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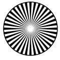
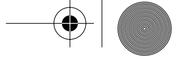

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Challenging the orthodoxy: union learning representatives as organic intellectuals

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Teacher education and continuing professional development have become key areas of controversy in England since the period of school-sector restructuring following the 1988 Education Reform Act. More recently, teacher training and professional development have often been used to promote and reinforce a narrow focus on the government's 'standards agenda'. However, the emerging discourse of 'new professionalism' has raised the profile of professional development in schools, and, together with union learning representatives, there are opportunities to secure real improvements in teachers' access to continuing professional development. This article argues, however, that union learning representatives must go beyond advocating for better access to professional development and should raise more fundamental questions about the nature of professional development and the education system it serves. Drawing on Gramsci's notion of the 'organic intellectual', the article argues that union learning representatives have a key role as organisers of ideas—creating spaces in which the ideological dominance of current policy orthodoxy might be challenged.

Introduction

The education function of trade unions has a long and honourable tradition in the history of the organised labour movement. It has also been a controversial and contested history in which fundamental questions have been raised about unions' role in relation to the wider social and economic system. Within the history of the British labour movement there has always been a strong tradition of seeking to work within the system in order to maximise the benefits for workers, whilst the voices of those who have argued that unions must ask more fundamental questions about the nature of capitalism have tended to be more marginal (Hyman, 1989). This conflict, presented crudely as between reformists and radicals, is echoed in the history of trade union education (Simon, 1990), which for many years wrestled with the tensions

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between an independent and critical working-class education—'carried on by and for the working class, and under its own control' (Simon, 1990, p. 16), and a system underpinned by significant state support, positioned within, rather than against, the dominant economic system.

The political, economic and social context at the current time is in many respects significantly different from, for example, the issues identified by Brian Simon in the early part of the twentieth century. However, in important ways the relatively recent emergence of union learning representatives resurrects the historic debate within trade union education about the extent to which such education has an explicit role in challenging the *status quo*. Or is it the case—as an integral element of the relationship between the state, capital and labour—that union learning representatives are central to reinforcing, rather than challenging, current orthodoxies?

Union learning representatives have developed as a key feature on the landscape of contemporary trade unionism within the United Kingdom. Supported by statutory entitlements, union learning representatives have a qualitatively different function within trade union education in so far as their role is presented as one of facilitator, rather than provider. Union learning representatives have a key role in supporting fellow union members to gain improved access to education and training through the provision of advice, and the negotiation of learning agreements with employers. A key emphasis for union learning representatives has been to support those sections of the workforce for whom an inability to access basic skills leaves them at greater risk of marginalisation in the labour market. However, union learning representatives are also a feature of white-collar unionism, and this article focuses on the role, and the potential role, of union learning representatives in the school teacher unions.

Union learning representatives have developed at a time when issues of teacher education and professional development have emerged high on the policy agenda. Policy discourses speak of a 'new professionalism' (RIG, 2005) in which teachers' work will be better informed by access to high-quality continuing professional development. However, the apparent increase in emphasis on professional development also highlights the potential use of such forms of teacher training as a means of reinforcing current policy agendas. Education performs a powerful role in forming and shaping the 'common sense' of the world that we inhabit. Teachers' training, and their continuing professional development, exerts a powerful influence on teachers' professional world—shaping not only what they do, but what questions are presented and how problems are perceived in the first instance.

In such circumstances, union learning representatives may have an important role to play in ensuring their colleagues can access the professional development that is the rhetoric of new professionalism. However, as *union* learning representatives, to what extent is it possible for teachers in these roles to work against the grain of current policy, and to open up spaces where the common sense of current policy discourses is challenged?

This article identifies how teacher education and the continuing professional development of in-service teachers performs a powerful role in shaping and reinforcing the discourses within which policy is framed. It then explores the role of the union

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learning representative within school teacher unions, and specifically within the context of the new professionalism agenda. The paper highlights the development of union learning representatives within a context of 'social partnership' in which unions and employers seek to work together to secure common objectives. The article concludes by discussing the potential development of the role of union learning representatives, but located within the more traditional concerns of trade union education. Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) notion of the 'organic intellectual', the present paper argues that union learning representatives can create spaces in which critical discourses can emerge, and in which ideas that challenge current orthodoxies can be encouraged and developed.

Teacher education and professional development: capturing the discourse

Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of the changes that have taken place in the English school system in recent years has been the degree of centralisation, and the extent to which the discourse of 'standards' has come to dominate the entire educational landscape. Such developments are common in different forms globally, but even by international comparison the extent to which the English system has succumbed to the demands of the central state are striking. Of course, the means by which this has been achieved are complex. There can be little doubt that the suffocating presence of the body responsible for the inspection of schools in England, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), buttressed by the introduction of quasi-market structures, has had a profound disciplinary impact—encouraging uniformity across the sector, coupled with an obedience to the demands of national policy. However, it is important to recognise how many of these processes have been reinforced by key developments in teacher education and professional development, the consequence of which has been to narrow the opportunities for generating critical perspectives in relation to current policy.

The importance of teacher education to winning the battle of ideas in education was perhaps most graphically illustrated by the state's role in reforming teacher training by taking control of the teacher training curriculum and putting OFSTED in place to police its implementation (Furlong, 2005). Coupled with the encouragement of more school-based routes to qualified teacher status, the consequence of these changes has been to focus 'training' more on practical skills of 'delivery', whilst marginalising efforts to raise more fundamental questions about pedagogy and practice. These tendencies within initial teacher education have then been reinforced by the state's nationalisation of 'leadership and management' training under the auspices of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). In contrast to the United States, for example, where a master's qualification is the accepted route to principalship, policy in England requires potential head teachers to hold the NCSL-provided National Professional Qualification for Headteachers, a qualification reinforced by a battery of related programmes for middle leaders, new and experienced head teachers. NCSL's monopoly on providing the professional qualification for headship, supported by its associated programmes, provides a powerful mechanism whereby

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the central state, through its arms-length agents, is able to assert influence over all those teachers who take on the leadership of a school. The impact of all these reforms is to significantly diminish the role of universities and other higher education institutions in providing teacher education and professional development. Hence those institutions whose traditional mission has been to generate new knowledge and to promote challenge and critique as the basis of educational enquiry have their role significantly diminished through the influence of new forms of regulation and professional accreditation.

Moreover, it is possible to discern further ways in which teachers' professional development becomes used both to support and to reinforce the demands of the central policy agenda. Specifically these link to the ways in which the culture of performativity increasingly drives the professional development needs of both teachers and schools. At an individual level, teachers face a performance management system that is now heavily focused on demonstrating impact on pupil performance. Both pay and career progression are underpinned by the need to show improved results, and within the performance management system there is a clear logic to identifying continuing professional development needs that support the drive for results. The link between professional development and performance at an individual level then becomes replicated at an institutional level as schools operating in a competitive environment search for quick-fix solutions that offer the prospect of providing improved results, quickly. In such circumstances it is little surprise if growing numbers of private providers enter the market to offer schools what they want (Ball, 2007). These organisations have no mission to generate new knowledge, to challenge or critique. On the contrary, their business survival depends on appearing to make the system work, not raising wider fundamental questions about the efficacy of the system itself.

The extent to which continuing professional development is both driven by national agendas, and reinforces them, is highlighted by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (2005, p. 3):

> Government policy has attempted to standardise practice, showing a lack of trust in the profession and a denial of complexity. It conceptualises CPD [continuing professional development] as a management tool to ensure good classroom practice, and is seeking to embed it within the management toolkit, including performance management, pay progression and contract. Items of training are to be imposed on teachers according only to immediate corporate needs.

Teacher unions, continuing professional development and the new professionalism

Teacher unions have long had an interest in 'professional issues' and professional development. Arguably the history of teacher unions in England often reflects uncomfortable efforts to reconcile their dual role as traditional trade unions campaigning on issues of pay and conditions of service, and professional associations advocating on matters of professional concern for teachers (Ironside & Seifert, 1995).

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Although it is not straightforward (Naylor, 2002), it is still arguably the case that the most effective way of differentiating between teacher unions is to locate them in relation to their stance on so-called industrial and professional issues. However, despite their long-held interest in professional issues, and matters of professional development in particular, it is only relatively recently that English teacher unions have moved beyond a somewhat narrow engagement with these issues. Traditionally unions had restricted their own provision of training to union officers with an emphasis on supporting those in lay roles who undertook representational duties on behalf of members. Unlike teacher unions in the United States, for example (Kerchner & Mitchell, 1988; Kerchner, 1993), there was no tradition of English teacher unions as direct providers of professional development. Conference motions tended to restrict themselves to calls for 'more continuing professional development', and the non-contact time that would make this accessible.

By the 1990s this situation was beginning to change. Unions such as the Association of Teachers and Lecturers were increasingly positioning themselves around issues of professional development. At the same time the National Union of Teachers was drawing on ideas from the US teacher unions, and recognising that direct union provision of continuing professional development offered opportunities to engage with members who might otherwise be less inclined to participate in the union through established structures (Barber, 1992). The election of New Labour in 1997 gave these developments a significant spur with the establishment of the union learning fund and union learning representatives, backed up with statutory entitlements. Although this initiative was arguably focused on those sectors of the workforce at greatest risk of exclusion, and in greatest needs of skills development (Fryer, 1997), union learning representatives have been taken up by all the main teacher unions and have become a key feature of union strategy in relation to promoting professional development for their members.

It is significant, but not coincidental, that union learning representatives have developed alongside the emerging 'new professionalism' agenda in schools and debates that have taken place regarding the transformation of the school workforce (Department for Education and Skills, 2002). In 2003 most of the teacher unions signed a national agreement (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) with Government and local authority employers that set out to both raise educational standards, whilst also reducing teacher workload. The squaring of this particular circle was to be achieved through the reconfiguration of the school workforce in a way that encouraged support staff to undertake 'non-essential' tasks previously undertaken by teachers. Styled as a 'remodelling' of the workforce, this agenda has since metamorphosed into the 'new professionalism' (RIG, 2005), and has extended its remit to cover pay restructuring and new performance management arrangements.

The new professionalism agenda is now one of the dominant influences on the training and professional development needs of schools, and it is important to identify its component elements in more detail. Elsewhere, I and others (Stevenson *et al.*, 2007) have argued that new professionalism is best analysed in terms of four distinguishing features. First is an emphasis on the so-called 'core task of teaching and

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learning', whereby teachers' work is re-organised—ostensibly to allow teachers more time to focus on teaching rather than be distracted by extraneous and unnecessary tasks. Although many aspects of these changes are uncontentious (such as the removal of a range of bureaucratic duties from teachers), there are consequences (such as an increased emphasis on the 'academic' role of a teacher at the expense of 'pastoral' issues) that are much more contested and strike at the heart of what it means to both teach and be a teacher (Stevenson, 2007a). Second is an acceptance of new accountability regimes, such as performance management and performance-related pay, in which teachers are held increasingly accountable for the performance of their pupils. In many ways this may be considered the key *quid pro quo* for the introduction of initiatives that may have had a beneficial on reducing workload pressures. Although teachers, for example, now have a statutory entitlement to 10% planning, preparation and assessment time, they are also subject to a performance management regime that ratchets up considerably the pressure to perform. 'Performance' in this context is increasingly framed within a framework that focuses on measurable outputs of student achievement in standardised tests.

The third discernible element of the new professionalism agenda is a focus on continuing professional development and a recognition that 'improvement' requires investment in staff and their continued training and development. As with other elements of the remodelling reforms (such as the emphasis on performance management), the case for investment in continuing professional development is rooted in contemporary human resource management strategy. Recognising the importance of human resources, especially in labour-intensive service industries, it is asserted that the key to competitive advantage is achieved by investment in human capital. In a context of limited resources, centrally imposed targets and quasi-market operating environments, the logic of this argument applies equally to public services as to commercial enterprises. The fourth, and final, feature of new professionalism is an emphasis on partnership in which teacher professionalism is predicated on the notion of a constructive dialogue between all key stakeholders. The approach does not necessarily eschew industrial militancy, but it does reject the adversarialism of traditional collective bargaining (Stevenson & Carter, 2007). In contrast, the partnership approach is based on generating pragmatic solutions to common problems as a means of securing win–win outcomes (NEA, 2003). Within the new professionalism agenda, this approach is illustrated by the emergence of the Social Partnership (Bangs, 2006; Passy *et al.*, 2007) in which teacher and support staff unions, central government and local authority employers work together to develop and promote the new professionalism agenda.

Of the four elements of new professionalism presented above, the latter two have a particular significance in relation to the development and role of union learning representatives. Clearly the increased emphasis, at a rhetorical level at least, placed on professional development provides opportunities for union learning representatives to press the case for improved teacher access to continuing professional development. As has been indicated, lack of access to professional development has been a long-held concern for teacher unions. Although there is now an apparently increase interest

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in ensuring teachers can access relevant continuing professional development, it is not yet clear how far this might result in significant and tangible improvements for teachers. Despite the rhetoric, there are still powerful pressures—notably, limited resourcing—that are likely to restrict teacher access to continuing professional development. Union learning representatives therefore have an important role in maximising the opportunities provided by an apparent coalescing of employer and teacher interests around the need for improved professional development opportunities.

The notion of converging interests highlights the extent to which union learning representatives may be assisted in their role by the development of a social partnership model of industrial relations in schools. It has been argued more widely (Clough, 2005) that the development of union learning representatives represents a practical manifestation of social partnership as advocated by the Trades Union Congress (TUC, 1999). Within this model of industrial relations, emphasis is placed on employers and unions working together—'effective partnerships are built on a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the business goals of the organization' (TUC, 1999, p. 13), whilst recognising the autonomy and independence of each of the partners within that. Significantly, 'training and development' (TUC, 1999, p. 11) is identified as one of three areas where the possibilities for partnership might be most fertile. It is the case that social partnership in the school sector has developed in ways that are quite distinctive to the sector (Passy *et al.*, 2007); however, it is possible to see the emergence of union learning representatives as firmly located within the development of this wider TUC-driven initiative.

Nevertheless, whilst the development of a social partnership model of industrial relations in schools may offer opportunities for the development of union learning representatives, it may also point to important limitations. Social partnership seeks to provide an independent voice for employees, which is separate from the employer-driven 'employee participation' initiatives that are a feature of much contemporary human resource management (TUC, 1999). As such, and especially within school sector education, it might be presented as a strategic choice by unions to seek re-assert influence through a more constructive engagement with employers. Central to this re-engagement is an acceptance of the overall aims of the enterprise. Social partnership is a debate about means, not ends. Hence, within the private sector, social partnership represents a formal acceptance by trade unions of the need for the commercial success of individual enterprises within a capitalist economy. It does not seek to challenge the fundamental nature of the employment relationship and the social relations that underpin it. This is not to suggest that trade unions have always seen themselves as critics of the capitalist enterprise—the reality has always been much more complex. However, it is to argue that social partnership represents a significant and qualitatively different adaptation to the dominance of current modes of production. So too can it be argued in school sector education that social partnership represents an acceptance of the fundamental elements of the post-1988 Act restructuring together with the future trajectory of policy. The debate is no longer about the efficacy of the standards agenda, and the competition-driven system that underpins it, but rather the debate becomes restricted to *how best to raise 'standards'*.

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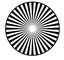
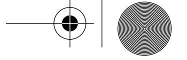
Within this context, the potential role of the union learning representative is limited. It is reduced to seeking more continuing professional development for members, but without being able to question the type of professional development being secured, or the efficacy of the wider system it seeks to support. By working within, and towards, the overall objectives of the organisation, union learning representatives not only leave the wider system in tact, they may actively reinforce it with union endorsement effectively undermining rank and file resistance. The danger is that union learning representatives simply reproduce the managerialist system of performance appraisal-driven professional development within which their members have to work. Union learning representatives can then be seen as no more than trying to compensate for the limitations of a management system that on its own terms may be inadequate.

Whilst there may be elements of this analysis that fail to convey the complexity of the role that union learning representatives perform on behalf of their members, it nevertheless serves to highlight the potentially narrow role played by these new union officers, and also the need to think more widely about the role they may perform.

Challenging the orthodoxy: union learning representatives as organic intellectuals

Thus far I have argued that different forms of teacher training and staff development have played a key role in winning teacher support for the process of school restructuring that began with the 1988 Education Reform Act, and which has represented a permanent revolution since then. This has been a difficult environment in which teacher unions have had to engage, and, although they continue to represent a powerful force in the school system, they have been unable to fundamentally challenge the overall trajectory of policy development. Union learning representatives provide an important opportunity for unions to support their members in the current context and to work towards meeting the demands of members frustrated by their limited access to professional development. However, given the framework of a social partnership approach to industrial relations, there is a danger that union learning representatives perform only a limited role. Not only do they fail to challenge the wider system, and for example the social inequalities it generates, but they actively reinforce it. If union learning representatives are to transcend this role, and to provide some space in which dominant ideas in education are challenged, then it may be useful to draw on the notion of the organic intellectual developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971).

One of Gramsci's central concerns in his *Prison Notebooks* is the role performed by intellectuals in 'organising ideas' and providing the ideological framework within which hegemonic power might be exercised. For Gramsci, intellectuals were much more than 'thinkers' (thinking, after all, is an activity common to all) but were distinguishable by the specific organising function they performed in society: 'All men are intellectuals … but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 9). This shifts the focus from intellectuality as the preserve of an elite minority to a broader conception of intellectuality as engagement in the development of

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ideas. Specifically, Gramsci was concerned with how intellectual activity defined in these terms might either reinforce or challenge the existing social order. The link between the generation of ideas and social action was made explicit by Gramsci in his notion of 'organic intellectual' (1971, p. 10). Organic intellectuals were those individuals who had a role in developing and propagating the ideas that challenged the dominant ideology. Gramsci's focus on both consent and coercion as the twin elements underpinning hegemonic power highlighted the importance he placed on ideological considerations, and therefore the need to 'assimilate and conquer' (1971, p. 10) the ideas of the existing order. For Gramsci, organic intellectuals were not remote and passive individuals, but were likely to be grounded in the social movements they represented. Organic intellectuals were likely to be actively engaged in 'practical life' as 'constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader"'. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10)—a notion that not only emphasises the role of organic intellectuals as activists, but also as a role alongside, and not remote from, those being organised.

The role of organic intellectual outlined by Gramsci points to the possibility of how the role of the union learning representative might be conceived. This is not to argue that all union learning representatives should be spear-heading the ideological war against neo-liberalism. This is neither realistic nor practical. However, it is to argue that union learning representatives have a vital role in creating a space in which the dominant, almost all-pervading, discourses of current education policy might be critiqued and challenged. The necessary first steps in this process require uncoupling union learning representatives from the strategic HRM approach in which they are currently steeped, and locating the post in an approach that has its roots in more traditional models of trade union and political education . In these cases, union learning representatives need to develop as something distinctive and different to the current role of continuing professional development coordinator—with whom they are sometimes confused (Alexandrou & O'Brien, 2007). Union learning representatives should continue to have a key role in negotiating with employers to improve union members' access to professional development. Developing union learning representatives' role by embedding them in collective bargaining structures is an important way in which union learning representatives become more than just continuing professional development advisers for colleagues and become genuine advocates of an improved learning environment for teachers. However, union learning representatives should also be encouraged to promote new and different forms of professional development—driven by distinctive union values and promoting union objectives. In so doing, spaces open up to discuss new and critical ideas—ideas that have often been driven out of schools by the relentless pressure to meet targets and satisfy inspectors.

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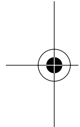
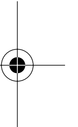
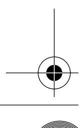
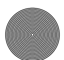
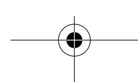
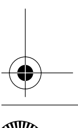



Such a role may not be welcomed by many union learning representatives. There is already considerable evidence to suggest that union members who undertake union-organised continuing professional development activities, or take on the role of union learning representative, are often individuals who have not previously had experience of engaging with the union (Wood & Moore, 2007). It is not unreasonable to assume that many of these individuals will be attracted to this type of activity



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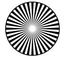
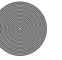
precisely because it breaks out of some of the traditional stereotypes of union activity and campaigning. Involvement such as this is to be welcomed and encouraged as one of the real benefits of the development of the union learning representative. However, it is not a reason to simply replicate a management-driven professional development agenda with one that has a union label. If union learning representatives are to begin to take on the sort of role presented in this paper, then they will need to be supported through both the lay and professional structures of their unions. At a lay level, union officers need to engage actively with the role of the union learning representative and the central role it can play in developing a vibrant union culture. Dismissing the work as peripheral, or 'not union work', seriously underestimates an important opportunity to challenge the existing orthodoxy. Within the professional structures of the union, the support for union learning representatives through training needs to ensure that those who take on the role are provided with a good understanding of what the role might look like. Unions themselves need to take on the role of collective organic intellectuals (Togliatti, 1979) by generating the discussions that challenge government policy at an intellectual and ideological level. Timidity about engaging with ideas does no more than leave the field open for dominant discourses to progress unchallenged.

Conclusion

Restructuring the public education system in England has been accompanied by a substantial and sustained ideological challenge to the welfarist values that underpinned the development of the comprehensive education system in the latter part of the twentieth century (Gewirtz, 2002). Central to the engineering of this process of change has been a 'reculturing' of the teaching profession in which efforts have been made by the state to align professional values with state objectives. This has been achieved in part by seeking to marginalise independent and critical voices, such as teacher unions and institutions of higher education. It has also been secured through the introduction of regulatory forms of control that ensure compliance and conformity across the profession. A key element of this ideological battle to capture and control the discourse shaping the future direction of policy has been increased central control of teacher education and professional development.

More recently the linked developments of a new relationship between the state and teacher unions in the form of a social partnership, and the development of the new professionalism agenda, has placed an increasing emphasis on professional development as a central element of the strategy to continue to press for higher standards. Within this context, union learning representatives have emerged with a key role to play in advocating for colleagues and seeking improved access to continuing professional development. Union learning representatives have an important role to play in ensuring that much of the rhetoric about professional development within the new professionalism agenda has the prospect of becoming a reality. However, there is a distinct danger within this approach that union learning representatives become no more than a union-endorsed version of the continuing professional development coordinator—making the system work when pressures from elsewhere may threaten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to undermine it. Conceived in these terms, union learning representatives are unlikely to challenge the current discourse dominating education policy, quite the reverse. They are likely to contribute to its reinforcement.

This article argues that union learning representatives are a key development in the new industrial relations landscape but that unions need to think more creatively and more ambitiously about what their role might be. Challenging the dominance of current discourses in education requires spaces where alternative and critical perspectives can be developed. These have been systematically closed down in recent years, and new approaches to generating critical discourses now need to be considered. Union learning representatives have a potentially vital role in creating the spaces in which these ideas may emerge, and doing so in such a way that connects the battle for ideas with teachers at the workplace. Union learning representatives are perhaps uniquely placed to make the connection between ideas and action—with each informing the other. In this sense union learning representatives have a key organising role to play, influenced by the notion of organic intellectual developed by Gramsci. This is not to exaggerate the role and influence that union learning representatives may be able to play; however, it is to assert that union learning representatives have an important potential role in helping reclaim the discourse shaping education policy. For this to happen, a necessary first step is for teacher unions to recognise that union learning representatives need to help challenge current orthodoxy, not reinforce it.

If unions are to successfully resist the forward march of neo-liberal reform that is restructuring public education, then it is vital that they engage in an ideological battle with dominant discourses. Failure to do so leaves unions dependent on fighting rearguard actions—resisting an academy school here, or redundancies there. Such struggles are the lifeblood of unionism, and vital in any campaign of resistance. But unless they are linked to a wider ideological renewal of unionism that is capable of mobilising those within and beyond schools behind a new vision of democratic public education, then such isolated campaigns are unlikely to yield long-term and significant gains (Stevenson, 2007b). Unions and other progressive forces must engage in the struggle for hegemonic power—recognising this 'is constantly having to be built and rebuilt; it is contested and negotiated' (Apple, 2003, p. 6). Union learning representatives have the potential to play an important role in that process of ideological renewal and engagement in which dominant ideas are challenged and contested. They are uniquely placed to connect struggles on the ground with wider debates about the future trajectory of policy. Their potential should not be underestimated.

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