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teachers and the national conflict

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The response of teachers, as professionals, to the current national conflict would not appear to require justification as a topic for reflection and open debate. In this matter, however, many may be inhibited by the fact that a discussion of national problems is inevitably a political one. Those of us who are critical of government policy may be disinclined to think through (aloud, with like-minded colleagues) the implications which the current crisis has for our orientation towards our work. On the other hand, educational ideas consistent with separate development may be advanced with markedly less chance of being condemned as "political": the teacher who does not believe the official line is thus placed at a disadvantage.

Apart from sharing in the general unease and anxiety which pervades our country today, teachers face a number of specific concerns related to their professional role.

The relationship between black teachers and black teenagers has obviously been deeply affected by the events of 1976. Furthermore, there has been an increased awareness of the contradictions in the role of teachers in black political development: however much they serve their pupils and the black community, teachers are also perceived as agents of the rejected system.

White teachers, too, may consider how their professional work, and the educational context in which they do it, are related to the political structure; and what their duties are towards their pupils when matters of political controversy emerge explicitly or implicitly within the school experience. And it is only with the white teacher that the reflections in this article will be directly concerned. For whatever degree of sympathy he might legitimately claim, it would be inappropriate for a white, without our present social structure, to suggest how black teachers might respond to their current dilemmas. All teachers, however, should be pondering the kind of education system which would make sense in relation to any conceivable future South Africa.

Those who accept separate development as the pattern of the future do not, of course, face the basic problems with which I am concerned here. With a clear conscience they may continue to serve the system, their worries being limited to matters of interpretation and implementation.

But there are many teachers who deny or at least doubt the justice and the viability of the separatist dispensation. They note that the separate development policy leaves the white minority not only with a dominant political position, but also at the controls of the sub-continent's economy. Independent homelands would necessarily occupy a dependent economic role: with its vastly superior resources, the white or white-controlled society would always be able to call the tune. So this dispensation would be fundamentally incompatible with any notion of distributive justice. Furthermore, these teachers recognise that in today's world such an unbalanced structural arrangement has no hope of long-term stability. Were the master-plan to unfold according to the Pretoria prescription, this would guarantee the sub-continent an escalation of conflict, and would therefore have within it the seeds of its own destruction.

The inevitable excesses in the demands and the tactics of some opponents of the system seem to lead many people to a facile rejection of the whole movement towards a re-ordering of our society, even though, on reflection, they will concede that such a re-ordering is inevitable if we are to have any long-term stability with justice.

Similarly, the enormous complexity of a transition to a different structure, and the

obvious strength of the forces resisting such a change, deter some from pursuing in discussion the implications of their misgivings about our overall social policy.

But where does the rejection of separate development lead a teacher who is pondering his role within the structure?

There is first a consideration of the relationship between the education system (to which the teacher contributes) and the overall national policy. The country's educational structure serves separate development in that students are allocated to institutions (and to whole sectors of the system) primarily on ethnic and language-group lines. Furthermore, the differential allocation of resources among the racial sub-systems of education reinforces the privileged position of whites; educational provision for the majority is disproportionately small. There is no substantial provision for adult education for the populace as a whole: what there is has been overwhelmingly directed to the white group, whose needs, though evident, are strikingly less urgent than those of other groups, except that, as they are the only voters for the national Parliament, there is a special need for their education in an understanding of the country's social problems. In schools, the syllabus and text books reflect the dominant group's interpretation of social reality. It would appear unlikely that from his ordinary school learning an adolescent could be expected to come to a balanced understanding of the factors in poverty in this country. Nor could a white pupil normally hope to hear a black perspective on our social and economic structure.

(While many may deplore this, and those in the dominant minority are tempted to deny it, our national conflict is basically one over access to power and to wealth. Our white pupils, however, may easily come to see as our paramount need the maintenance of group identity, and as our greatest peril the spread of socialist ideas. It is of course true that ethnic group membership and distinctive cultural traditions do have some influence upon most people's behaviour towards one another in a heterogeneous society, and that culturally homogeneous communities have a head start on the road to social harmony. But this is far from a justification for the primacy of ethnicity in our political structure, nor can it provide support for the notion that the maintenance of group identity requires separate national sovereignties. It is also a fact that among the dangers facing us is the possibility of eventually sliding under international communist influence. But this needs to be seen in perspective along with the more immediate danger of an escalation of intra-national conflict through continuing minority control and privilege, secured through Draconian security measures which factors, incidentally, make the infiltration of communist ideas more likely.)

If the above political features of our education system be substantially accurate, the teacher must at least wonder about the ultimate purposes being served by his talents and energies. I don't believe that this is a straightforward matter. Obviously, system-serving is not the only thing happening in our schools. Many young people are having the opportunity to acquire important skills, perceptions, perspectives and attitudes to learning. Nevertheless, the problem of the political consequences of one's professional actions remains. On the one hand, a teacher of mathematics or science cannot escape the dilemma on the grounds that his subject is politically neutral: the system which he is helping to operate is **not** neutral; the consequences of his co-operation in the system must be examined beyond the bounds of his subject. On the other hand, for some teachers there may be opportunities to contribute to the growth of more balanced perceptions of South African society. Certainly the matter is sufficiently serious and sufficiently complex to call for deep reflection on the part of teachers concerned about the best ways of using their abilities in the service of the national community.

A second general area of concern would be the treatment (or non-treatment) of major social issues which are also matters

of political controversy. It is possible for history material to deprive pupils of a wide perspective on the events of the past. It is easy for geography teaching to omit vital considerations such as the human consequences of migrant labour or the economic dependency of the black homelands. Aspects of youth preparedness may readily become political indoctrination. Some prescribed works in literature syllabuses may lend themselves to the reinforcement of racist stereotypes. A teacher concerned to protect his charges from propaganda may experience a dilemma when faced with the conventions and rules which prohibit action interpretable as political. The trap is the notion that the teacher must be neutral: this is often seen as requiring silence or acquiescence when the official line is uttered.

The teacher's first duty is clearly towards the education of his pupils. And this principle applies even when current affairs are being discussed informally inside or outside the classroom. But what should happen when there appears to be a conflict between this principle and the general requirement or custom of "no politics"?

It is of course much easier to write about this than to handle a difficult concrete situation. But it seems fair to ask concerned teachers not to avoid the problem. Implicit assent to educational material which one believes to be misleading or potentially destructive is inconsistent with professional integrity.

There are of course crude ways and diplomatic ways of inviting pupils to respond critically to questionable interpretations, and the tactical skill of a good teacher should minimise the chances of a confrontation, while maximising the opportunities for balanced learning. But one could hardly suggest that a fear of confrontation should be permitted to inhibit honest professional behaviour.

A teacher might, of course, respond thus: It's all very well for an academic to imply that those of us at the coal-face should take risks. Such a reaction would be understandable, but would not dispose of the logic of the point. In the end, of course, the degree of compromise which a teacher will settle for in this situation must be a matter of individual judgement.

So far I have dealt with two basic points: the political role of the education system (and the implications of the teacher's participation), and the response of the teacher to controversial syllabus topics and teaching material.

The third general area of concern is the type of education system which is implied by a rejection of separate development and an acceptance of some more integrated form of society. Here I shall be indicating themes for discussion rather than suggesting answers to the very many problems which arise when one opens up this topic. My main point is that there's a great deal of study to be done about alternative strategies of educational development. It obviously needs to be done by people from all groups in the country. Certainly one would hope that the various non-separatist teachers' organisations would see this activity as a crucial task for the immediate future.

In a society healthily advancing in both distributive justice and creativity, under conditions of the greatest individual liberty commensurate with that justice and with sufficient social cohesion, one would expect to find, inter alia, the following features of educational policy:

(a) a maximising of equality of opportunity (among geographical areas, sexes, social and ethnic groups), and supplementary resource-allocation (with appropriate programming) for disadvantaged groups;

(b) a minimising of the separation of various groups into different institutions (this to be implemented in conjunction with the application of other social and educational principles: in the concrete, skilful compromise would often be required);

(c) a curricular policy reflecting the overall social policy but encouraging open treatment of controversial matters;

(d) a comprehensive programme of adult education in cultural, political and vocational areas;

(e) an encouragement of independent (i.e. non-state) educational institutions,

subject to a state scrutiny in broad terms to ensure basic compatibility with the spirit of the society;

(f) a system of educational decision-making and management designed to maximise the participation of all interested parties at local, regional and national levels.

Though all or most of these very general statements might elicit the assent of a fairly broad spectrum of opinion among those opposed to the present system, a move to a level of more detail and greater concreteness would certainly throw up a variety of policy controversies and practical problem of implementation. Honest people with identical social objectives may differ substantially on the appropriate strategies and tactics of transition towards a different educational system, as well as on the way in which the system should "ultimately" reflect a culturally plural society with non-exploitive and non-totalitarian national goals. To take just one challenging area: the handling of cultural material (songs, literature, art, dance) in the school. An educational system designed to foster national unity would certainly seeek to encourage in all young people an appreciation of cultural material from all social groups. In any given school, the relative contribution from the heritage of each group could be related (preferably, not too tightly) to the local population proportions. The designing of suitable teaching material and the appropriate training of teachers would obviously demand a very great deal of sensitive and painstaking professional endeavour.

It is important that we do not underestimate the complexity and delicacy of the operations involved in desegregating an education system in a context as complex as ours. (Nor, of course, should we seek to follow any particular precedents, e.g. the American.) It is equally important that a recognition of the strategy dilemmas and practical problems of implementation does not make us shy away from discussing what should be regarded as the major challenge of today for all those concerned with South African education. Too few people appear to be looking ahead in this way. I hope that during 1977 many groups of teachers throughout the country will be pursuing this matter and exchanging ideas about the many issues involved.