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Reflecting on a Decolonial educational praxis in South African public schools

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Abstract

The continuing educational crises and the recurrent discourse on educational reform in South Africa foreground critical questions on what constitutes a viable philosophical and pedagogical strategy for the country. This article examines the transformative praxis of a dissident teachers' organisation, the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA or the League), and how the development of its distinctive non-racist and non-collaborationist worldview provide meaningful possibilities for present-day educationists seeking a progressive educational alternative. The article draws on decolonial and critical education theories to engage the views of TLSA teachers and non-League education activists. Documentary material on the TLSA and its umbrella body, the Unity Movement, provide key primary sources for the article. In addition, secondary information linked to the broader liberation movement offers valuable insights and perspectives on what could be defined as an alternative educational praxis. Overall, the article examines whether the coexistence of the TLSA's holistic educational outlook and 'egalitarian oriented' counter-consciousness, offers tangible possibilities for exploring an emancipatory decolonial education.

Keywords: Alternative education; Critical pedagogy; Decolonial education; Teacher politics

Introduction

This article focuses on the philosophical and historical outlook of a prominent and intellectually engaging teachers' organisation, the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA, League or Teachers' League) and its contribution to the anti-colonial educational, political, and socio-cultural struggles before and after 1994. The TLSA's philosophy unfolded over more than nine decades as part of its commitment to education as a vehicle for fundamental social change in South Africa (SA). Whether the organisation's emancipatory theory and practice has relevance for the current period in which a decolonial discourse has become increasingly manifest, is central to this paper. Foregrounded, at the outset, are a few salient concepts underpinning the TLSA's perspective on education. These concepts form the cornerstone of the organisation's initial policies, which it continued to propagate during the 1990s after re-emerging as a public teachers' organisation. From 1963 until 1992, the League operated underground and in relative secrecy. Its re-emergence in the early 1990s and endeavours to organise as it had previously done during the 1940s to early 1960s, was accompanied by wide-ranging governmental reforms. These reforms encompassed extensive changes in educational legislation, particularly regarding policy and curriculum. A key aspect of these reforms was that they were located within the political economy of the new SA and infused by the neo-liberal ideology of the market with its growing and pervasive narrative of privatisation and cuts in public spending (Bond 2000; Marais 2001; Harvey 2007).

The demise of several curricular initiatives from 1995 to 2010, particularly Outcomes Based Education (OBE), centred not only on implementation but the educational philosophy underpinning these curriculum endeavours. The outcomes-based approach, for instance, was premised on a constructivist philosophy that placed primacy on the notion of extrinsic 'outcomes', emphasising demonstrative job-oriented skills that were mainly economic, and business-driven. The League would fully engage with these developments (*The Educational Journal [EJ]* 1994a: 11; 1994b: 4; Abrahams 1994: 11), particularly since its teachers had witnessed key values that had been considered central to education effectively neglected, if not abandoned, in particular the 'holistic development' of the child (Abrahams 1994: 11). The latter pedagogical perspective embraced values, culture, intellectual, and academic advancement or more broadly speaking, the rational and imaginative virtues of education (Waghid 2001: 128).

The TLSA's alternative educational philosophy was consciously developed within its ranks during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. This political and pedagogical undertaking

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took effect when the League became an affiliate of the federated Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM or Unity Movement), established in December 1943. The central argument underpinning this article is that while the League developed its philosophy within a context significantly different to the existing one, its early educational and pedagogical discussions and formulations continue to remain highly relevant for educationists in the present period. Remnants of these ideas can be found in oral recordings and transcripts of interviews with TLSA members who were active from the 1940s well into the 1990s and in certain cases beyond this period. These original voices are significant, for as Boadu (2022: 649) notes, 'there are many African histories that are still unwritten, making oral histories an indispensable feature of African historiography'. He further makes the compelling argument that history 'should be determined by the people around whom the story revolves' (Boadu 2022: 649).

Additional primary sources central to constructing this article include texts from the Teacher's League's monthly and bi-monthly publication, *The Educational Journal,* organisational pamphlets, as well as literature of the Unity Movement, published during its early formative years and which continued until the 1990s and into the new millennium. The widespread distribution of this body of literature and the discussions that flowed from it during the early years (1943 to the early 1960s), what Soudien (2019: 164) refers to as a 'knowledge-producing impetus', was dubbed, 'the most sustained, intense and widespread political education of the oppressed people ever conducted in South Africa, and on the available evidence, in Africa' (Jaffe 1994: 166). With these factors in mind and cognisant of the shifting political and social identities of teachers and policy development in education, the crucial question this article educes and intends to clarify is: 'To what degree does the TLSA's philosophy, pedagogy, and epistemic strategies offer educationists possibilities for advancing an alternative educational praxis for the current period?'

Historical background to the TLSA's philosophy

The Teachers' League was a product of its time, shaped by circumstances peculiar to South Africa. A mix of political and socio-economic factors that were uniquely South African would thus impact the organisation at different times in its historical development. International forces, too, proved critical to the formation of the TLSA's ideas and practices, which ultimately shaped its identity. The organisation for that reason cannot be properly understood without considering its early history and how the emerging societal forces came to bear on it before and after it embarked on the 'new road' of anti-segregation and

non-collaboration from 1945 when it joined the NEUM.

The 'new road'

Born within the political milieu of the early twentieth century, the TLSA was a child of the African Political Organisation (APO), founded in 1902. The APO's leadership, schooled in nineteenth-century English Cape liberalism, largely accepted the socio-economic inequalities and Western standards of 'civilisation' that offered the limited space of a qualified non-racial franchise, based on property, wages, and literacy (Bickford-Smith 1995: 67, 68; Roux 1978: 53, 64). The APO leadership, in many respects, bore the hallmarks of the time, principally as pragmatists who accepted the 'reality of the period', of white supremacy and with it an imposed 'coloured' identity. A central concern of the APO was to uplift the 'coloured' community, particularly the skilled strata and emergent petty-bourgeois elite. This it sought to attain by working within the system, using passive methods of non-cooperation such as dialogue, petitions, and deputations.

The TLSA was established on 23 June 1913 under the leadership of Harold Cressy, the principal of Trafalgar High School in District Six (Adhikari 1993: 24, 25; Lewis 1987: 75). As an ostensibly non-political professional teachers' organisation, the League represented and was exclusively composed of colonially oriented and self-defined 'coloured' teachers. The TLSA's central aim was to address the professional frustrations and injustices 'coloured' teachers experienced and to advance the educational development of this community and their integration into the politically and economically 'white' dominated society. This it sought to achieve in an incremental way through discrete negotiations and consultation with the Cape Education Department. For the next three decades, the organisation employed a cautious and diplomatic approach in a bid to win piecemeal reforms, aiming to find accommodation within the existing system on terms that allowed 'coloured' teachers relative privilege.

In an endeavour to reinforce professional solidarity amongst its teachers, facilitate communication between the membership and the executive, and promote the organisation in areas outside the Western Cape, the League published its official organ, *The Educational Journal*, from May 1915 onwards. To further entrench its identity, in 1918 the organisation adopted the adage 'Let Us Live for Our Children', a motto that remained inscribed on the cover of its journal to encapsulate the vision and philosophy of the TLSA at different periods in its history. This distinctive inscription, as with the organisation's journal, would remain a distinguishing feature of the Teachers' League.

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In the 1930s, the League faced its most challenging period when the great depression struck the black community in the Cape particularly hard, resulting in severe job losses and unemployment (Lewis 1987: 180). Adding to these difficulties, the 1930s also saw the power of the 'coloured' vote rapidly declining, while the 'white' vote effectively doubled in the Cape (Goldin 1987: 165). Age and pigmentation, for men as well as women, would become the sole qualifications for full citizenship. In the harsh socio-economic climate of the early 1930s, disenchanted, skilled, and semi-skilled 'coloureds' within society rejected the APO's moderate tactics of cooperating with 'white' political parties (Hendricks 2018: 118).

In education, too, the League's emphasis on professionalism rather than engaging in more direct political action contributed to its failure to advance its members' interests and the community it claimed to represent. These economic and political developments had significant repercussions for the Teachers' League, resulting in signs of rising disagreement within its Western Cape branches by the mid-1930s (Hendricks 2018: 118).

Starting in 1937, the TLSA witnessed a growing presence within its ranks of radical socialist factions from the New Era Fellowship (NEF), a leftwing discussion group, and the Workers' Party of South Africa (WPSA) who were sympathetic to the Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky. As World War II began, these individuals started exerting a strong influence on the organisation's membership (Mokone 1991: 21; Adhikari 1993: 70).

In 1943, differences came to a head between the moderate and radical factions of the League when five members of its executive accepted positions on the Coloured Advisory Council (CAC) (Mokone 1991: 23; Adhikari 1993: 71). The radicals perceived this move as a renewed attack on the limited political rights of the 'coloured' population to establish a separate voters' roll for them. Furthermore, this development seemed to signal that General Smuts, the leader of the governing United Party, had reneged on his earlier war promise to end segregation (Dudley 2005; Rassool 1997: 1).

An intense and protracted battle for control of the League ensued between the radicals and moderates, with the former seizing control of the organisation by 1944, resulting in the walkout of a large section of its conservative membership (Hendricks 2018: 119). The latter group formed the Teachers' Educational Professional Association, with the mission to work from within the Education Department as a recognised teacher organisation. This fundamental shift would propel the TLSA to join the newly formed anti-segregation, Anti-Coloured Affairs Department (Anti-CAD). In 1945 with a national membership of 2 000, the TLSA united with a wider grouping of organisations that constituted the NEUM, notably, the All-African Convention, located in Bloemfontein, and the Durban-

based Anti-Segregation Committee. The League's professional and political outlook, henceforth, would be inextricably tied to that of the Unity Movement and its Ten Point Programme (TPP) of full democratic citizenship rights for all South Africans and the policy of non-collaboration (Hendricks 2018: 119–121). The TPP included: the right to the franchise, education (which encompassed free and compulsory schooling for all), property and privacy, freedom of speech, movement and occupation, social equality (of 'race', class, and gender), revisions of land law, civil and criminal codes, taxation, and labour legislation in keeping with the initial six points (Tabata 1974: 59–61; Mokone 1991: 34). Non-collaboration, in short, meant not consenting to operate the instruments of one's own oppression. This foundational policy will be elaborated on at specific times in the article.

The educational values of the Teachers' League of South Africa

From here on, the key aspects of the TLSA's ideological thought will be examined. These ideas are to be tracked, as the League moved through the extremely repressive and challenging years of the pre-apartheid, apartheid, and post-apartheid periods while pursuing its well-established role of informing the oppressed populace of what the organisation saw as imminent dangers emerging in education. The merging of this custodianship with a distinct brand of politics and philosophy of education would become the hallmark of the League from the time it joined the NEUM. It ought to be noted further that this articulation or dialectical link between context, political theory, and practice would profoundly shape the League's philosophical outlook. This philosophy, it is argued, was neither mystical nor abstract, hovering above society, but a philosophy deeply rooted in, and informed by, changing political and socio-economic realities within the country and globally that the League was alert to and in which it located itself and its ideological point of view. This worldview, to a greater or lesser degree, may be considered a materialist philosophy in the Marxist sense, that was continually unfolding and incomplete, which the League itself would declare in its 50th Anniversary publication of *The Educational Journal* of 1962 (*EJ*, 1962:34).

To make the League's philosophical outlook explicit, four of the organisation's theoretical and political concepts are the focus:

- the role of League teachers'
- nation building: non-collaboration and non-racism
- internationalism

- the politics of transition (to a post-apartheid state)

The role of League teachers

The ideological role of the teacher in the liberation movement or the anti-apartheid resistance struggle was deemed unequivocal for the NEUM, notwithstanding their newly acquired social status and thus the contradictory class and race position teachers occupied (Maurice 1952: 12–14; Soudien, 2019: 172, 173). In this emancipatory equation, teachers were at the vanguard of the liberation struggle and, as it were, the carriers, the 'vectors', of progressive anti-segregation ideas that were informed by political theory (Hendricks 2010:43). The centrality of political theory to the NEUM cannot be overstated. Kies, a League teacher at Trafalgar High School, and one of its leading theoreticians, was emphatic about this critical dimension in his 1945 address to the NEUM:

> *Theory is important. Your political theory means the way you sum up things, where you consider the interests of the oppressed to lie. This determines your direction; it determines the type of demand you make and the type of organisation you admire or follow or join; it determines your political activity* (Kies 1945: 23).

Beyond this insistence, Kies (1943:23) also noted that 'The ignorant can never lead.' With this mindset, League teachers were expected to educate and inform the oppressed and others of their views on politics and education. These ideas were rooted in the Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategy of what a leading Teachers' League spokesperson, Edgar Maurice (1952:8), termed, '"education for social change'. Political education was viewed as indispensable 'practical work' and integral to transforming people's consciousness. Maurice's (1952:5–15) assertion shows that change and emancipation needed to be upheld as real possibilities for the teachers of the emergent federated united front.

For the NEUM, the professional teacher layer had a vital contribution to make. They had to reject 'collaborationist professionalism', eradicate prejudice and racialism amongst themselves and the oppressed, and undertake to raise the people's political consciousness through 'building the people's movement for emancipation' (*EJ* 1953: 6). Tasks of this nature, the League declared, were 'not only political work' but 'educational work of the highest magnitude and in the noblest tradition of the struggle for liberation' (*EJ* 1953: 6 [emphasis in original]).

Within the united front of the AAC, ASC, and Anti-CAD, the NEUM advocated as a central strategy the teacher-worker alliance. *The Torch*, the ideological organ of the Unity Movement, would state:

> *Now, more than at any time, the oppressed people need the teachers. Freedom will never be ours unless our teachers can give us generation upon generation of young men and women, fired with a passionate desire to dedicate their lives and talents to the cause of our emancipation. And freedom will never be ours until the teacher stands shoulder to shoulder with his fellow-worker in the field and factory, with no false barriers of pride and superiority to keep them apart* (*The Torch* 1946: 4).

With this pedagogical outlook of their relation to other social layers in society which includes in this case 'the relationship between power and knowledge' (Soudien 2019: 164–165; 2022: 193), League teachers, as emancipatory 'vectors', embarked upon educating and informing the oppressed and others of their views on politics and education (Hendricks 2010:43). This impulse inspired them to 'educate the nation' through a process of eliminating 'blinkers and prejudice' that falsely divided the population, 'teaching that all people belong to one human family and are of the same quality' (*EJ* 1962: 34).

In practice this new outlook translated into League teachers being encouraged to go beyond set syllabi, and develop in their students a sense of self-confidence, academic excellence, and a strong social and political awareness. This 'greater purpose', as it were, meant transcending the classroom by working in civil society and building community structures at different levels of the public sphere. The most prominent of these, and in which TLSA teachers were pivotal, were the Parent-Teacher Associations, later the Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTAs and PTSAs), the non-racial schools' sports movement (Hendricks 2021), the trade union movement, the education fellowships, and cultural organisations such as the Wilvan School of Ballet (later Wilvan School of Dance). The central intent was clear: to subvert the isolationist strategy of the apartheid regime and to inspire the resistance movement through sustaining and spreading, as elaborated on earlier, the core ideas or the emancipatory philosophy of the Unity Movement. This intent was encapsulated concisely in the latter movement's 'nation-building' slogan, 'We Build The Nation'.

Nation building: Non-racialism and non-collaboration

In political and theoretical terms, the concept of nation-building formed the foundation of the NEUM and TLSA's thinking and was supported by the twin pillars of non-racialism and non-collaboration. The former's injunction called for the rejection of categorising people according to 'race' types, whilst the other, originating from the Workers Party of South Africa (WPSA), meant the refusal by the oppressed to work the instruments of their

own oppression, that is, segregated and inferior political institutions (Drew 1996: 16, 17). Through this strategy, it was envisaged that the oppressed would assert their humanity and thus break the 'slave mentality' that kept them in perpetual subjugation (Kayser 1997: 36). The concept of class struggle was furthermore introduced as an integral part of non-collaboration, to expose the oppositional nature of the oppressed's interests relative to that of the ruling class. It also served to thwart class collaboration within national liberation organisations and alliances, demonstrating the importance of autonomy of thought and action in forging working-class independence (Alexander 2006; Drew 1991: 326).

An outflow of non-collaboration was the political tactic of the 'boycott'. The boycott was deployed strategically to expose perceived collaborators, and to make 'inferior' or 'bogus' bodies and institutions amongst other 'ruling class schemes' unworkable (New Unity Movement 1994: 14, 27). Whereas non-collaboration was a permanent political attitude, the boycott was practical—a specific application of non-collaboration employed 'at specific times' and 'on specific issues'—to undermine the ruling class policy that attempted to divide the oppressed according to class and colour. It also, for the Unity Movement, fulfilled the vital connecting function of developing the unity and the independence of the oppressed as foremost tenets of nation-building (Tabata 1952: 27). Although non-collaboration and the boycott were berated for separating the NEUM from the heat of political struggle' (Soudien 2019: 172; Alexander 1989: 188; Alexander 2006), Tabata would concretise the boycott in his ground-breaking text, *The Boycott as Weapon of Struggle,* an innovative tactic emanating from within the liberation movement. Here, he cogently argued that children had to be educated 'in the cause of liberation itself; [because] they must acquire the intellectual equipment even though only segregated schools [were] open to them' (Tabata 1952: 19).

These points of departure—non-racism, non-collaboration, and the boycott—spurred the League along with its sister teacher organisation in the AAC, the Cape African Teachers' Association (CATA), to wed politics and education in an endeavour to 'impede, obstruct and undermine' the apartheid government's divisive 'race'-based policies (*EJ* 1955: 12).[1] This distinct humanistic perspective and strategy formed the central plank of the TLSA's philosophy from 1944, as its principal thesis was that all people were of one human race and innately equal, and that they should be treated as such (*EJ* 1993b: 9). This

1 *The Educational Journal* of June 1955 was banned by the educational authorities owing to the TLSA President, Willem Van Schoor, having been accused of making anti-white 'herrenvolk' statements in his presidential address. Kies, who was the editor of the journal, was implicated for publishing the address. Kies and van Schoor received notices terminating their services and were thereby dismissed from the teaching profession (Registrar of the Supreme Court of South Africa 1956–1958).

outlook, premised as it was on opposing racism and class-based prejudice, articulated with Freire's 'incomplete' and 'unfinished' notion of humanisation (Freire 1993), and formed the basis of the League's broad world view—of 'internationalism' or 'universalism' (*EJ* 1993b: 6; Soudien 2011: 52). Within decolonial Marxist circles, a similar worldview holds currency—an internationalist perspective that considers 'planetary visions of liberation' as critical to countering 'conflicts, poverty and inequality' generated on a world scale (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021: 62, 63; Kvangraven, Styve and Kufakurinani 2021: 3).

Internationalism

The League's internationalist and anti-colonial viewpoint shaped its understanding of what constituted relevant and worthwhile knowledge and knowledge production. To demonstrate this standpoint, its foremost cadres who were leading members in the Unity Movement, contributed substantively to *The Educational Journal* and produced a series of seminal texts that would reinterpret SA's past and impact teacher activists and academic scholarly writings (Saunders 1986: 79–81; Bam 1993: 50, 54–60). The works of Mnguni, *Three Hundred Years* (1952), Nosipho Majeke, *The Rôle of the Missionaries in Conquest* (1952), Willem van Schoor, T*he Origin and Development of Segregation in South Africa* (1950), Isaac Bangani Tabata, *Boycott as Weapon of Struggle* (1952), *The Awakening Of A People* (1950), *Education For Barbarism* (1959), Ben Kies, *The Contribution of the Non-European Peoples to World Civilisation* (1953), and Edgar Maurice, *The Colour Bar In Education* (1956), to mention the most prominent texts, stood out as penetrating contributions at a time when a stream of repressive apartheid legislation was being imposed on the oppressed populace (Hendricks 2010: 58). Noteworthy are articles that appeared regularly under the auspices of the education fellowships. These fellowships or political fora were local discussion groups affiliated with the NEUM and constituted the New Era Fellowship (NEF), South Peninsula Education Fellowship (SPEF), and the Cape Flats Education Fellowship (CAFEF), amongst a host of others located within disenfranchised communities nationally (Hendricks, 2010: 58, 59).

These new emergent literary works, while local in focus, endeavoured to break ideologically with the insular and inward-looking 'racial-cultural' tendencies fostered by apartheid and sought to position South Africa within the framework of broader anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and thus international, discourses and struggles. The Kies treatise, for instance, aimed at debunking the 'racial' myth of the superiority of a 'Western', 'European' or 'Christian' civilisation, arguing instead that 'the colonial and semi-colonial

world' made proportionately a far more significant contribution to world-civilisation and the advancement of humankind (Kies 1953: 39, 40). Moreover, and which has been more recently foregrounded within debates on decoloniality, is that the notion of a pure 'West' and what is called 'civilization' is in effect the 'contribution of people across the world' (Soudien 2022: 197; Platzky Miller 2023: 8, 20). Kies (1953: 23, 24) pointed instructively to the indebtedness of Greece to Africa and Asia and argued against conventional scholarly views by locating Egypt epistemologically and geographically firmly within Africa. He furthermore stressed that Africa south of the Sahara, was 'further on the road to civilization' than most parts of Europe, especially 'after the decline of Greece and Rome and the ascendancy of Christianity' (Kies 1953: 34; Soudien 2022: 202).

Kies, a teacher who was a central figure within the League, had by the early 1950s presented a persuasive alternative to the 'History of Western Philosophy' narratives. His contention painted the 'history of philosophy as *globally "mixed"* or *entangled*.' (Platzky Miller 2023: 3 emphases in original). Kies's thesis would coincide with other anti-colonial texts in the Cold War period, specifically Basil Davidson's *Lost Cities of Africa* (1959) and later Walter Rodney's decolonial Marxist text *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). Maurice, similarly, linking the global and local, tracked the changing history of colour prejudice and the colour bar in South African education (Hommel 1989: 82, 83, 86). Staying within the framework of previous NEUM writers, he identified the colour bar as an outgrowth of international capitalism, which in the colonial context unequivocally benefitted the hegemonic/dominant 'white' group. His analysis concluded, much like Rodney's 1972 seminal thesis, that only political victory over the *herrenvolk* would bring the 'abrogation of the colour bar in education' (Hommel 1989:96). The Mnguni and Majeke publications were also viewed by certain university historians to be for their time perceptively 'pioneering', 'radical' within the 'Marxist tradition', and 'Africanist' (Saunders 1986: 79–81).

Premised on the above universalistic perspective and its implications for schooling and the broader education landscape, the League vehemently opposed notions of 'differentiation' that placed knowledge of the modern world out of reach of the nation's children, arguing that this policy stunted their (children's) intellectual development. The emerging knowledge-based world economy, the NEUM contended, rendered 'our children' unable to access universal knowledge as equals (Tabata 1959: 40–47; *The Torch* 1953: 8), thus blocking them from becoming fully-fledged members of society with access to full citizenship rights (Tabata 1959: 3, 4, 7–11). The Movement's argument foreshadowed by a few decades Muller and Young's (2019: 198) contention that underscored the

transformative potential of 'powerful knowledge', which the latter characterised as disciplinary, specialised knowledge with the critical capacity to be transferable from one context to another and thus conceptually integral to social justice. Much like Tabata, *The Torch*, and the Teachers' League, Muller and Young (2019: 198, 201) reveal how those in power have historically restricted the circulation of specific types of knowledge, specifically powerful knowledge, as a key strategy to advantage certain sections of society. Based on a comparable perspective, the League opposed what is termed in Afrikaans *andersoortigheid* (one's 'differentness' from others), which placed the emphasis on 'race', 'ethnicity', 'nation', culture, language, education (schools and universities), inter alia. For the NEUM affiliate, differentiation was undeniably sinister, a deceptive scheme to divide the oppressed and maintain white supremacy (*EJ* 1993a: 4).

The politics of transition (to a post-apartheid state)

In the post-apartheid period, the League would continue to hold to its modernist outlook of an emancipatory critique and contended that 'our children' deserve nothing less than the best education, and who, the TLSA emphasised, had to be adequately equipped for life beyond school (Abrahams 1997: 17). Operating within the earlier mentioned humanistic, decolonial, and oppositional framework, in a vein much like the decolonial educational theorist Zemblyas (2018), the organisation spoke out against teacher politics and educational reforms that prejudiced the child, 'our children', in any way that denied them equal opportunities. Freire (1993: 16), writing in the early 1990s, voiced a similar pedagogical and humanistic concern by expressing his support for 'competent teaching' that delivered 'quality education.' For him, 'poor children… are the ones who suffer the most from the inequality of education' (Freire 1993: 16). The League held to a similar pedagogical disposition concerning 'competent' and 'quality' teaching. These and related concepts will be elaborated on in relation to teacher unionism and the emerging new curriculum, as SA transitioned into a post-apartheid state.

Teacher Unionism

The emergence of teacher unionism in SA from the mid-1980s into the 1990s, culminating in the formation of the mass-based South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), and soon afterwards the politically moderate National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), was a disconcerting development for the TLSA. Although

it had sought affiliation with the union movement in 1946 (*EJ* 1946a: 11; *EJ* 1946b: 12), the TLSA was extremely critical of teacher unionism. One of the issues was the quality or inexperience of the union leadership. Anothe, issue was their political and ideological agenda given their predilection, the League claimed, to place party politics above the interests of children. After all, as the Teachers' League well knew, SADTU was an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, which was in a tripartite alliance with the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress. This alliance, in partnership with the ruling National Party, were at the forefront of political negotiations during the early 1990s, and for the League susceptible to strategic compromises at the bargaining table. This troubled the teachers' organisation, as it fundamentally opposed negotiations with the ruling party, branding the alliance and others from the liberation movement who participated in these talks as nothing but collaborationists. Given this uncompromising stance, the TLSA sought to vindicate its politics by exposing and lambasting politically perceived manoeuvrings behind the scenes or the wily politics hidden by the glare of the media (Hendricks 2010: 135).

The League's most concerning issue when engaging teacher trade unionism, was the question of teacher strike action, which it saw as counter-productive in the terrain of schooling. The upshot of this pedagogical position was that while the TLSA wedded the political and educational, SADTU sought to merge the political and economic ends of the struggle, consistent with its trade union focus, which prioritised workers' interests. Negotiations and strike action to ensure teachers' demands were met were thus central to improving the quality of teaching and learning, SADTU maintained. Alexander (2001) explains:

> *it [education] gets sold ... The fact that the state pays for it does not mean it's not a commodity … that education has a sort of dual aspect to it, is of course true, but you cannot highlight the one [professionalism] as though the other didn't exist … and therefore if the conditions of education are such that the children and the teachers ... cannot carry out their tasks properly, [and] a strike seems to be the correct type of action to take - it has to be taken.*

The League's point of departure on this matter was unequivocal. For it, teachers were the custodians of the community, and it contended that the classroom was the starting point for countering the ideological effects of the system. As such, schools were sites to nurture, care for, and protect children while parents worked to make ends meet (*EJ* 1993c: 9). In keeping with this educational viewpoint, the League posited that 'when teachers are on strike', 'children are placed at risk' (*EJ* 1993c: 9). League teachers, by implication,

saw themselves as fulfilling the pedagogical role of *in loco parentis* and thus were duty-bound to the children entrusted to them. For the TLSA, the altruistic and transformative role assigned to the teacher was far more important and inseparable from the liberation struggle. Adriaans (2000) was curt on this point:

> *Teachers in the Teachers' League never fought for teachers' rights in retrospect. ... They never fought for promotions, they never fought for increases of salaries, they would never have dreamt of going on strike for higher salaries, because they saw their role as being the educator force of the liberatory movement, not to see to their own personal benefits. ... there were so many people poorly paid, I mean what right did you have to make demands for your own personal improvement economically?*

Statements and related attitudes like these distinguished League teachers from their union counterparts, as it exemplified the way they sought to construct an identity for themselves as progressive educators and intellectuals representing 'their' community, the community of the oppressed. It was here, as Tabata (1952: 184) would have it, that teachers or intellectuals had a choice; they could either 'place themselves at the head of their people and launch a struggle against the government or side with the rulers against their own people'. This Gramscian conception of the teacher as the 'organic intellectual', (Vacca 1982: 63–65) or Giroux's (1989: 152) equally engaging 'transformative intellectual', exemplified the principled role League teachers assumed for themselves in the 1990s. This role cast League teachers as custodians of the oppressed, whose mission, amongst others, embodied the responsibility of 'empowering individuals and groups within oppositional public domains' (Giroux 1989: 153).

Notwithstanding their harsh attitude towards teacher unionism and their brusque view of strike action, the League did not oppose confrontational forms of working-class actions in principle. In fact, the organisation viewed these interventions as legitimate responses by workers and teachers in their quest 'to redress social evils and secure just demands' (*EJ* 1993d: 3). What came to the fore in the latter part of the 1990s for the TLSA was the reinterpretation of strike action in schooling. A more imaginative and proactive interpretation of strike action would emerge within the NUPSAW education sector, the descendent of the TLSA from 1999, when the League was compelled by labour legislation to join the independent union movement (Hendricks 2018: 134–136). Instead of teachers vacating their classrooms or abandoning the site of teaching and learning, they were encouraged by the new teacher-based union to engage students through alternative lessons and programmes as part of conscientising them. This alternative approach, the education sector averred, would help students develop a critical understanding of the social system

and therewith their role and responsibility in transforming the world, a world where all must be afforded equal opportunities (Hendricks 2010: 310).

The mentioned counter-hegemonic strategy of embracing 'study and struggle' was not new in the SA educational domain, and in fact, finds its antecedents in the alternative educational movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The difference, however, was that in the realm of teacher unionism it was novel. Up to that point, teacher unions mimicked trade union industrial actions, resulting in teachers leaving their classrooms and schools or the site of work (work site). For the League schools did not produce commodities, nor did it service clients. Rather, schools were central to enriching young minds and bodies. Here, for the NUPSAW education sector, no 'assembly line' or 'conveyor belt' in an industrial sense, existed. The League evidently did not subscribe to the inevitability of what Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Althusser (1972), through their 'correspondence' and 'reproduction' theories, purported capitalist schooling propagated. Instead, the TLSA viewed schools as sites of struggle, or in decolonial terms, sites of epistemological defiance and '"disobedience' (Mignolo 2009).

The League, in principle, was not anti-trade union but rather emphasised the merging of the political, class, and educational struggles. Within this matrix, the pivotal role of organisational leadership in ensuring independent and unwavering allegiance to the workers they represented was critical. The crux of the matter, for the NUPSAW education sector, was that teacher unions had to remain vigilant and not collude or collaborate with the education authorities at the expense of children, teachers, and workers (Hendricks 2018: 137–139). These tangible and cognitive political, educational, and organisational concerns were interrelated and central to the union question and that of non-collaboration for the Teachers' League and its union successor.

Curriculum reform

The evolving curriculum reform in the post-apartheid era motivated the TLSA to pursue its core political role of working within a critical and oppositional framework. It spoke out against the narrow market-driven skills or 'instrumentalist' approach to education that emerged with the Education Renewal Strategy (ERS) in 1991, the National Qualifications Framework of 1996, and later OBE and Curriculum 2005 (Hendricks 2010: 144, 214, 218–220). These were educational reforms the apartheid and post-apartheid governments sought to implement in a political economy of widening inequalities (Marais 2001: 153). The ripple effect of this deep-seated disparity impacted massively on education, and in the

hazy context of a great deal of media hype surrounding the new curriculum's break with the previous apartheid one, which was announced in 1997 and implemented a year later, the League had to find its way independently. In this period, the Marxist class perspective that was integral to the TLSA's non-collaboration policy stood out as a distinct feature of its analysis, which, in turn, had decisive implications for its practice.

Regarding OBE, the organisation's initial stance was that the curriculum would work in well-resourced, former 'whites-only', Model C schools, given that they were achieving and setting the standard (*EJ* 1997: 10). Furthermore, regarding the pricklier foundational thinking anchoring OBE, the League was loath to declare: 'There might be little wrong with the philosophy underpinning the concept', and more plausibly, 'we believe that the OBE approach is the way forward' (*EJ* 1997: 3, 5). Given these early pronouncements on the new curriculum, the organisation found itself not directly opposing OBE, which others such as Jansen (1997) had clearly articulated at the time. In addition, it could no longer sustain its initial opposition to Model C schools, stating by the late 1990s that all children should have access to resourced schools as a democratic right. The League, for a brief period, seemingly maintained an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the unfolding reforms in education, particularly regarding the new curriculum.

The shift to oppose the philosophical underpinnings of OBE would only occur once the TLSA formed the NUPSAW education sector in 1999. In this new phase of the organisation's life, the debilitating effects of the outcomes-based curriculum on learning and teaching have become evident and educationally pronounced. Up to that point, it was the emphasis of OBE on skills 'training' and vocational education that concerned the TLSA (*EJ* 1997: 10). This concern was informed by the international developments where policymakers were pushing to link education and work in an education-economy bind. This global backdrop presupposed that as in human capital theory, education would yield returns for the individual and society, and thus ostensibly greater productivity for the nation (Christie 1996: 412–413; Klees 2014: viii; Vally and Motala 2014: 23, 29, 43). The League was left far from convinced by these pronouncements. While the organisation at no point spoke of modernisation or human capital, these concepts were implicit in its response to events happening in education. For example, the TLSA was exceedingly aware of the deleterious effect the new resource-dependent OBE would have on working-class schools (*EJ*, 1997:10), whereas, conversely, for well-equipped Model C schools it held benefits. Conscious of these stark differences, the League spoke out against the narrow skills-based approach of vocational-oriented education, which it indicated OBE espoused. The organisation, instead, advocated a broad philosophical outlook where:

> *education should aim at developing the whole person ... and oppose curriculum and syllabus programmes that attempt to move away from sound academic development towards the overly practical. ... The function of schools at all levels is to develop a well-rounded young person who will be employable and can also relate to and enjoy all the enriching aspects of life.* (Abrahams 1997: 14, 15).

However, since the majority of schools were found in under-resourced communities, and OBE was unavoidable, the TLSA encouraged teachers in these schools, where a far greater demand was being placed on their ingenuity, energy, and time, to set the 'highest possible standards' and to work towards delivering a 'good general education' (*EJ* 1997: 11).

As a result of its broad view on education, which concomitantly emphasised 'academic excellence', the Teachers' League in the post-1994 period, faced heavy criticism from educational quarters within the liberation movement. These voices declared the organisation's outlook elitist for advancing an 'Oxbridge' approach to education that was too far removed for most people (Liebenberg 2005). This elitism, for certain educators, demonstrated insensitivity to the fact that most township children failed to reach Grade 12 (Christie 1996: 408), owing to the schooling system's emphasis on academia. Liebenberg (2005), a longstanding community activist and teacher within the Black Consciousness Movement tradition, elaborated:

> *If you are an elitist in terms of vocational training, you want this person to become a heart surgeon or whatever… but when you are in the township when it's a matter of bread and butter [it's different] … for me, the elitist is the crème de la crème, the cream de grandeur right at the top. I'm not focused on that I'm focused on the people on the ground right at the bottom.*

Options were essential to avoid demoralising people and stymieing their development, these educators insisted (Wieder 2003:57). Steadfast in its educational mission, the TLSA contended that it simply expected its teachers to teach according to standards the racialised and class-biased education system was denying the oppressed or black working-class children, whom, it emphasised, had to be adequately equipped for life beyond school. For teachers in the League, teaching involved holding 'each other and themselves to demanding standards' (Soudien 2011:50). Hanmer, a prominent member of the Teachers' League from the 1940s, was unequivocal on this matter, stating that for the organisation, teaching embodied:

> *dedication to education, an education as part of a social process, which also sees a democratic situation, a democratic society. It's a clear dedication to children and what*

> *is important in order to give children the very best opportunity to live widely, generously in society and not focus their minds on a very narrow end, but to broaden their minds, to make them critical, to assist them to access information, to access quality. It's quality, quality, quality all the time ...*(Hanmer 2005).

It was this emphasis on 'quality teaching with a social justice orientation' and which was 'geared towards the creation of a radically new society' (Omar 2017), that appeared to set these TLSA teachers apart from those who did not subscribe to their views. The League, in other words, did not consider the notion of education 'of an "educated" person' to be elitist (Abrahams 1997:17). Alexander, a radical educationist and activist, stated incisively: 'I don't think it was merely elitism, I think behind it there was a very strong sense of egalitarianism, a very strong sense that through social revolution we would bring about an egalitarian society in which everybody would have access to exactly that high status knowledge' (Alexander 2002). The TLSA's bottom line, it appeared, was that all students should be afforded the opportunity to learn and achieve their fullest potential.

It was the coexistence of the TLSA's holistic approach to education and its 'egalitarian-oriented' counter-consciousness that gave the organisation its distinctive character and set it apart from other teacher organisations from the 1940s onward. This dualism, it could be contended, makes viable the organisation's educational philosophy, a view that placed an emphasis on the school curriculum, the centrality of the teacher and student in the learning process, and crucially, an understanding of the politics of education and its role in transforming society and the nation. It could be further deduced that it was the originality and integrated nature of the TLSA, and later the NUPSAW education sector's perspective on education, which provides new possibilities for addressing the deep crisis in which South African education and teaching finds itself at present.

Conclusion

It could be argued that the Teachers' League produced a distinctive philosophical perspective on education that remained relatively consistent after it had broken from the moderate politics of the APO by the mid-1940s. Constrained by a challenging political and socio-economic environment, the TLSA's philosophy pivoted around the immanent notion of 'education for liberation' as the key to eventually achieve social transformation. The adherence to non-racialism and non-collaboration, in tandem with its emphasis on internationalism, formed the foundation of its praxis or the theoretical and practical approach to education.

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Once it had aligned with the Unity Movement, the TLSA emphasised the crucial role of teachers as central to the struggle for emancipation, viewing them as the carriers of progressive and transformative ideas. Through fusing the political and educational struggles, the League sought to counter the divisive policies of colonialism and apartheid. It promoted unity and independence of thought and practice as foundational to the underclass or subaltern sections of society.

Internationalism was integral to the TLSA's worldview, and its analysis aimed to locate South Africa within the broader global discourses and struggles against colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism. The League strove to break with insular trends and rejected, through its own form of epistemic disobedience, categorising people according to 'race', ''ethnicity', or 'culture'. Its leading theorists dissected and discredited notions of a pristine 'Western' philosophy and 'civilisation', and through a 'de-centred' decolonial perspective promoted the alternative idea of an 'entangled' universalism that embraced the notion of 'one human race', stressing equality and the right for all to access universal 'powerful' knowledge.

In the immediate post-apartheid years of the 'rainbow' nation, the TLSA maintained its emancipatory critique and continued to oppose educational reforms that marginalised and obstructed the right to education for all children. It spoke out against the neo-liberal, market-driven educational policies that neglected the holistic development of 'our children', and which disadvantaged under-resourced schools, the very same schools that had been disadvantaged under apartheid. Emphasising academic excellence in addition to an education offering a broad curriculum, the TLSA faced criticism for being elitist. Notwithstanding this reproach, the organisation's teachers remained resolute in their mission to prepare students for life beyond school.

The legacy of the Teachers' League's educational values and philosophy transcends its historical lifespan, and its holistic and integrated outlook provides valuable insights for addressing the current crisis in South African education and, particularly, schooling. By drawing on its enduring principles of non-racialism, non-collaboration (independent thoughts and actions), and internationalism, educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers may well find possibilities for advancing a more equitable, innovative, and transformative educational praxis.

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