



Twenty Years of Resistance

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When I went back to university study, 23 years ago (I was a serial university student, an impossible role now given the expense of university papers), I was trying to kickstart a fairly stagnant career as a schoolteacher. I was aware of the depredations on Education (and other fields of human engagement) brought about by the consequences of the reforms generated in 1984 and 1987, and was very much aware of the way that they already, by 1995, were limiting the autonomy and professionalism of schoolteachers.

Tomorrows' Schools or, more significantly, the Treasury's *Brief to the Incoming Minister* of 1987 set the tone for the educational policies of the 1990s. The overwhelming plank of the reforms was 'provider capture' – a tenet which made ignoring the wishes and experience of teachers not only desirable but theoretically justified. Prior to these reforms, the teacher unions, the Department of Education, and the various Boards of Education had worked together with a common aim: to improve the education system. After the 'reforms', the unions were cut out, and teacher representation was severely limited, in case they were to deform policy by advancing their own advantage rather than that of the students or system. It has taken a long time, and a lot of work by individuals, to bring government back to a position of valuing teacher input – which may well now be at risk again.

In the world of teachers at that time, further education was more or less defined by the 'Leadership' field, which lends itself to the tropes of neo-liberalism. So, pragmatically, I enrolled in a 'leadership' course, at that time called 'Educational Administration', at the University of Auckland. Still not enchanted by the rhetoric of leadership, I encountered two people who made a huge difference: one was Dr Michael Peters, who introduced me to the idea that the theory of neo-liberalism was worth studying, and the other was Dr Susan Robertson. Susan was a sociologist with a keen interest in 'teachers' work'. Both have gone on to prestigious careers, and I count myself very lucky to have met them.

It was a revelation to me that teachers' work could be a legitimate area of study. 'Education' as a discipline had always seemed to be about the interests of the students, not the teachers. Focusing on teachers and their work has been made all the more important as a series of industrial relations Acts: the Labour Relations Act, 1987; the Employments Contract Act 1991; the Employment Relations Act 2001; and the ERAA 2004. These Acts rendered the existing unions (PPTA and NZEI) increasingly impotent with regards to the nature of teachers'

work. Prior to 1987, the unions had been the ‘voice’ of the teachers with regard to education as a whole – encompassing the obviously employment related issues of pay, conditions, rules governing recruitment, terms of employment, etc. – but also covering the nature of the work, pedagogy, curriculum, and ethics. The clauses of the new Acts removed from the unions the right to discuss elements of the nature of their work – like curriculum and pedagogy – which for many years had been the central components of collaboration between the profession, the regional Education Boards, and the central Department of Education. Curriculum was henceforth the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, ‘pedagogy’ became an unknown quantity: it appeared only in the ERO regulations as ‘delivering the curriculum’. Henceforth the unions of the profession could only raise matters of pay and working conditions. The latter, working conditions, obviously could be pushed to its limits, conceptually, but it invited a focus on student behavioural issues which was not good for teachers and particularly not good for the public image of the profession. The reasons for excluding teachers’ organisations from discussion of their own work was ideological: Neo-classical economics provided the blueprint for management of the Economy, and the ‘softer’ areas of government responsibility – Education, Health, Social Welfare – were dominated by ‘Public Choice Theory’ (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). Public Choice Theory, by its own description is the application of economics to politics. I would add here that it is a seriously limited, very right-wing view of economics, largely dominated by Hayek and Milton Friedman. More ‘left wing’ economists like Marx, Keynes, and Amartya Sen, were largely ignored. It might also be worth noting that Public Choice theorists are very opposed to democracy as being inefficient and allowing the (poor) majority to overrule the (wealthy) minority. These views are currently very evident in the USA and creeping into New Zealand.

For public choice theory, the ‘agency problem’ was a major worry. Although people can be relied upon to seek their own advantage, this becomes a problem in companies, where the ‘agents’ or employees do not necessarily follow the best interests of the employer but try to divert the wealth or advantages of the business to their own ends. This was known as ‘rent-seeking’. The Public Choice Theory of rent-seeking was applied to New Zealand’s public servants in a doctrinal form called ‘Provider Capture’. The idea was that employees are so bent upon feathering their own nests, making their own work easier, and expanding their ‘empires’ that they cannot be trusted to give impartial advice (Devine, 2004; Peters & Marshall, 1988). The consequences are still with us: the Teachers Council is not as trusted or as pro-active as the unions were on behalf of teachers or education, and teachers’ contribution to policy is still a matter of centralized grace and favour rather than of right.

In this context the initiation of a publication that focused on Teachers’ Work was a political act. The title, with its insistence on the value of teachers’ work (as opposed to the belittling technisation of the neo-liberal/Treasury viewpoint on teachers as ‘deliverers’ of a curriculum decided elsewhere) was itself an act of resistance. So, I applaud all its editors – Paul Adams, John O’Neill, Leon Benade, Christoph Teschers, Daniel Couch – and the authors, reviewers and readers, who have supported the *Journal of Teachers’ Work*, for their commitment to preserving a concept of the teacher and teachers’ work which goes far beyond the technical.

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