

# Book Review

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Ronald G Sultana, Ed.: *Themes in Education: A Maltese Reader*, Msida, Malta, Mireva Publications 1991 xxv + 297pp + bibliography Lm6.95, I.S.B.N. 9-781870 - 579087

"Teacher: Page 26 number 14. Pay attention, please. Alison will you read? (She does) Now how much have I got Roberta?

Roberta: Lm36.26.

Teacher: How many articles? So our answer is articles. Roberta is stuck." (p 290)

Nothing could be more trivial. A simple slice of life which is repeated every day, with some variations, in the world's classrooms. It is a reality so common that it encourages an appealing naivete', a perfunctory abandonment to the visible trappings, the "reality" of the situation. Asking oneself "What is going on here?" may appear to be disarmingly simple and obvious. Yet, a critical immersion into such and similar social situations would reveal a hitherto invisible drama, a nexus of tensions, forces and contradictions which influence the structures, process and people involved. Culled with the help of an "educational imagination" (*pace* Wright Mills), there is usually much more to trite social cameos than meets the eye.

## From Common Sense to Good Sense

It is with this primary charge of problematizing - meeting the challenge of moving from complacent common sense to critical good sense - that a team of academics associated with the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta have brought to light an edited collection of papers which address a selection of key themes in the theory and practice of education. The volume brings to bear the

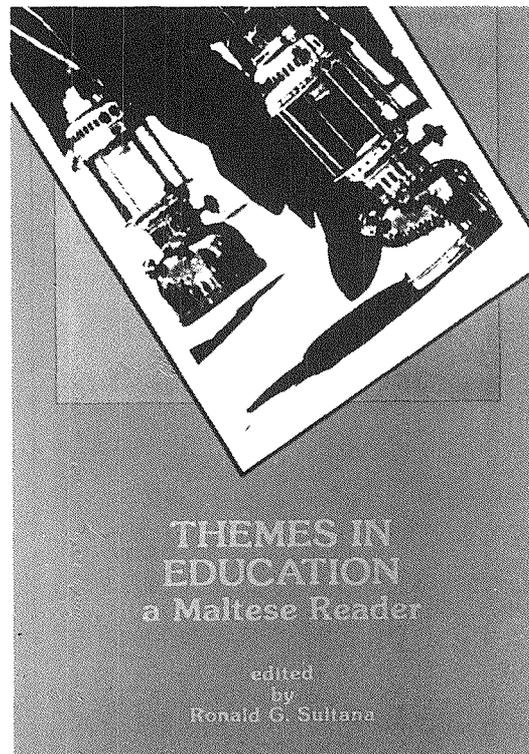
complimentary research interests of Faculty staff, teased out as these are with the corroborative support of various secondary texts, self-executed primary research projects and framed within the organized discipline of educational and social theory. A useful and supplementary source of data is a selection of the mostly unpublished, undergraduate and (since 1990) graduate work carried out under supervision by Faculty students over the years.

## Global Attributes

Before venturing into detail, I would single out two particularly important general attributes in which this text definitely breaks new ground: The creation of a customized professional textbook for the training of Maltese student teachers at tertiary education; and, following on this, the firm rooting of the publication in Maltese data and Maltese situations, with the proper theoretical and comparative baggage to contextualise "what is going on here".

## Underlying Philosophy

The inspiration for the text is drawn from the circuit of praxis - That all learning begins with practice; one learns by doing; one reflects intelligently on performance, generalising and conceptualising from the experience and using this new found knowledge and insight to experiment and perhaps refine future practice. Central to this process is both the vital role of grounded and therefore relevant, "practical theory", as well as the critical investigation of what is tacit and implicit in such practices. It is the latter which distinguishes the reflexive educator from the practitioner impervious of the implications of a social predicament in which s/he



unwittingly belongs as actor, product and victim. This technique, which is described in the book's introduction by Paul Hirst, distinguished author and now a retired Professor of Education, informs the pedagogy pioneered at the University of Cambridge and carried over by the Faculty of Education at Tal-Qroqq.

## Reviewing the Main Corpus

The rest of the volume consists of eleven papers, penned by nine different authors. The sequence is not haphazard but it follows "a basic pedagogical principle whereby readers are invited to engage firstly in articles which are non-technical in nature, but which encourage critical reflection on educational practice generally.."; (secondly) by "papers increasingly engaged in higher levels of theorizing and more abstract principles of a general nature drawing on the foundational disciplines of philosophy, sociology and psychology.....; (thirdly and lastly) by "educational theory which is more firmly grounded in Maltese data and which demand skills in the appraisal and the critical interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data" (p.xiv). Let me play the game by the editor's rules and review each contribution within its purported sectional context.

## General Reflections on School Practice

Ronald Sultana's launching essay on *motivation* confronts the pedagogical foundations of process-centered stimulus-response theory (representative of a "How do we lead an individual to learn something?" stance) with those of child-centered, humanistic education (grounded in the tenet that everybody wants to, and can, learn). The author makes no bones about his own philosophical standpoint and forcefully identifies the ethical and even practical preferences of the latter approach in inducing contemporary educational practice. Tempering enthusiasm with cold reality, Sultana comes up with what Fenech later calls a "low visibility class" (p.52) of so-called: "uneducables" as an example of an empirical context which approximates the humanistic and motivating brand of education for which he has made his case. I would be the first to agree that a number of the so-called structural impediments to schooling can be progressively managed, adapted and transformed by committed educators, especially when these are collaborating on such an overtly political task (see also Sultana on this in page 252). I'm afraid however that the selected example may read as a declaration of failure,

rather than as powerful evidence of the practical success of the preferred motivational theory. How indeed - one may challenge the author - does a more "typical" classroom environment, with its teacher-student ratios, ossified bureaucratic setup, prescribed syllabi and exam orientation, match up to the ideals of liberatory education?

Kenneth Wain's contribution examines, in a lucid unfolding style, the role and nature of *discipline* in the classroom. The essay exposes the political, philosophical and moral considerations which underlay the practice of teacher discipline, its relationship (as cause, effect, as a means or an end in itself?) to "order" and what order itself implies.

The argument examines different forms of discipline and bases for teacher authority and contrasts these with the political morality which is supposed to characterise a (morally desirable) democratic society. Perhaps Wain here stops short of assessing whether indeed a democratic society in practice actively propound the mobilising values with which he ascribes it, rather than sticking to the purely socialising ones, even of the self-regulatory brand. Democratic institutions may only pay lip service to the noble virtues of self-actualisation. The hidden agenda, as it works out, is not necessarily a dysfunction of the system's democratic character. That "authoritarian schools cannot be appropriate training grounds for the future citizens of democracies" need not necessarily read as a critique of autocratic school practices; it may spell out a discrepancy - perhaps unintentional and inevitable? - between the theory and practice of democratic life, which schools in a sense cannot help but mirror and reproduce.

Joseph Fenech's contribution is a (perhaps too formalistic and mechanistic) perspective of the *decision making/planning process* and of the different kinds of decision making practices. The author, by reproducing a selection of classroom events, drives home the imperative of acknowledging the ongoing construction of meaning, conscientizing the teacher alias decision-maker of the subliminal and unconscious motives and rationale behind his/her choices, pregnant as these are with implications on self, situation and students.

## Discipline Grounded Abstract Theorization

*Classroom talk* is the subject of investigation in the article by Charles Mifsud. The paper is a well-balanced account of the peculiar patterns of

classroom discourse and the rationale behind their investigation, hovering confidently between a literature review and perusal of locally gleaned case material. The author spices the account with a useful discussion on problems associated with research methods and design. The awareness of practical technical limitations in educational field research is one vital issue which other authors fail to address head on. Sadly, a key consideration in understanding language in the context of educational practice in Malta - the investigation of the English-Maltese dual fused code - is notable in its absence. It is nevertheless an obvious, prime candidate for empirical investigation, and stands out sharply in the extract from an audio-recording of a year 5 English(?) lesson (pages 71-2). This is not even hinted at by Mifsud. In the whole volume, only a "note" by Darmanin (p 297) addressed this "theme".

Posing the question "What are schools for?", Charles Farrugia provides a balanced and comprehensive sweep of *schools and their curricula*. After a somewhat lengthy preamble (which would have been quite comfortable were the paper being presented in splendid isolation), the author digs his heels into the subject matter, and explores the multiple directions in which schools purportedly seek to develop people, an agenda not without its inbuilt contradictions and antitheses. A quite insightful and unexpected surprise here is the personal statement, almost confession, by the author of his guiding and inspiring educational philosophy. Such a declaration of what is usually unacknowledged (and absent in the other articles of the volume) increases the richness of the piece.

Joseph Gixti (the one former member of the Faculty among the volume contributors and now working in Australia) negotiates the tightrope between diagnostic/formative and summative/exam-based *assessment*. With a series of counter-proposals to the widespread position that exams are necessary, he builds a case for continuous assessment as the alternative, diagnostic tool. His is a damning critique of examinations and of their effects on schooling and students. Yet, scratching away the idealist rhetoric, Gixti may be hard put to defend the empirical validity of his alternative option: continuous assessment may also be abused of; it may be perhaps even more prone to manipulation and personalisation. Nevertheless, continuous assessment may itself end up perpetrating the age-old social inequalities - not least because of the diagnostic procedures utilised, the teacher

perceptions and ideologies which infuse the hidden curriculum. But this is in itself an invitation for further beckoning research initiatives.

Joseph Mifsud comes next with a second article on *assessment*. As with Gixti, the underlying position here is that "assessment and teaching practices for all pupils must shift from a purely exam-oriented assessment tradition to an ecological (and therefore evaluative) one" (p 126) even though remaining aware that "formal examinations... are the most efficient and simple strategy for selecting and excluding students: (p 120). I feel that the focus of this article shifts uneasily from fieldwork results to theoretical pronouncements and policy recommendations. It appears most valuable when looked at as a select review of literature on assessment models.

### **Educational Theory steeped in Maltese Data**

Mary Darmanin's first contribution deals with the issue of *gender and subject choice*, focusing on the production of gender differentials in Maltese secondary schools. Darmanin discusses authoritatively how gender issues are influenced by class considerations and how these in turn stamp such matters as subject choice, exam results and career prospects among school children; the promotion prospects and headship and counselling placements of teachers as well as curricular design and text bias. The author places these issues within the wider context of gender identity construction and reproduction in school, framed as these are by the invisibility of women in most social situations except for their uncontested colonisation of a few, invariably domestic, roles.

Partly on the basis of the same fieldwork and database, Frank Ventura indulges in an attempt at assessing the reasons and influences (apart from ability) behind the differential choice of science subjects between boys and girls in Malta. The interplay between *Gender and Science* is based on performances and GCE results in different schools, broken down by gender and science subject over the secondary school age continuum. Ventura's analysis here is more technical and descriptive than Darmanin's, and emerges as the most scientific paper in the volume in both style and analytic design.

Next, Ronald Sultana tackles the debate about *class and educational achievement*, highlighting the relevant issues by drawing on a variety of empirical research work and locating

Maltese educational practice within its parameters. He comes out strongly and uncompromisingly in a crucial area of research which he has helped pioneer locally, addressing whether education in Malta has influenced, if at all, the quality and nature of class boundaries. His theoretical review of "Why working class kids fail" is systematically elegant and pregnant with challenging propositions. In the process, he suggests further enticing areas of local educational research, especially of the diachronic, "origins and destinations" type. My main concern here is with a rather uncritical interpretation of the concept of social class: Sultana is aware that there are different contending criteria for class identity as well as different premises for ranking social inequalities. Whether this is a case of "Am-Brit fallacy" remains yet to be empirically tested in Malta.

Mary Darmanin's second article on *schooling and class* brings the volume to a close. This article is a breadth of fresh air with its ethnographic focus. At last, here we have real-life teachers (albeit with unduly pompous non real-life names) who occupy center stage and act their part as the interface-or should one say chalkface? - of various constraints and as definers of their clientele, rather than anonymous numbers or cardboard types acting as faithful and submissive reproducers of "the system". The author/investigator is a shrewd observer of classroom practices with a forceful pen (though at times convoluted grammatical constructions). The article exemplifies the situational embedding of different pedagogies resulting from a complex set of features including teacher biography and career, pupil intake and ability, institutional bias and resource base...

## A Critical Overview

I will not be accused of missing the wood for the trees, and it is here that perhaps my main criticism must be levelled. Firstly as is common with so many edited volumes locally and overseas, the articles do not readily conform to the same academic standard. Apparently, different authors had different audiences in mind when writing their contribution; and the editor could perhaps have managed a better standardisation of the final product. It is perhaps also an editorial sin not to have economised on bibliographical entries. Footnotes are laden with the dead weight of full citations which are then reproduced in the final bibliography. This would have saved space and made the text more concise, less bulky (and less costly?) One also fails to understand the logic

behind the inclusion of two articles on assessment and another two on gender in education, the latter even sharing a similar database, leading to a duplication of remarks and data. (For example, compare Darmanin's Table IX on page 180 with Ventura's Table 1 on page 184). I am willing to accommodate both Sultana's and Darmanin's articles on social class not so much for their distinct focus but because of even more distinct, indeed complementary, methodologies. This volume admittedly delves into "themes in education", and makes no claim to being comprehensive. But a sharper focus would have permitted a problematisation exercise on still other relevant themes. Many are already suggested in the text itself. I could add a few myself: An ethnography of pupils (a regrettably invisible voice and force in the volume); and assessment of pedagogy at the University; issues in post-formal adult education. Finally, why should such a prestigious publication be accompanied by a modest number of (regrettably often strategically placed) typographical errors? Did you know that 7% of interviewed private school boys want to become "pilates" (p 153) and 4% of girls "lawyers" (p 152)?

## Rising to the Challenge

But these are petty errors which will no doubt be corrected prior to the next print run. I am probably now being unduly wicked and my spite may be mistakenly interpreted out of proportion: Although - or perhaps I should say because? - the editor has thought fit to insert in the text that I am his good friend and colleague - I will only give credit where it is due. I cannot thus be hesitant in recommending this volume wholeheartedly. It stands out as a major initiative in Maltese academic collaboration not easily paralleled; it justifies the recourse to students projects under supervision; it is a professional example of a self made text, a compendium of handy "practical theory" for the budding teacher; a handbook of theoretically grounded "themes" based on contemporary Maltese educational practices to concerned academics, a resourceful exponent of the culture of informed inquiry and scrutiny which reaffirms the relevance of academic pursuits when addressed to the nitty-gritty issues of the real world.

The text is exactly what Roberta needs. It can gather and us unstuck: shaking adult students and concerned educators out of the reverie of meaningless and chaotic routine; widening our appreciation of the complexities of the trivia of schooling and classroom practice.