CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHING PROFESSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE MALTESE SITUATION.

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This is the second of a two-part article. The first part appeared in the April 1989 issue of our magazine. Author, Dr Ronald G. Sultana holds a first class degree in English and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education from the University of Malta, as well as diplomas in Religious Studies (Institute of Religious Studies) and in Guidance and Counselling (University of Reading, U.K.). He has recently successfully completed a doctoral research study in the sociology of education at the University of Waikato (Hamilton, New Zealand), and is currently lecturing on the subject at the University of Malta. His major interest is in the relation between education and the economy, and has published widely on the subject in local, British and Australasian journals of educational studies.

2. TEACHERS' WORK AND PROFESSIONALISATION

In my work as teacher educator, I often find myself in the awkward position of promoting a Critical Education on the one hand, and confronting the reality of our schooling system on the other. Students tell me that they agree with many of the ideas we discuss during lectures, seminars and workshops, only to have to jettison their ideals at the doorstep of the classroom. While there are various reasons for this — and indeed, some of the more capable, courageous and committed find ways to subvert a formal, often cruel system to respond with sensitivity to the intellectual and personal needs of their pupils — I would like to focus here on only a few and inter-related issues. I will therefore look at the constraints on teachers' work, and the significance this has for their status as professionals.

It has been argued by some that Maltese teachers have a high degree of autonomy: the latter enter the classroom and are practically free from formal control and supervision. According to this view, if teachers want to follow any of the three orientations to education discussed earlier, they are free to do so. Such an analysis, however, fails to recognise the tryrannical rule of the sanctified "Curriculum", and the stranglehold of examinations on any form of experimental, innovative and progressive education. How **free** do teachers actually feel to follow the interests of their students, to help create an association between learning and enjoyment, to encourage and satiate young people's curiosity when what counts are grades, streaming, examination results, and the channelling into status schools?

The problem is systemic: all the current research in sociology, psychology and pedagogy point to the need for change. Part of the tragedy is that for a variety of historical and economic reasons, teachers have lost their sense of direction, have personalised rather than politicised their alienation from the system, and as a body of workers have generally opted to struggle in isolation to implement a program they rarely believe in rather than **collectively** demand for change.

A leading American sociologist of education, Michael Apple, has convincingly argued that teachers, like a variety of other orkers, are becoming deskilled. He argues that the professional status of teachers depends on an inter-related set of abilities which have been developed over the years. These include (a) the skill to develop curricula and programs of learning which suit the students, which present alternative points of views, which encourage the development of critical, conceptual and practical faculties (b) the communication of these through a variety of pedagogical techniques based on sound theory.

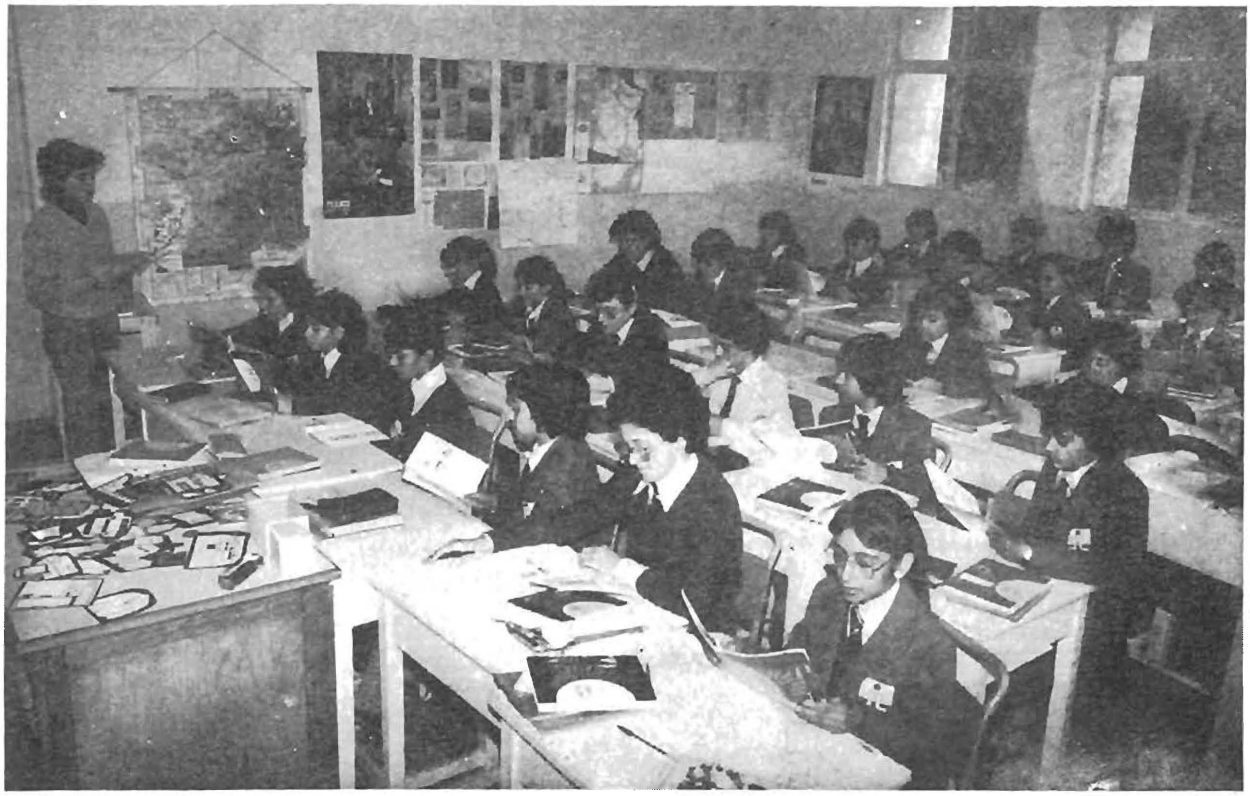
The problem in the United States is that teaching packages are being produced by Education Departments, often with the financial backing of private industrial concerns. Such teaching packages include texts, criteria for assessment, model answers etc. All the teacher has to do is to deliver this package — and again the pedagogy is specified to the last detail — and to evaluate whether the pre-established "learning goals" have been achieved.

At face value this might appear quite attractive to the Maltese teacher, generally starved for educational resources. Apple argues, however, that such packages **deskill** teachers. The latters' abilities — in producing knowledge, in responding to situation, in being sensitive to individual and group needs — atrophy through lack of use. We therefore have the subtle but devastatingly crucial modification of teachers' work: they are now technicians, mere *"factotums"* to decisions which are taken for them by others far removed from their classrooms, decisions which often work against specific groups of students identifiable by their class, gender and ethnicity.

Such sophisticated learning packages are not in use in Malta. But the same sort of deskilling — if teachers have ever actually been "skilled" in the meaning explored above — is taking place in Malta. We might, as teachers, have a "code of ethics", even eventually a deserved increase in our salaries, and perhaps a heightening of social respect and esteem as well as other benefits which normally accompany so-called professionalisation. The fact remains, however, that professionals we are **not** until our job simply remains that of accepting the directives from above, the passing on of an enforced curriculum, the selecting and sorting of students in such a way that some are given special status, and others are ignored. Students' reactions to such an imposition is everywhere evident — we might conveniently label it "deviant behaviour" or "absenteeism", but if we are honest with ourselves, we know that their resistance signals a message, a reaction to a process whose original and explicit intention is to humanise and empower through the development of cognitive and practical skills, but which in fact many experience as alienating and destructive.

Decentralisation and the devolution of power and autonomy into the hands of the professional teacher is a necessary but not sufficient condition for Critical Education to come about. Such a major swing in educational policy calls for the development of a variety of skills in school administrators, teachers, students, and parents — we are therefore talking about **skilling** rather than **deskilling** here. If democratic participation is truly to become a reality across the board, then there has to be an intensive investment in inservice education and training (Bezzina, 1988 has provided a rationale and model for this) of a work force of teachers who — as Farrugia's (1987) and Borg and Falzon's (1988) studies have indicated — have grown weary through disillusionment and stress.

I would suggest that such stress results not only from the very real material difficulties of making ends meet in the financial regard, but also from the living of contradictions in the carrying out of their teaching duties. In a rigidly hierarchical and bureaucratic educational system, teachers find themselves sandwiched between a belief in democracy and participation on the one hand, and the daily experiencing of the lack of autonomy in their work on the other. They might have humanistic and possibly progressive ideals at heart, but feel obliged to forget the individual, the groups who need positive rather than negative discrimination, those who can arrive at high levels of



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intellectual labour through a practical pedagogy — because their taskmaster, the Syllabus, beckons. Thus the definition of the "good teacher" has historically shifted, in Malta, from the person who successfully endears his/her students to education to one who manages a number of passes at this or that competitive exam.

Hence the role of educational leaders and, possibly, of the teachers' trade union. Recent theories of the State — such as those developed by Jessop (1982) and Offe (1984) for instance — have demonstrated the importance of social movements like those inspired by feminism, liberationism, a concern for the environment, etc. These movements, when sufficiently mobilised behind an ideal, can form strong pressure groups to wield power and resources from the State. Perhaps more importantly, they are capable of resisting the logic that the State would want to impose on a variety of its constituents, and therefore create spaces to assert their own agendas.

Currently in Malta the concern of the State is with a vocational definition of the educational enterprise. Human capital theory, the investment in education for the economic well-being of the country, is the overriding logic that characterises a number of statements about education from a variety of sources. While some would argue that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, Carnoy and Levin (1985) — the two foremost political economists of education today — have noted in their critical and historical analysis of the development of education, that when the needs of industry become the major concern of policy makers, the critical and humanistic concerns of education tend to fade in the background. In other words, "capital rights" become more important than "person rights".

It is interesting to note, therefore, the lack of attention given locally to inequality in educational opportunity, provision and achievement, the lack of a concrete strategy to combat sexism and sexist practices in our schools, the turning of a blind eye to the violence on students' self-concepts perpetrated by intra- and inter-school streaming, the disillusionment of so many students with an education which they find alienating, cruelly competitive, and joyless.

We urgently need in Malta a social movement of teachers, one that is inspired by democratic educational ideals, one that is committed to the enhancement of human values in state schools, and through them of Maltese society generally. My concluding question is in fact a challenge: Is the *Malta Union of Teachers* ready to fulfill the task of assuming educational leadership in these terms, of approximating schooling to a critical and humanising education, of skilling teachers to implement such a vision? Its credibility as a "union" with teachers generally — and with the rising generation of young educators specifically — depends, I sincerely believe, on the confrontation of this challenge.

While, for the sake of stylistic simplicity, I have not quoted directly from books or articles, my thoughts have obviously been formed by a critical dialogue with a variety of texts. I would recommend the following authors to teachers who would like to delve deeper into some of the issues explored above. Most of the following literature is available at the University Library:

Apple, M. (1982) **Education and Power** (Boston, Mass.; ARK).

Bezzina, C. (1988) **School Development: Heading Towards Effectiveness in Education** (Malta, MUT Publications).

Borg, M. and Falzon, J. (1988) *"Sources of Teacher Stress: Some Maltese Data"* **The Teacher** (December).

Bourdieu, P. (1973) *"Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction"* in R. Brown (ed.) **Knowledge, Education and Social Change** (London, Tavistock).

Carnoy, M. and Levin, H. (1985) **Schooling and Work in the Democratic State** (Stanford, CA; Stanford University Press).

Jessop, B. (1982) **Beyond the Capitalist State** (Oxford, Martin Robertson).

Farrugia, C. (1987) *"Challenges"* **The Teacher** (December).

Offe, C. (1984) **Contradictions of the Welfare State** (London, Hutchinson).