

Learning to teach in South Africa

WALLY MORROW

REVIEWED BY MAUREEN ROBINSON

In the decade between 1989 and 2000 South Africa underwent profound political and educational change. As the introduction to the book, *Learning to Teach in South Africa* reminds us, the period included the release of Nelson Mandela, the first two democratic elections, and the adoption of the Constitution. It also saw the launch and review of Curriculum 2005 and the promulgation of the *Norms and Standards for Educators*. During this period Wally Morrow wrote 11 essays, all from the viewpoint of the truly engaged intellectual (with one essay being written later in 2005). These have been compiled in a volume that combines the conceptual with the practical, the historical with the prophetic, the analytic with the anecdotal, and which, in its own piercing style, offers a penetrating comment on the times.

The 11 essays are roughly divided into three interweaving themes, namely, teaching, teacher education and issues of relativism and multiculturalism. Throughout the discussion of these themes a few central points are reiterated, encapsulated in the following quotes:

- “We need to retrieve a sense of the centrality of teaching” (p. 2)
- “The task of professional teachers is, centrally, to organize systematic learning — that kind of learning which leads to epistemological access” (p. 3)
- “... without a shared moral discourse it is not possible to have a significant discussion on the aims of education” (p. 142).

The argument for retrieving the centrality of teaching is captured most directly in Essay 6, entitled, in Morrow’s inimitable crisp style, “What is teachers’ work?” Here he argues that the sensible idea underpinning outcomes-based education, that “what matters at the end of the day is what learners learn” is unfortunately “suffocatingly wrapped in a range of other matters, which, piled on top of each other, take the workload of teachers towards impossibility” (p. 94). The suffocating wrapping he refers to includes continuous assessment, often manifested as an “unbroken stream of tests, projects, exercises that merely spread the misery”, the challenge of learner-centred education for teachers who may have a couple of hundred learners, and the seven roles of the teacher in the *Norms and Standards for Educators* that “inflate the work of teachers beyond the capacity of all but the exceptionally talented and obsessively committed” (p. 96). The burden is compounded by the extensive care-giving functions that teachers are often expected to perform; Morrow argues that it would be more effective to leave this task to others and to let teachers do what they have been employed to do, namely, to teach.

The refrain of teaching being essentially to “organize systematic learning” echoes throughout the book. An apparently simple concept, it takes on depth and resonance in its application through practical examples. So, for instance, in an essay written in August 1994, three months after the first democratic elections, he argued that “it would be an error for us to think that political measures are going to be a sufficient remedy [for our ills] ... Key agents in the success of any schooling system are the professional teachers who work in it” (p. 29). Indeed, 15 years later, this warning continues to ring true, as the matric results disappoint once again and the 2009 budget allocates funds to set up a national unit for teacher accountability.

Morrow’s call for teacher professionalism and systematic learning is not couched in an idealistic concept of schooling or society. On the contrary, Essay 4, delivered in 1999 to a UNESCO colloquium in Paris, vividly illustrates the devastating conditions of basic education in South Africa at the time, with crime, unemployment, high rates of HIV, slums and illiteracy prevailing. Where such contexts are matched by endemic disorder in schools, irregular attendance of teachers and learners and lack of routine, together with teaching that demands nothing more than simple data

recall, learners, he argues, stand little chance of breaking through their cycle of poverty.

Morrow's writing, while strongly conceptual, is not the work of an armchair critic or philosopher, content to pronounce on what should be. For three years during the period when no essays were written, he chaired the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education which produced a report entitled *A National Framework for Teacher Education in South Africa* (2005). In these Recommendations he gives practical shape to some of the views espoused in the essays. Thus we read Recommendation A1:

Retrieve the word 'teaching', understand it as the practice of organizing systematic learning, and relocate it at the heart of how we think about, plan and organize the education system (p. 101).

Essay 11 deals with the thorny issue of the politics of difference in South African education. Morrow argues that the politics of difference, where individual identity is dependent on group identity, can flourish in relatively secure and stable societies. In a society like South Africa, he argues, we would be better served by a politics of equal dignity, "with its commitment to the presumption that all people are potential participants in the discourses of reason" (p. 195). Manifestations of the politics of difference, like affirmative action and calls to 'Pass One, Pass All', he argues, do not do justice to the learners of the country since "those [disadvantaged] communities are hardly likely to be benefited by licencing teachers ill-prepared for their professional responsibilities" (p. 188). With these strong views, the book offers an excellent base to take this discussion forward.

This review would not be true to the spirit of the book and its author if it did not raise some points of debate. One of these draws on the strong distinction that Morrow makes between the different goals and disciplinary sources of "academic" and "professional" education. If we accept this distinction, one could ask who the audience of the essays is meant to be. The "academic" reader seeking a literature review or empirical findings could be disappointed. Equally disappointed would be the "professional" reader seeking clear tips for action. And yet, both would probably be fascinated by the way in which Morrow himself crosses this so-called divide, arguing that "theorizing about teaching is one of the principal ways of improving the practice" (p. 15).

Few educationists in South Africa have so ably and sharply commented on this era of our history and the ideas penned in *Learning to Teach in South Africa* have had a lasting impact on a generation of scholars and teachers. These ideas include the distinction between formal and epistemological access to learning, the call for a shared moral discourse on the aims of education and the acknowledgment that large class teaching is a reality in South Africa. With the publication of these essays, we have an excellent testament to one of the most influential contributors to education in our country.

Maureen Robinson