In the last issue of Education Herald for 1979, editor Peter Temple commented on the fact that during the year classroom teachers had shown reluctance in coming forward to contribute to debate on education in the relevant forum provided by The Sydney Morning Herald.¹

The reason for this reluctance to write was explained in terms of teachers being wary about presenting their views publicly on controversial education issues for fear of jeopardising their careers.

Perhaps this is true, at least in part. Not many years ago at the start of my teaching career a headmaster took me, an idealistic young radical, aside and offered me this friendly advice on how to get ahead in my chosen career: "Just keep your head down, and don't rock the boat." This is an old idea which fortunately is on the way out, but one for which evidence keeps on surfacing; thereby showing justification for its continuation as a survival principle amongst teachers.

This aspect aside (because this isn't the place to deal with it), I would like to suggest that without realising it Temple has touched on a problem that goes far beyond The Sydney Morning Herald, its education forum, and teacher timidity. For the fact is that teachers in general don't write. And from what I can gather this is the case in Australia, America, and England. Sure teachers write - a letter here and there, the odd report, a university paper, etc. But not sustained expressive writing where they labour to express themselves and their experiences creatively.

"Now hang on a minute mate" I hear you say, "that's not true. What about Thea Astley, Thomas Keneally, Barry Oatley, Colin Thiele, Cliff Green, Alec Hope, Christina Stead et al.; they all laid the bases of their literary careers while functioning as school teachers?" True. And it is also a fact that in the nineteenth century many Australian authors started their literary careers whilst engaged in school teaching.² In fact I'd suggest, without the benefit of statistical evidence that in contemporary English literature school teaching is probably one of the major career backgrounds amongst writers (remember D.H. Lawrence, William Golding?). But the point to draw from this is that all these people don't amount to teachers in general. They were/are exceptions, not the rule.

WHY DON'T TEACHERS WRITE?

Surely the answer stares in our faces. Time. Teachers are a busy section of the work force, trying to do a difficult job that is made more difficult by the fashionable attacks on teachers and educational standards, which happen to come at a time when teachers are also trying to come to professional terms with increasing curriculum and syllabus changes. Teaching is a job subject to a great deal of stress and any opportunity for relaxation is both deserved and welcomed.³ Unlike their tertiary colleagues, teachers have no chance to withdraw into a sabbatical year.

Not only are teachers busy in terms of teaching and its associated activities (e.g. lesson preparation, marking of students' work), but many of them
are also actively engaged in extra-curricular activities (e.g. external university studies, trade union activity), all of which are part of ones professional development - but unpaid, unrewarded, and time consuming.

What I have said in these two paragraphs is true for all teachers. In the case of English/History teachers however, the problem of time versus limited energies is magnified. As the Hunter Valley Branch of the E.T.A. has rightly argued, the work load, expectations of, and strains upon teachers of English and History are so much greater than those applying to any other secondary school teacher.4

Indeed I think it appropriate here to reiterate words written nearly twenty years ago by David Holbrook. Of teachers he said - and I think this is relevant to English/History teachers in particular - "While they are in school they are invariably overworked, and their professional loyalty to the children is sometimes exploited. Insufficient allowance is made for the exhaustion caused by that emotional absorption in his work which a teacher must allow before he can begin."5

WHY SHOULD TEACHERS WRITE?

One of the problems in education today is that too much comment, too many proposals both for and against change, too many initiatives, are being made and taken by people who have either never been teachers, or who - if they have - have little if any contemporary experience of face-to-face teaching on a day-to-day basis. From my viewpoint another pressing problem in education today is that too much power is held and exercised by such people who, however well-intentioned, are metaphorically "light years" away from classroom realities.

It concerns me that more teachers don't write on education issues. A 1977 Queensland survey showed that 80% of primary and secondary school principals had never had work published in educational periodicals. In the the case of the classroom teacher this could be expected to rise.6 The tragedy is that in the long run only teachers really know what is happening in the classroom. Only they know the virtues and shortcomings of education changes, and proposals for change; vice versa, only they can clearly see the "costs" involved in resistance to change. It ought to be a truism: ALL TEACHERS SHOULD WRITE.

There is a further dimension. When you are taught to drive, you are taught by someone who knows how to drive. Similarly, when you are taught to fly an aeroplane, you are taught by someone who knows how to fly. And so on ad nauseum. But when it comes to teaching someone how to write, quite obviously students are being "taught" by people who do not know how to write. If you do not write, you do not know how to write. Sure, you might have an intellectual grasp of writing as a process (you only have to read a few articles or books to get that far) but as Mao Tse-tung once argued, only through practice can one transform intellectual understanding into human understanding. And if teachers of writing don't themselves write, then to put it bluntly, they don't know how to write. It ought to be a truism: ALL TEACHERS OF WRITING MUST WRITE.
WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

(1) To produce real teachers of writing we could implement a program along the lines of the Bay Area Writing project (California, U.S.A.), undoubtedly the most tested, most successful system in the English-speaking world of in-service training of teachers to fit them to teach writing. This program entails intensive teacher preparation over periods of either two or five weeks, and includes amongst its methods (e.g. reviews of approaches to teaching writing, discussion of issues in the teaching of writing) extensive writing by course participants.

(2) That suggestion would cost a lot of money. It also requires an imaginative Education leadership. So I guess it’s not on; teachers will have to prepare themselves, themselves, on a shoe string. Therefore I offer the following. Before I do however, please realise I am a classroom teacher. I teach 27 periods a week plus sport, do playground duty, prepare the school magazine etc. To teach writing, I think the most important thing is to find pleasure in writing oneself. Even if it only means ten minutes of free writing at some odd time of day (or night), the experience of writing is one that transforms a teacher into a teacher of writing.

FOOTNOTES


4. Some of the ideas of the Hunter Valley Branch of the E.T.A. were detailed in E.T.A. Newsletter, November/December 1979, pp.14-15. See also John McKelvey’s cartoon in this issue of the Newsletter.


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