

"Obey", "disobey" or "tinker with" reforms to the system: a subject for French teacher trade unions to work on

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Abstract. This paper presents our work to support and train members of the teaching sectors of two trade unions. The aim was to encourage participants to discuss practices, the difficulties in their day-to-day work and impediments to taking action, given the current reforms to primary education, and thereby assess the reforms' impact on the teachers' activity. It was also intended to help trade unions build up a collective dynamic around their work and re-positioning the work activity at the heart of their preoccupations. This project consisted of one/two day workshops held at local trade union branches. They were led by an ergonomist and a trade union representative. The discussions revealed that the prescriptions received from the management increasingly contradict the values of the profession. Therefore, in the name of professional ethics, different strategies of resistance have emerged, from minor modifications to the prescriptions received, to disobedience. However, adopting such strategies is itself a cause of suffering for teaching staff, and leads to some leaving the profession prematurely. We will discuss the difficulty trade unions have in dealing with the issue of work, their strategic positioning as regards developments within the profession, and the role an ergonomist can play in this process.

Keywords: Teachers, reforms, suffering at work, disobedience, trade unionism

1. Introduction

In France, research looking at disobedience, and more broadly, resistance at work has greatly increased over the last 10 years. "Disobedience is a form of non-violent direct action; it involves taking direct action, which bypasses political intermediaries; it is about using an alternative to strike action in order to state one's convictions" [1].

In the teaching sector, this movement of disobedience first began in November 2008 in the primary schools with the introduction of major reforms [2]. It spread rapidly, and in the space of several months, over 3,000 teachers were identifying themselves as "*educational objectors*". The movement grew in a context in which the trade unions were incapable of providing the solutions teaching professionals were looking for, or of changing the situation. In the words of one teacher, "*Disobedience is the only solution. The President of the Republic said so himself: Nobody notices a strike*

anymore. He's the one who has forced us into this; him and the contempt with which the Minister of Education treats us. He has forced us to look for new solutions, to be innovative and to innovate. Well, we have innovated. And we've found a way of getting what we have to do done" [3].

The trade unions do not know how to react to these "objectors" whose resistance they have not instigated and over which they have no control. They stress the difficulty they have in tackling the issue of work and opposing both work intensification within the profession and the wave of reforms to the national education system. As the movement wrote on its website on 29th June 2009, "We have wrong-footed both the management and the trade unions". Not only have the trade unions not participated in the movement, but they have actually taken a firm stance against such practices. However, the situation has made them realize that they are losing credibility with teachers in terms of their ability to impact on the issue of work. They are far more comfortable dealing

with issues related to employment and remuneration. This has resulted in a desire to work on and increase their understanding of these issues in collaboration with work analysis specialists (ergonomists, sociologists of work).

2. Problem, definitions

2.1 Problem

This paper presents work carried out to support and train members of the teaching sectors of two different trade union organizations, on the work of teaching.

The aim was to encourage participants to discuss their practices, the difficulties they encounter in exercising their profession, impediments to taking action, and transgressions of the rules in order to understand the impact of current reforms on the activity. It is also intended to help build up a collective dynamic in relation to their work, repositioning the work activity at the heart of trade union preoccupations.

Y. Baunay, head of the work section of the FSU¹ research institute with whom we collaborated on this project, is aware of the extent of the problem: "Why is so little trade union activity devoted to work, its content and its organization, to the notion of work as an individual activity of human subjects faced with an imposed situation?" [4]. This state of affairs can be extrapolated to all trade unions: "That's the way it is and it's a shame: the content of work in itself is not the trade unions' cup of tea"(5).

2.2 The context of primary education reforms in France²

The reforms to primary education over the last ten years have been based on the transposition of management tools and principles used in the corporate sector to the public sector. They are intended to streamline education in order to improve productivity and value for money. These have been implemented by means of a series of root and branch reorganizations which have had an impact on the

work itself, staff numbers³, the teachers' remit, the curricula, pupil assessment methods, and provisions for children with difficulties [5].

One of the main reforms was the reduction in teaching hours. The children now receive 24 hours of lessons a week instead of 26. The two hours this has freed up are supposed to be used to provide personalized support for children with educational or behavioral issues. Despite this reduction in teaching time, the curricula have been reinforced and are increasingly demanding: Teachers are expected to teach more subjects in less time.

In order to offset the implementation of personalized support, the ministry has cut 11,000 RASED (specialized support network teacher) positions. Therefore, class teachers no longer receive any outside help to support children with difficulties, and must organize remedial work themselves.

From an educational perspective, learning is based on lecturing, learning by rote and repetition, rather than encouraging pupils to think for themselves.

Since 2005, another reform means children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream schools. This has made financial savings by limiting the number of new specialist establishments and teaching positions. However, teaching staff are not trained in dealing with these children, the extent and nature of whose disabilities vary widely.

Furthermore, the introduction of new teaching management methods has fostered a quantitative approach in what is a highly qualitative profession, mainly through the introduction of national pupil assessments. Monitoring children's performance requires the implementation of national tests and the regular recording of results by teachers, even in nursery schools.

It has also involved the setting up of a national pupil identification database (the BNIE), managed by school heads, which follows pupils over a 35-year period. As of their first year of nursery school, pupils are allocated an identification code which means their progress through the education system can be monitored through the results of systematic assessments.

Finally, financial savings have also been made by introducing policies to not systematically replace absent teachers resulting in a reduction in the number of supply teachers and the use of contract workers or

¹ FSU: Fédération Syndicale Unitaire, France's largest public-sector trade union organisation

² Whilst our action concerns both primary and secondary education, this paper concerns only the primary sector.

³ Number of teaching posts cut over the last three years: 11,200 in 2008, 13,500 in 2009, 16,000 in 2010 whilst the number of pupils has not dropped significantly.

even job seekers to fill in for absent staff, many of whom have no training.

These different reforms have resulted in the emergence of "professional conscientious objectors" [2] supported by the "disobedience" movement and of the various forms of resistance which we decided to work on in collaboration with the trade unions.

2.3 From adaptation to disobedience

In the field of ergonomics, the employee is not considered as a passive being faced with an prescription. "The activity can never be effectively accomplished by strictly adhering to the rules. At the very least these are interpreted, adjusted or relaxed, and at most, ignored or infringed." [6] The gap between the prescription and reality is acknowledged; this is what is varyingly called cheating, bending, transgressing or tinkering with the rules in order to meet the demands of the job. This is one of the subjects of their analysis.

For Clot [7], the activity should be seen "as a question and an answer to the activity of conception": "The activity is the alternative construction of the task with reference to the emergence of operating procedures which do not correspond to those set out in the definition of the task". The work activity is considered as permanent compromise: This is the "hidden face of work", managed discreetly, in the shadows. "Invisible boundaries are set out, between what is known but goes unsaid, what must be said but not done, between those who know, those who cannot see, and those who turn a blind eye" [6]. Sociologists such as Bouquin [8] describe this in slightly different terms: "Today, as in the past, rebellious subjectivity is making headway. (...) It is possible to give way without giving consent, and to do the minimum required whilst keeping up appearances. Resistance at work develops in the interstices of domination. It builds up in the little pockets of autonomy where domination is less pervasive".

However, a significant number of teachers have taken a more radical stance. Whilst modern public-sector management increasingly requires submission from its employees, they openly declare themselves as "objectors". "*I conscientiously refuse to obey! Dear inspector, I am writing this letter because today, in all conscience, I cannot remain silent! (...) I cannot in all conscience apply these reforms*" [2]. They clearly inform their line management of their refusal to implement certain reforms which contradict

their own practices, built up over years of experience, and they try to organize resistance [2, 9]. These are no longer the discreet practices implemented behind the closed doors of the classroom which ergonomists are used to working on. This is now a stance taken publicly, justified in the name of professional ethics in order to oppose what they consider to be dangerous for pupils and the future of the education system, a stance they adopt conscientiously, fully assuming the consequences. This echoes what Clot [10] called "the ethics of responsibility" which helps people to recover their ability to take action. "In France there is a fringe of indignant men and women who refuse to see their profession perverted and their ethics trampled, who refuse to submit, who oppose with all their might, as insignificant as this may be, the power of the steamroller" [5]. The case here is made for a form of ethical disobedience, an "educational disobedience" born out of the theory developed by Thoreau [11], acknowledge today as the father of civil disobedience. The consequences of this disobedience, fully assumed by the "objectors, are often severe, ranging from reprimands and sanctions (salary docked, demotion, transfer) to dismissal. "Faced with a choice between legality and legitimacy, they choose legitimacy" [5].

Our decision to highlight these different forms of resistance at work is based on the premise that they reveal a shared perception of the deterioration in working conditions and a shared refusal to accept the unacceptable, in order to uphold the values of the profession and ensure the quality of their work.

3. Method

3.1 Trade union workshops

The request from the trade unions was to implement workshops open to teachers (union members or not) to provide theoretical input on different aspects of their work, and also to encourage the participants to work collectively on their professional practices. This "work on work", aims to allow participants to discuss the changes in their profession, the conflicting approaches and contradictory imperatives which hinder their activity and are a source of suffering at work, of cognitive dissonance and of ethical dilemmas which are rarely discussed collectively. The aim is to allow them to recover their ability to take action, to engage in collective mobilization around their work and to

recreate the potential for solidarity and collective analysis by thinking through these issues. The intention is to help them change their positioning by means of an approach to their work which is removed from the activity [4-12], to focus their analysis and provide them with the tools they need to better understand the day-to-day life of teachers, their work strategies, the difficulties and impediments to taking action. This work should help them to better negotiate their working conditions with the management. In parallel to this aim in terms of labour relations, we also aim to give the participating teachers room for personal development by comparing practices and bringing them out of isolation.

The three workshops referred to herein, are offered as part of the professional and trade union training offer. They are organized by the local branches of two teacher trade union organizations which, independently of each other, both approached us with the same request. The workshops are jointly led by one or two trade union representatives and a work analysis specialist. Their titles are determined by the local branches; they primarily focus on the difficulty of work, health and work, stress, suffering at work and working patterns. They take place over one or two days.

The format varies according to the branch, some of which have specific requests. Either the session begins with an intervention by the trainer followed by debate with the participants on the basis of the presentation; or the participants first share their perspectives and the trainer then intervenes; or the workshop begins with a film chosen by the local branch, followed by discussion. It is important to maintain this flexibility in terms of organization to ensure that the work is based on that already carried out by the local branches and builds on this thinking.

In total, over 100 primary school teachers have participated in the three workshops held so far (30 – 40 participants in each workshop); more are set to be held in the coming months.

3.2 The ergonomist's role during the workshop

The ergonomist's role is to provide theoretical frameworks and understanding of the workshop's theme, to facilitate the session and debate and ensure the discussions respect certain ethical guidelines. They take up the position either of a trainer, during the theoretical input phase, or of a participatory observer during the discussion phase. . The role of

the trade union leaders, jointly running the sessions, is to take part in the debate and to encourage deeper analysis of how they establish their own perspectives on work and to question certain trade union practices.

3.3 Data collection

As we were unable to record the sessions, we wrote down, as faithfully as possible the teachers' contributions throughout the workshop, and in particular during the group discussion. We then carried out a qualitative analysis of this data, taking into account the changes in the content of the discussions throughout the duration of the workshop. We have presented this data in the form of verbatim reports.

4. Results

We will present a summary of the group work and discussions which took place on the theme of work, as well as the aspects of group dynamics which caused us difficulties.

The presentation of the results, based on the chronological order of the discussions, reflects the cognitive process proposed to the teachers regarding the issue of work. Starting from an instinctive aversion to the reforms, we guided them into a collective analysis of the changes to the profession, working strategies, the "tinkering" required to preserve the values of their profession and to do their work on a daily basis.

4.1 Mixed emotions: between anger and desperation

Two emotions permeated the group work: anger and desperation. The feeling of anger with regard to the impact of reforms and developments in the profession on their work activity is shared by experienced and newly qualified, younger and older teaching staff.

Isabelle (50 years old): Personally, I am very angry about the changes in the profession and the appalling working conditions.

Joël (40 years old): Even I feel angry, and I am normally a very calm person.

Aurélié (24 years old, 18 months of service, supply teacher for several different establishments): I am very angry about the training we receive. We get sent all over the place without proper training.

This anger results from the undermining of the profession and the profound changes to their profession over which teachers feel they have no control.

On the other hand, the feeling of desperation is born out of the difficulties they encounter in finding solutions to ensure the quality of their work, ways of countering orders from the ministry which work for each individual teacher, and the solitude in which these forms of resistance are implemented.

4.2 Consensus on the problems

Opinions flowed freely when the teachers were asked to speak about the difficulties they encounter in the work and the impact on the future of their pupils. The issues raised were broadly the same for all those present.

The teachers said that they have great difficulty managing their time given the new reforms which have multiplied the different activities and introduced a much denser curriculum. The title given to one of the workshops reflects this: "Teacher working patterns: What future for our profession?" and these comments made by participants:

Carine: There are more and more tasks to accomplish and subjects to be taught. With the increasing number of assessments, a lot more is asked of us in terms of liaison with parents. We are asked to personalize the work as much as possible which involves more preparation. This takes time and also increases our workload.

Marie: I never get time to sit down, or even to go to the toilet.

Dominique: Teachers are overworked. There is very little time to speak together and consult with each other. So we're obliged to meet together at lunchtime or in the evenings after work. The work takes precedence over everything else.

Luc: Working to tight deadlines doesn't leave time to work collaboratively. We spend more and more time discussing administrative matters, rather than speaking about our work. We don't have time to discuss how we can address certain concepts: We only ever speak about the children with severe problems. We cannot work together to create a working collective.

They highlight the increase administrative tasks, primarily related to assessments and project work.

Léa: There is more and more paperwork, I spend all my time filling out forms, it's a waste of energy and efficiency.

Guy: There are more and more administrative requirements which are completely out of touch with what happens in the classroom. These demands don't make sense. Our profession is no longer a profession! It's eating us up, and we don't even realize it.

This problem is even more acute for the heads of schools, the first point of contact for management and central administration, who combine class teacher and managerial responsibilities, but who do not always benefit from a reduction in teaching hours in order to fulfill their dual remit.

Liliane: We are constantly being asked to do new things, even from one year to the next. It's increasingly difficult to cope with and to live with. As a head in particular, everything is called into question in a short space of time. There is no time to adapt, we no longer have time to think through our work.

The gradual dismantling of the RASED structure, raises two problems for teachers: They no longer have a specialist who can help them to objectively analyze difficult situations, and they can no longer benefit from breathing space when dealing with children with behavioral disorders. The implementation of personalized support as an alternative to the RASED positions is complicated. There is a lack of resources and expertise to implement support for pupils in difficulty. This contributes to a deep-rooted sense of failure, a feeling that they are responsible for their pupils' difficulties.

The inclusion of children with disabilities also poses problems for some teachers. Their presence means an AVS (learning support assistant) has to be recruited. This raises several problems: differences in interpretation of the AVS's role may generate tensions; joint activities and collaborations which are sometimes problematic as the AVS may be more focused on the disability than educational concerns. This creates additional work for the teacher as they are obliged to find ways of ensuring the smooth running of the class.

Teachers are also highly concerned about the impact of reforms on pupils' learning. Time constraints mean they often have to gloss over the various concepts which have to be taught. This, in addition to the emphasis on learning by rote, fuels fears that pupils will no longer be able to master the thinking processes and essential knowledge they will need in their future lives.

Patricia (52 years old): We can no longer work serenely! I really cannot see how we can help our

pupils progress. I only see one thing: That we are preparing future adults who will be totally incapable of working!

It is their teaching work itself, their *raison d'être*, that the reforms undermine. This results in genuine suffering, frustration and a loss of all meaning in their work for the teachers who, despite their reservations, decide to "conform".

Lily: What we do no longer makes sense; we have no visibility on the developments in our profession, even one year ahead. Our work is to implement projects we don't believe in and carry out assessments we don't believe in, but what I want to do is work with children. I need to feel that there is some meaning in what we do. We fill out for the sake of filling out (assessments); the real work is not done or not done correctly. I actually feel like I'm just working to please an institution which does nothing with it.

This is why teachers resist as best they can "the progress of the national education bulldozer" [5], resistance which most of the time is confined to the privacy of the classroom.

4.3 The reforms which require teachers to ... "tinker"

Teachers have not met the reforms with passive resignation; they are not all in a position of "prevented activity" [7], and the more experienced they are, the less passive they are.

However, it was difficult to get the teachers to discuss their resistance strategies. They are reluctant to go beyond the observation that "the institution is

causing serious dysfunctions". Modesty, embarrassment, a fear of exposing oneself to one's colleagues, even those from other schools...the difficulties show how hard it is for trade union members to discuss their work and to adopt a controversial position with regard to their professional practices, positioning themselves as analysts of their work.

Sylvain: I don't want to discuss what I do in the classroom. I don't want to bare all to my colleagues. It's personal!

The debate which helped to name these strategies was also revealing. The use of the terms "disobey, infringe, transgress" was firmly excluded. It was unthinkable, considered as "professionally incorrect", a taboo for trade union members. The notions of "making do, tinkering, avoidance and prevention strategies" seemed to better correspond to their experiences in the classroom. After a discussion which was of particular interest as an ergonomist, a certain number of concepts (task/activity) were defined and a consensus was reached on the term "tinkering", with its less negative connotations, less focused on opposing authority.

We have identified several types of "tinkering" which are sometimes combined: – inertia – the implementation of reforms with certain modifications – the undeclared non-implementation of the prescription – and the declared non-implementation of the prescription, communicated to the person's line management. The table below contains some examples.

Table 1

The type of "tinkering"

Type of "tinkering"	Examples
Inertia	- Jacky (52 years old): Some inspectors say: "I would just like to remind you that you are supposed to do this". We discuss it: sometimes I have a justification, sometimes I don't. So I tell them: <i>"If you say so, perhaps I forgot or didn't see it. I'll make a note of it and I'll do it"</i> (...) We know there are certain fashions and certain ideas come back around from time to time. Why make changes today when we know that tomorrow they'll go back to what I'm already doing? So I wait for it to blow over and for a new minister to be appointed who goes back to the curriculum we had before. It's also a question of common sense that we build up with experience, we know there are certain things which work with the children, so we carry on". - Eveline (50 years old): (on the subject of nursery school assessments) People of my generation, we have made changes grudgingly, we have really tried to resist up until the very last moment. You know, the power of inertia, passive resistance... but there is increasing pressure from the education inspectors... so we end up giving in.
Implementation of reforms with modifications	- Léon (35 years old): The curriculum changes, evolves. Personally, I try to follow it honestly – but to the letter, no. Patricia (48 years old): I follow the curriculum, but I don't necessarily do everything. I follow it according to the children. As far as possible I try to introduce the concepts I'm supposed to introduce, but if I see that the children are not following, or if I need to go more slowly, I don't

	necessarily follow through to the end! Well, that's just too bad!
Undeclared non-implementation of the prescription	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Michelle (42 years old): "I can't get a handle on the pupil assessment forms they make us use. It's a problem for me, so I don't use them". - Manue (35 years old): At the beginning, I did the assessments; but I didn't use them to put into place remedial work. I realized that the colleague who had my students the following year didn't even read them. So I stopped doing them: They're only used to produce statistics! - Yvain (42 years old): I tinker with the assessment data because if we follow the correction criteria, we end up penalizing pupils who know things. Sometimes I mark them up. - Annie (38 years old): They want figures, I give them figure, without even doing the assessments!
Declared non-implementation of the prescription	- Annick (56 years old): I have never filled in the national assessment booklet we're supposed to give to the parents! I have my own system of assessment: I've always had my own sheets with my ticks and my points. At the last inspection, I showed the inspector my assessment sheets. On my last inspection report, it's written: " <i>Mrs E. does not give out the assessment booklet</i> ". So she advised me, told me how to do it! They're not taken in either; not the clever ones! And I also didn't do it out of sheer laziness, because the last two years, I just didn't want to do it!

More experienced teachers, and those reaching the end of their career find it easier to talk about this "tinkering", which they justify on the basis of the values of their profession, and their professional expertise. As observed in other professions, youngest follow prescriptions more closely as they have no previous situation with which to compare them and have been molded to conform from the outset.

However, the most experienced teachers are not comfortable speaking about their "tinkering" with newly-qualified teachers who, due to the dismantling of teacher training in favor of master's courses, have to learn on the job and seek support and guidance from their colleagues.

- Michelle (54 years old): I sometimes have scruples about discussing my tinkering with younger colleagues, because we're sending them to slaughter.

More than mere scruples, it is feelings of guilt that are expressed by experienced teachers, in particular those at the end of their career, guilt that they are unable to defend their profession or change the course of reform, when they possess the experience which could call into question the relevance of the reforms.

However, resistance is difficult and there is intense pressure from the inspectors. Sanctions can be imposed; the inspections which award points for career development are a particularly effective means for putting on the pressure.

4.4 Short-term tinkering is unsatisfactory in the long term

Whilst this tinkering is considered indispensable, it is nonetheless far from satisfactory in terms of

professional ethics. Teachers are expected to unconditionally adhere to the rules, yet in the name of their professional values and experience, they find themselves having to bend the rules. This puts them in a paradoxical position which is difficult to maintain in the long term and has an impact on their mental health and how they see their future.

Sylvie (40 years old): The difficulty in recent times is not the issue of "tinkering". Either you decide to oppose, or you do something, but you can't go on like that for 30 years. I am fed up! I'm not going to lie for 30 years; I don't want to pretend. I don't have the wherewithal to keep this up in the long term. In the duration, it'll weigh me down.

This trade union member highlights the limitations of these "personal adjustment" strategies which do not fundamentally change the work and are a heavy burden on mental health. She raises the issue of exhaustion, professional fatigue, burnout and psychological suffering in the long term. She invites us to question more fundamentally the work, the relevance of the prescriptions and imperatives in a more collective manner, and for the trade unions to position themselves in opposition to what the "objectors" call the "dismantling of the national education system". This echoes the contribution of a recently retired trade union member:

Ginette (60 years old): The only way out of this situation is by collective action, otherwise they'll all become totally depressed! (...) I don't know exactly how it will all blow up, but I do know that it will blow up! It's a certainty! It's not possible to carry on like this! There is a very strong sense of unrest. And there is also some misplaced pride, because it's wrong to say that we can get anywhere if everyone just does their own thing in their own corner.

4.5 Reforms which push teachers into disobeying and/or wanting to leave the profession

The contributions of the participants at the end of their career were often tinged with bitterness and disillusionment: *"I no longer recognize myself in my work."* Indeed these changes seem to affect the very meaning of their activity. This is one of the main arguments that lead to teachers deciding to take early retirement.

- Yves: I have colleagues at the end of their career who are leaving or people who want to leave and very quickly, and that wasn't the case before where the pleasure of the job was much more palpable.
- Claude (53 year): Personally, now, I want to jump ship as soon as possible.

However, increasing numbers of younger teachers, aged between 30 – 40 years old, disappointed with the changes to the profession, say they are considering a career change.

- Alex (30 years old): I can't see myself doing this for my whole life in these conditions.
- Pierre (34 years old): I have ten years experience and am already fed up.

The dominant reasons behind this desire to leave the profession are concerns regarding mental health.

5. Discussion

Reforms to the education system have introduced far-reaching changes to the curriculums, pedagogical approaches, and the teachers' remit (remedial work through the provision for personalized support for pupils in difficulty): work intensification is a problem raised by all teachers. These reforms require teachers to adopt approaches based on assessment and the traceability of the activity of both teachers and pupils, and to adhere to values of performance and profitability, previously unheard of in this profession. However, teachers are resistant to the introduction of industrial constraints to their profession which they consider to be in total contradiction to their public service remit, the values of their profession which they have built in over time and the learning process of which they are a key part.

The unrest amongst teachers centers around the concept of "quality of service". The absence of debate between stakeholders in the education system on the notion of "quality of work" has led to resistance strategies developed with varying degrees of openness vis-à-vis the management.

During the workshops, we also observed that it is the more experienced teachers who claim to exercise the most resistance to certain reforms through their daily practices, justifying their refusal to implement them by their experience of reforms (none of which have had their impact assessed) and the high cost of changing practices at the end of a career. They highlight the lack of consideration for their skills and professional expertise when preparing changes⁴. The teachers want their work activity and their analysis of the issues faced to be taken into consideration when drawing up reforms.

They are torn between implementing reforms they don't believe in and circumventing prescriptions, or even refusing to follow them in the name of professional ethics. This is particularly difficult for them as they consider themselves as the *"good little soldiers of the State"*: *"I am a civil servant; we are there to implement the prescriptions from our ministry"* explained one teacher.

However, discussions during the workshops revealed that many teachers disobey the rules laid down by the inspectors, cheat during inspections, simultaneously implement unofficial prescriptions in order to ensure learning, and sometimes simply do not do what they are asked. These modifications are generally implemented individually and discreetly: Collective strategies negotiated with the management are rare⁵. They are usually confined to the privacy of the classroom, often shared with parents, and sometimes shared with colleagues within the school.

However, "When they battle with their conscience alone and tinker in secrecy in order to resist, it is also because they feel there is no-one they can approach in their trade union who is interested in this new form of suffering", suggests Weisman [5]. It is the taboo, unspoken side of their work, the unthought of work and trade union action. These individual initiatives highlight the difficulty the trade unions have in dealing with work issues and in making pro-active propositions to the decision-makers in the national education system. According to Clot [7], "There is a lot of wasted energy that builds up in today's work. This energy could be channeled into trade unionism if the trade unions were a forum for professional debate

⁴ The reforms are not the result of co-construction with teachers; they are drawn up by specialists in education sciences who do not have classroom responsibilities.

⁵ In one *departement* (local administrative area), the participants told us about a collective negotiation with an inspector to reduce the number of administrative documents that have to be filled out.

on the quality of work, an indispensable tool for "treating" the work". However, this is not currently the case, although the workshops in which we have participated are a first step towards this.

However, these individual means of regulation have their limitations. The feeling of professional effectiveness, on which the person's subjective relationship to work is based, depends on the satisfaction derived from implementing these compromises, from this "tinkering". "The subjects cannot develop or maintain reasons to act and persevere in the face of adversity unless they believe that by their actions they can obtain the results they want." [13]. However, in the current climate, teachers wear themselves out trying to find solutions, and are fed up of having to cheat in order to cope with the reforms, whilst ensuring the quality of their work. This explains why certain teachers consider leaving the profession prematurely [14]. These escape strategies run counterpoint to the actions of the "objectors" who seek to remain in place as long as possible in order to change the course of the reforms from the inside.

6. Critical evaluation against our approach and areas for further research

This co-construction of training courses on work, carried out in collaboration with the unions, seems to have been useful, as in 2010, Y. Baunay wrote the following: "An increasing number of sessions have been held to look at the issue of work and have produced knowledge which is useful in understanding work and related issues, and useful with regard to its transformation. These sessions have helped to change perspectives on work and its representations. They have highlighted the urgent need to implement actions to transform the work, involving all stakeholders in the education system, which allow the employees to have their say" [4]. The fact that we have received an increasing number of requests from local branches to hold workshops is a further indicator of the interest such initiatives generate, and the fact that they respond to the needs in the classroom.

However, our action (short interventions at varying intervals) is merely the start of the trade union's work which must be continued and built on. It represents a starting point, intended to show trade unionists the importance of focusing on the analysis of work in order to tackle dysfunctions and health problems, as

well as the importance of a collective approach to these issues. The aim is to help them stop wringing their hands and start developing forms of collective resistance built on professional expertise, the skills of teaching staff and to offer them guidance in developing their trade union activity. This will allow them to position themselves as credible stakeholders, capable of debating work and participating in the changes to the profession, and give them the resources to respond to the needs of their colleagues in the classroom. On countless occasions throughout the workshops the participants expressed their feelings of helplessness when faced with their colleagues' problems and the depression or even suicides of their peers.

This change of approach can only be achieved by implementing a research-training-action approach as carried out by Chassaing & *al.* [15-16] in the car manufacturing sector. One of the trade unions with which we have been working for the last 4 years has said they are ready to embark on this approach.

7. Conclusion

This work has a broader interest in terms of the role ergonomists can play in the deep-rooted changes affecting the world of work.

In the light of the new neo-liberal governance currently being put into place throughout the French civil service, the ergonomists working in this field are increasingly concerned with the deterioration in working conditions, the undermining of the meaning of work, the lack of consideration for employees' skills, and the impact on their physical, mental and psychological health [12-16-17-18].

Supporting the trade unions as they grapple with the issue of work, is a matter of ethical urgency but it is also a political act. When taking such a stance, it is important however to be aware of the potential instrumentalization of the ergonomist and to keep a certain distance from the trade union's project: The intention is not become a substitute for the stakeholders themselves.

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