and were over the age of 20 years, reminds us that the future is still the prisoner of the past as shown in the Pie Graph 1. Taking into consideration the above discussion the 2010 strike brought further strain to the already distressed education system.

The picture looks even grimmer in black communities when one considers that only 24% of learners who enrolled for grade 1 in 1998 managed to complete their matriculation in the minimum of 12 years (Ministry of Basic Education, 2011). Although the matriculation pass rate has improved nationally since 1994, it is still worrying that 70% of matriculation passes are currently produced by only 11% of schools. This led Zwelinzima Vavi, Cosatu Secretary-General, to lament the continued existence of the fault-line in terms of unequal access to better education (Seekoei, 2010). In its own assessment of the school infrastructure, the Department of Basic Education report published in May, 2011 painted a damning picture of state schools. According to this report, ‘about 3500 public schools in South Africa have no electricity while 2402 have no water supply’. Of the country’s 24793 public schools, 913 have no toilets. These figures refer to schools that have never had these facilities at all, as well as schools where infrastructure was destroyed or not properly maintained.

While lack of resources and infrastructure affect results in poor rural provinces, rich provinces face challenges of their own, largely stemming from a lack of commitment by both teachers and pupils. Official statistics in Gauteng, for
example, show that Soweto has 60 under-performing schools compared with an average of 10 in other townships. Teachers blame the outcome-based education (OBE) curriculum for poor results. In fact, OBE was one of the issues highlighted during the 2010 teachers strike. They also argued that there had been too many changes to curriculum structures since 1994 without giving any of those curricula a chance to succeed.

The consequences of such a trial and error approach to the curriculum culminated in the dismal performance of pupils as manifested in the 2011 Annual National Assessment (ANA) report. The ANA results highlighted not only curriculum chaos and inadequate district support, especially for under-resourced and rural schools, but also a close correlation between poor levels of achievement and low socioeconomic status. The ANAs tested about 6 million children from grades 1 to 6 on their literacy and numeracy. As expected, better-resourced provinces such as the Western Cape and Gauteng consistently performed higher in all categories than the poorer provinces, including Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West and Northern Cape. Overall, the results showed that ‘the quality of basic education is still well below what it should be’ (Ministry of Basic Education, 2011).

Although a number of sources that reported on the strike did not highlight these issues, the above concerns were raised by protesting teachers through placards and anecdotal evidence. These concerns are a stark reminder that the present derives from the past and the future can be imprisoned by the past. In a 2011 publication, entitled Memory and Pedagogy, Mitchell and her colleagues remind us that despite unhelpful incidents that memory can bring forth, exists positive aspects of memory. They note that such incidents and their effects should not override the fact that ‘the past can be a useful learning experience and used as a ‘space’ for the present and the future’ (Mitchell et al., 2011, p.1).

EFFECTS ON THE CLASSROOM, LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

The deterioration of the culture of learning due to ill-discipline is one of the major contributing factors to education crises. Among teachers, ill-discipline has been compounded by a lack of commitment or clarity on policy and the code of conduct. Among pupils, it has been exacerbated by the absence of the guidelines on disciplining unruly pupils in schools. These problems have resulted in a corrosion of the culture of teaching and leaning in schools. Even Cosatu acknowledged this in its working document at the Sadtu National Conference in 2011 in Johannesburg, by pointing out that: We would not be exaggerating if we were to say that our education system is in crisis (SAPA, 2011).

One incident of ill discipline worth mentioning took place at Meadowlands High School, in Soweto, where Moss Senye, a school principal who was also the leader of Sadtu, assaulted a 17-year old pupil at his school. The pupil’s parents dragged Senye to court. Angered by this, over 1,000 Sadtu members downed the chalk and converged on the court in Orlando, Soweto to support Senye.

This incident highlights several issues. First, it highlights the lack of cooperation between teachers and parents in instilling discipline among pupils. Second, the abandonment of classes by teachers to attend the court case in support of their union leader suggests that teachers value their union more than their duties. Third, the incident highlights the need to find better ways of disciplining unruly pupils than physical assault.

However, when asked why teachers abandoned their duties to support him in court, he attributed this to Sadtu members being a close-knit family. This confirmed the accusations often levelled at Sadtu; that its members usually give up teaching time to attend meetings and workshops, or to participate in marches and demonstrations. Nevertheless, the fact that teachers went to court to support their union leader illustrates the influence that union leaders wield in schools. Sadtu has a stranglehold on our education system.

Furthermore, Senye’s case highlighted several issues ranging from insults and racism to irresponsibility. This came to the fore when Senye labelled Gauteng’s MEC for education, Barbara Creecy, a ‘Satanist’ for implementing the ‘no-work, no-pay’ policy (Machete, 2011). Shocked by such a racist attack, Sadtu’s Gauteng provincial structure apologised to the MEC on Senye’s behalf, and argued that Sadtu is a non-racial and multi-racial organization.

Ill-discipline among teachers did not escape the attention of the other alliance partners, especially the ANC. Speaking to Sadtu delegates during the 2010 Sadtu national conference in Johannesburg, ANC General Secretary, Gwede Mantashe, rebuked teachers for ‘lacking interest in the education of the black child in general’ (Mohlala, 2010). Some teachers have impregnated female learners. According to Richy Brijraj, the Chief Executive Director of the South African Council of Educators, 18 teachers were struck off the roll during the first half of the 2011 academic year alone, for unethical conduct including sexual violence against pupils.

REMEDIES AND RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

Whether directly or indirectly involved, protest actions often impact on sectors and sections of the population that are essentially distant from the actual protest itself. Parents of school-going children, service providers to schools and the general public expressed concerns in
relation to the length of the strike, the nature of demonstrations related to the protest action, as well as its effects. Debates and talks that were generated during the 2010 strike ranged from investigated media reports to public comments of ordinary people. The nature of the responses was diverse, but essentially it became a public topic that reflected how significant education is to the general public. Hence, in this section we discuss the responses that the protest action generated. The discussion is twofold, concentrating on common/public responses and reactions from representatives of the state. The latter led to changes in policy, procedure or processes. We focus on if, and how, these responses had any traces of memory, either as a lost, desired and/or even enforced element.

As with the previous state workers’ protest actions, the involved parties reacted to a number of incidents related to the protest. However, responses to the 2010 protest were relatively heightened. Amongst the elements that stood out during this period were statements that made concerted efforts to evoke the past in an attempt to get each party to accede to the to an estimated membership of 245 000 teachers others’ demands. Intentionally or unconsciously, actions and statements either reflected nostalgia for, or disgust with the past. While on one hand some references to the education sector’s untenable status quo were made, teachers’ conduct and conditions in schools demonstrated traces of desire for the past; on the other hand there were nuances that, despite the new order, the sad past lingered on.

**Government**

A number of state officials responded, from senior managers to the incumbent president himself, as demonstrated in the above discussion. Further, procedures and record-keeping were introduced or enforced, earmarked towards ensuring the whereabouts of teachers during this period.

**Unions/ teachers**

Hit back by slating what they referred to as fat-cat lifestyles that took away resources that could have bettered teachers’ salaries. Such tendencies are explained in Storeloff and Pereira’s (2008) study that analyses the position of teachers’ unions where significant resistance to (or lack of) reforms is portrayed, which subsequently lead to conflict with the government.

**Learners**

During the teacher’s strike, learners were reported as being concerned that the school system was being disrupted, a situation they said would impact their future negatively. Learners affiliated with a Western Cape based organisation, IkamvaYouth used the organisations’ facilities to keep up with their school work. A website that hosts the organisation, www.scenicsouth.co.za, reported on the learning activities of their learners, noting that, Ikamvites refused to let their futures be gambled away. Showing wisdom and maturity beyond their years, they support, encourage and educate one another.

Elsewhere, learners reportedly said that they were determined to become better human beings and that their parents’ marginal status quo was a stark reminder of what they should aspire to move away from, to achieve a better life. A grade 11 Ikamvite, Anele Mathambo, was quoted saying; ‘we must not let the strike of the teachers disrupt us. We must continue to study because that is our future.’

**Parents and general public**

Concurring with learners on the importance of building a better future and referring to the strike as a ‘tragedy’, Mahlomola Kekana, president of the National Association of Parents in School Governance (NAPSG) said; ‘The impact of this strike may affect the entire generation as the damage far outweighs the gains made by public servants, in particular the teachers’, (www.news24.com). In other media fora, such as the SAFM’s *The After Eight Debate* of 2 September 2010, various callers lambasted teachers, citing their failure to emulate their predecessors who were not only committed to teaching but conducted themselves professionally and cared for the learner above their own needs.

In the wake of the above-listed responses and equally concerned by the strike and the state of education in general, parliament asked the Education Minister, Angie Motshekga, to explain why schools were dysfunctional. She highlighted

(i) poor leadership by school management teams and district offices;
(ii) poor subject knowledge on the part of teachers; and
(iii) inadequate resources (SAPA, 2011).

However, the Democratic Alliance Member of Parliament, Junita Klopper-Lourens, countered these responses and pointed out that the Minister failed to highlight real issues that explained the dismal performance of the school system. Klopper-Lourens argued these included, amongst others:

(i) the random manner in which curricula were developed and implemented;
(ii) officials that lacked the competence to serve the teaching community meaningfully; and
(iii) the stranglehold that Sadtu has on teaching
According to Klopper-Lourens (2011), the curriculum has not been developed according to scientific principles and methods, but rather based on achieving unrealistic outcomes. On the issue of officials who lack the competence to serve, she blamed the structure of the national Department of Basic Education, which resulted in fragmented areas of responsibility on the one hand and hobbled policy formulation and leadership on the other. Klopper-Lourens also blamed the crisis in education on Sadtu, which she said forces its members to give up teaching time to attend meetings and workshops, or to participate in marches and demonstrations (Klopper-Lourens, 2011).

In the same vein, the most significant acknowledgement of the seriousness of the crisis in the educational system came to the fore when President Jacob Zuma, in his first State of the Nation address (2009) outlined new plans of action aimed at reforming South Africa’s education system. Some of the identified needs were: additional training for teachers, and teachers to be in school, in class on time, teaching, with no neglect of duty and no abuse of learners (News24, 2011).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that memory can, as was the case with the 2010 protest, contribute towards further damage. We have demonstrated how the South Africa teachers’ series of strikes have become a form of bringing memory forward; in a manner that Johnston (2011) terms, a form of ‘rememoring’ that is mired in causing damage.

South African schools have undergone many policy and legislative changes. However, the education system still needs a rescue plan aimed at changing the mindsets of some teachers and pupils, especially the way they view and value education, both as a profession and as the key to social and economic development. These teachers and pupils, like some pockets of South Africans, still view violence, vandalism, destruction of property and the burning of libraries and schools as solutions to the challenges that face the country today. The violent conduct during protest actions indicates that some South Africans have not yet moved with the changes of the democratic dispensation which commenced in 1994. Yet, the advent of democracy has opened so many ways of resolving conflicts peacefully and in line with the precepts of democracy.

It should be acknowledged that people do not wake up in the morning to engage in violent acts or vandalism. These acts are manifestations of frustration, due to slow process of change and poor service delivery by the government. Thus, the blame partly lies at the doors of politicians. History reminds us that revolutions normally arise as a means to freedom. However, once achieved freedom is once again withdrawn by the same leaders of the revolution, in pursuit of their personal interests. Thus, the new ruling class becomes the new oppressor within a very short time. The corrupt politicians justify their evil deeds under the pretence of promoting the interests of ordinary people. Consequently, revolutions or the so-called people’s democracies become the most insidious dictatorships. The French, Soviet, Chinese and our own South African revolution, attest to this fact.

Certainly, no one can deny the fact that teachers are one of the most important groups of professionals in any society. No one can deny that their conditions of service have progressively worsened and that, like most South Africans all they see are blatant forms of corruption and wasteful expenditure by politicians. No one can deny that South Africa needs strong teacher bodies and teachers’ unions that can contribute to the transformed curriculum, that can build the poor, and that can encourage teachers to enhance public education. Nonetheless, these needs cannot overshadow the need for quality education and the professional development of teachers. Special training programmes, therefore, are needed to professionalise the teaching profession. There is also a need to re-instil ethics and professionalism into schools. To achieve this, as a starting point could be the introduction of performance-based pay for teachers alongside the introduction of a subsidy allowing teachers to acquire the tools of their trade, such as computers and internet access. This could be achieved, first by focusing on instilling a culture of accountability and responsiveness, and second, by setting up support programmes through the establishment of a teacher development institute that would look at practical applications.

The culture of learning needs to be restored by giving schools greater autonomy, not only in hiring and firing staff, but also in adapting the curriculum to local needs. Teachers should take on the mantle of professionals and be given opportunities and incentives to improve their skills. They could also be given the freedom to move between schools and be rewarded for excellence. As Jansen (2008) contends, ‘For too long the authorities have been seeking wonder cures in top-down fixes and in the process have disempowered the very people responsible for delivery. A return to school-centred education rather than department dominated directives is a primal requisite for the return to a culture of learning’ (SAPA, 2011).

REFERENCES
