

REMEMBERING NEVILLE ALEXANDER: ACTIVIST-EDUCATOR

Professor Melanie Walker, 4 September 2012

Speaking in 2010 in his Strini Moodley annual memorial lecture at UKZN Neville described himself as ‘an incorrigible revolutionary socialist’ – that seems about right to me! At the same time his Robben Island years meant that on a personal level he could exercise solidarity and deeply respect people with whom he differed politically, but I think it fair to say remained convinced that his was the better argument!

Neville’s educational contributions in the 1980s, allied to his political activism, touched my life profoundly at that time, and taught me lessons which have stayed with me ever since, and it is about this that I want to talk. I want to begin with how I came to first meet Neville, who was both a remarkable teacher and educator, and a principled and brave political figure. The two identities of political activist and educator are interwoven in my view so that what we struggle towards is always aligned with how we work to get there. This in turn directs attention to the role education (both the what and the how) plays in advancing our struggles for dignity and justice in South African society.

Back in 1979 I was teaching History on the Cape Flats. The students were delightful; the materials available poor- a syllabus offering a deeply partial view of South African history and dull textbooks. I therefore began writing and printing my own resources. This in turn led me to SACHED in 1980 around the time Neville had begun to work there following the expiry of his banning order, subsequently becoming director. SACHED at that time was in the forefront of developing and advancing progressive approaches to pedagogy and curriculum, and provided a dynamic space for teachers to share alternative curriculum materials and ideas. Neville, as the director was admittedly a remote figure, charismatic and awe inspiring to a young white teacher grappling with the tremendous challenges of the intense and volatile activity in schools at that time.

In the 1980s Neville was unsympathetic to the dominant slogan of ‘Liberation before education’ or ‘Liberation first, education after’, arguing that schools could be sites of responsible struggle for a democratic education in the future and for the lives of future persons. This resonated powerfully for those of us teaching on the Cape Flats, working daily with talented young people. For some of us, we did not quite see why our immediate situation - the education we offered on a daily basis - could not or should not contribute to thinking differently about our future society and build in our imaginations the schools of tomorrow, even though our practical action might seem only imperceptibly transformative at the time. Neville’s stance and his own commitment to education offered us a way to be democratic teachers even in undemocratic times.

At about the same time I moved to live in Woodstock in Cape Town, an area which historically had managed in part to defy Group Areas to sustain a racially mixed community

so that I was able to get involved in the local anti-apartheid youth organisation and the civic association. This brought me into a different kind of contact with Neville and others who worked with him at that time. In 1983 our Civic we became part of the Cape Action League, the same year in which the broadly ANC aligned UDF was established. Cape Town at that time was rather sectarian in its politics so that many teachers began to drift away from SACHED and the politics of its director. Certainly the CAL was the smaller grouping, left-wing, socialist, often maligned as 'Trotskyite' or 'ultra-leftist', none of which deterred either Neville or those of working actively in the organisation around vigorous grassroots campaigns, for example, against the old Tri-Cameral parliament.

Neville was further concerned to make links to Black Consciousness, admittedly generating a certain awkwardness for white activists. But what is more significant now is how both CAL and BC have been airbrushed out of struggle politics by the present rulers. While the CAL may not have played the hugely significant role of BC, it brought both a much needed radicalism and pluralism to the Cape Town political scene at that time, informed by rigorous intellectual debate and uncomfortable questions. Throughout this Neville was principled, fierce, intellectually demanding - no sloppy thinking but conceptual clarity - something he applied consistently to his own public speeches.

He was also humble; at this time he was living in his modest Grassy Park home, and continued to do so for the rest of his life.

Neville was against race-based politics and advocated the significance of class-based politics in the interests of true justice and the need for South Africans to move away and beyond race-consciousness. At the same time he was deeply pragmatic, and accepted that race existed, and exists, as a social construct in the lives and racist experiences of ordinary people. I recall clearly a conversation - around the time that we were campaigning door to door against the Tri-Cameral parliament on the Cape Flats and in Atlantis - around the difficulty of social class as an entry point to engage people in struggles against manoeuvres by the apartheid state. Even though race was an empty concept for Neville, he understood that it was not a false illusion; ethnicity and race based identification was most powerfully obvious in the material circumstances in people's everyday lives. While race might have to be the entry point to a dialogue with people, it was however not where the debate ought to end. For Neville, it was always necessary to advance ideas to counter the racist and divisive ideology of the everyday in people's heads - and to produce a new political project of non-racialism because people are never completely captured by history but are able to think their way out into differently imagined identities.

Indeed for all that academic studies and the understanding of race in South Africa have advanced somewhat, Neville was one of the early commentators writing in 1979 that it was rather astonishing that in the scholarly community in South Africa - 'the only country in the world where race constitutes the basis of state policy' - that so few 'have bothered to examine the concept of "race" as a political priority'.

Those were heady and exciting times; the experience of Neville's courageous leadership and the practical politics of rigorous democratic thinking and inclusive ideas have stayed with me through my life and my thinking about education.

Therefore, I now want to make three specific points about the pedagogical implications of Neville's political work and what we might learn from it in the here and now at our own University.

- i. Firstly, conceptual clarity and careful reasoning were tremendously important to Neville politically and educationally. So, a university education ought to enable and demand this clarity and reasoning in all its students.
- ii. Secondly, for Neville practical action to bring about social change is as important as thinking well about the problems we face. It follows, I think, that universities have a moral obligation to foster in all students the knowledge, skills and values to turn the privilege of a university education to the benefit of those who are undeservedly disadvantaged.
- iii. Thirdly, Neville advocated a genuine regard for the diversity of human life; a university education ought to enable this diversity to flourish in ideas and action which take us beyond race to a new imaginary. For Neville this regard for the diversity of human life was achieved most especially through learning to listen to and understand each other's language; but regard for diversity can both embrace this and also curriculum and pedagogies more broadly to foster respect, recognition and valuing of diversity.

If we truly achieved these three challenges for every student on our campus, and in our own educational practices - critical reasoning; commitments by our graduates to act for justice; and a regard for human diversity - we will have gone some significant way to bringing an equal South Africa into being.

Important in Neville's thinking is an openness to a future that is profoundly experimental, that is, what it means to be this 'new' South African is not yet settled, but a subject for conversations between, and with, people in the situation out of which may come thinking and action. Rather like a Stenhouseian curriculum, new South African-ness is first imagined as a possibility, then the subject of experiment grounded in practice. Yet this openness to what it means to be a new South African is also not arbitrary in that it is infused with a deep concern for, in Neville's own words, 'a humane world order, one where every child and every person has more than an outside chance of fulfilling his or her human potential'. Translated into education this requires us to ask what it means to be human as a radically open question animated by social justice, one that can only be answered by actually doing education, rather than as a question that needs to be settled before we can begin to educate.

Here at the UFS we have a tremendous space for critical hope and possibility, Neville's legacy, if it is nothing else, requires us to think about what kind of future persons we educate, for what kind of South African society, and to act to bring our ideas into practice.

To conclude, Neville's work has sustained a principled left-wing politics of which we still have much need today to so that we might reason rather better than we do and under more robust conditions of plurality, while his unassuming personal life speaks as a powerful counterpoint to the current tendency to 'grab what you can'. Neville's death marks a huge political and educational loss in South Africa. He called for us to speak up and to address the challenges of our society, 'fearlessly and candidly, no matter how awkward it may be'. It is now up to us to take up this challenge through practical action as educators and students, in the light of Neville's own lifelong commitment to education and its role in bringing about democratic justice in South Africa. To me, he was above all an 'activist-educator'.