

A RESPONSE TO MORRELL'S 'EDUCATION STRUGGLES'

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How is one meant to survive in a system like this? And equally important – how is one meant to provide a meaningful education to the youth of this country?... We are all just teachers and, sitting back, are bombarded by the questions but feel a measure of helplessness as we struggle to find the answers....

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In his article 'Education Struggles: Teachers and School Committees in Natal/Kwazulu' in *Transformation* 7, Rob Morrell argues that state reforms in education have and will continue to give teachers a stake in the status quo. 'Changes in the position of teachers', he suggests, 'are disposing them to support the status quo rather than challenge it' (Morrell, 1988:57). While teachers might organise around professional issues such as the dismissal of a colleague, or around political issues centred on racial or national oppression, they are unlikely to align themselves with the working class in the struggle for socialism. Rather, teachers will choose to pursue material advantages and a more affluent standard of living for themselves. Citing the work of Shalem (1986) Morrell suggests that teachers are more likely to use professionalism to provide a barrier against the interference of the state. Thus he attributes teacher quiescence in Natal/Kwazulu less to coercion on the part of the state and the educational authorities and more to a desire for job security and professional advancement.

Morrell locates black teachers within the middle class whose political allegiance reformist capital is attempting to secure. Hence, he suggests, the economic interests of teachers receive support from the state. He cites statistics which show that education budgets for black education have increased substantially over the past few years with the bulk of the funds being allocated to teachers' salaries. Because upgrading is officially supported and financially rewarded the push to obtain better qualifications has not necessarily been coercive. Certainly, large numbers of teachers are

busy with further studies. Further, teachers are relatively affluent compared to the communities in which they live, particularly in the rural areas. They are encouraged to apply for generous housing subsidies and many of the women can expect additional financial support from a male wage-earner. All this leads Morrell to conclude that teachers as a stratum are unlikely to be radicalised (although he does concede that some teachers are politically active in progressive teacher organisations such as NEUSA and WECTU) and that the goals of people's education will not be achieved 'unless the schools themselves come under the influence of other powerful radical forces'.

Useful though Morrell's evidence is in better understanding the position of teachers, his article subscribes to a reproductive theory of teaching. Its functional description of teachers is, this response argues, politically disempowering in the way it promotes pessimism about the contribution which teachers can make to educational and social transformation.

Erik Olin Wright argues that teachers occupy a contradictory location within class relations and only 'if the contradictory character of the objective class locations of intellectuals is grasped can we begin to understand the contradictory character of their relationship to the class struggle' (Wright, 1979:211). And only then can appropriate political strategies be developed for linking teachers as intellectual workers to socialist movements. Similarly, Alexander maintains that teachers 'constitute a layer of people for whose commitment and allegiance we have to contend with the ruling class' (Alexander, 1988:23).

This contradictory position can be exemplified as follows: according to Wright at the economic level teachers, like workers, are employed by capital or by the state. Like workers they must sell their labour power in order to live; nor do they control the apparatus of production (the education apparatus) as a whole. Morrell correctly identifies the process of the deskilling of teachers, converting most of them into technicians and a few into managers. Teachers do not control schools. They do not draw up the syllabus. Nor do they write the textbooks. Teachers' assessment function is carefully monitored and controlled by a vigilant army of HOI's, inspectors and subject advisers. A teacher captures this pervasive surveillance:

Man, they're always visiting us and checking on what we're doing. Every second week they're there. They make sure that we stick to the syllabus. They listen to our lessons. They look at the tests we set. They're there to control us man, not to help us (quoted in Christie, 1985:149).

One might call this a process of 'ideological proletarianisation', that is a 'process in which the capacity of teachers to interject their own ideas into

their teaching is reduced' (Sarup, 1984:122). More efficient bureaucratic control will further erode the opportunity for teachers to educate:

With all this inspection there's no time for real education — only for drilling students (Christie, 1985:122).

Morrell concludes that teachers are likely to pursue the path of professionalism to win material benefits and day to day control over their work. Yet, as Wright points out, teachers, unlike workers, have real control (albeit often not recognised) over their own labour process (classroom work) (Wright, 1979). At the ideological level teaching is one of the critical locations for the dissemination and elaboration of bourgeois ideology. Teachers are employed by the state to help maintain ideological control and to serve the political interests of capital. Nevertheless teachers may potentially subvert bourgeois ideology at the level of ideological relations given some degree of autonomy over educational production. So the degree of professional autonomy of teachers varies enormously across time and place.

Now it is precisely this professionalism which might bring teachers into conflict with the education authorities such as the DET. Hartshorne argues that teachers are *not* treated as professionals but as instruments of policy (Hartshorne, 1988). In a recent interview, the chairperson of DETU complained about the imposition of instructions from the DET hierarchy to teachers. 'In most cases', he said, 'the instructions are unreasonable' (South, 13.10.88). Teachers after all do not control the education system, they merely work within it. What then happens if teachers begin to demand job rights and an autonomy that the system cannot deliver? This may well lead to problems of control and legitimisation. Morrell cites Shalem in support of his argument but her study is located in a different context — that of white english-speaking teachers working in an educationally privileged community. In the context of schooling for the oppressed in South Africa professionalism may well be worth supporting provided that it is linked to wider struggles aimed at mobilising broad support for a fundamental restructuring of schools.

Morrell mentions in passing examples of teacher resistance in the 1950s and teacher work inside of progressive teacher organisations but finally portrays teachers without the benefit of contradictions or resistance. There is little sense of teacher agency in his account. It lacks detail on the way teachers both accommodate and resist, interact and attempt to survive. Thus the coercive power of the education authorities should not be underestimated as an explanation of teacher quiescence (or survival). Recently the DET in Cape Town embarked on a witchhunt aimed at rooting out 'radical teachers'. A circular was sent to DET schools requiring principals to list 'leftist/radical teachers' at their schools and to supply information on their membership of unions and their involvement in

'subversive activities' and to comment on the 'effectiveness of 2 way radio communication to and from the schools (incl. SAP)' (*Argus*, 10.09.88).

Yet teachers continue to resist, as Morrell recognises by saying that while resistance in Natal has subsided 'it has not disappeared'. Earlier this year an estimated 1200 teachers supported the stayaway on Monday 6 June (Philcox, 1988). In 1985 progressive teachers risked their jobs to support students. Refusal to administer exams in the presence of the army and police in the schools led to 72 of these teachers in the Western Cape being charged with misconduct while many more temporary teachers were dismissed. In a highly repressive society these are examples of important moments of political resistance in which some teachers have demonstrated their willingness to risk personal and job security in fighting against injustices both inside schools and in support of broader community struggles.

At the level of the actual school curriculum Morrell's approach offers no room for developing oppositional modes of teaching in schools and fails to open up questions of how classroom practice might be related to a socialist future.

Ethnographic studies of teachers' actual work experiences may well reveal examples of teachers who, while they recognise the difficulty of structural change, remain determined that in their classrooms students will explore, think, compare and investigate patterns of oppression and exploitation in the wider society. Such research would provide a more richly textured understanding of how teachers construct themselves as subjects in ways which are both disempowering and empowering. In other words, what happens in the real world of schools? We need to know what the inconsistencies and contradictions are which lie beneath the surface of schooling and teacher work. Schools, after all, are sites 'of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles' — for teachers as well as students (Giroux, 1981:18). Failure to recognise this 'is not only a disservice to the many teachers who have risked much to oppose apartheid, but it could also undermine the contributions of progressive teachers to the struggle' (Gilmour, 1988:3).

Such evidence as there is regarding the experience of black urban primary school teachers in Cape Town highlights the ambiguities of the class position of teachers rather than confirming Morrell's thesis. I work in a project with a group of DET primary school teachers to facilitate teachers investigating their own classroom practice. Much of this work highlights the ambiguities and contradictions revealed by the concrete experiences of ordinary teachers in real situations. All of them wish to 'improve' their teaching. There is no certificate, and thus no salary increase, for involvement in the project — yet they demonstrate real interest and concern for their pupils. Not all of the women are able to rely on the wage

of a male-breadwinner. Often they are the sole support of extended families. In one case a teacher supports a family of twelve and lives in the same four-roomed house she has lived in all her life.

This is not to say that teachers are not economically privileged relative to other workers in the community, but simply to plead for investigation into hidden contradictions over visible certainties. It is a mistake to emphasise the material conditions of black teachers' existence at the expense of considering the variety of forces shaping their class position. Teachers, as both Wright and Alexander point out, have no fixed class location. They will ultimately take their class position through engagement in struggle.

The thrust of People's Education is to promote democracy, non-racialism, collective work, active participation, critical and creative thinking in schools. Any attempt to democratise education must take seriously the empowerment of teachers so that they might participate in the production as well as the implementation of educational knowledge and develop a discourse around transformative educational theory and practice. Rensburg reminds us that teachers are 'cadres of people's education' and they, 'not activists will be most important in implementing people's education' (Rensburg, 1986:11).

Any serious attempt to develop critical and creative thinking in students needs teachers who can think critically and creatively and work collectively. One way forward for all teachers concerned about the quality of their teaching might be to begin by critically reflecting on their own classroom practices. Reflexive teaching enables teachers to see the improvement in their work, to understand that classroom practice can and does change. Such teachers are well placed both to imagine a new educational reality and to act strategically within the present situation. So, what is needed is a project of the *possibility* of teacher work, one that recognises the real and present conditions of schooling and yet imagines a different educational future. Gramsci poses the question in this way:

How can the present be welded to the future, so that while satisfying urgent necessities of the one we may work effectively to create and anticipate the other? (quoted in Simon, 1982:83).

And if we do not win the commitment of the vast majority of teachers, warns Alexander, 'the educational arena, or at least the schools as institutions will have been finally lost to the powers that be' (Alexander, 1988:23).

Finally, then, in our struggle to build a new education system do we put teachers on the other side or do we 'think of ways of transforming teachers into agents of fundamental social change'? (WECTU teacher quoted in Kruss, 1988:30).

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