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## The Struggling State

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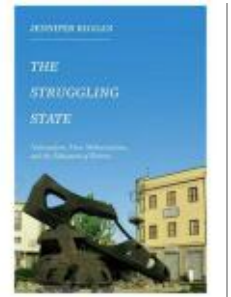
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## Students or Soldiers?

*Troubled State Technologies and the Imagined  
Future of Educated Eritrea*

### Cowboy Hats and New Curriculum

A couple of days after I arrived in Eritrea in August 2003, I ran into two friends who were elementary school teachers. With a grin they asked me, “Jenni, have you heard? They are going to give us horses and cowboy hats when we teach!” We shared a hearty laugh about that. They were referencing the workshop they were attending on what teachers dubbed the “new curriculum.” Teachers who were in Asmara to attend end-of-summer teacher training sessions were under the impression that they were being trained to implement a curriculum based on Texas’s standards-based curriculum,<sup>1</sup> although no one knew exactly what that meant or what was Texan about the curriculum. No one was taking it seriously. I heard a version of this same joke repeated over the coming weeks and even months later.

But after that summer, no one mentioned Texas. Several months later, when I conducted interviews with Ministry of Education officials and specifically asked about Texas, they refused to acknowledge that it was more than a passing influence. And yet teachers were aware enough of it that they made jokes about cowboy hats. In fact, prior to my arrival in Eritrea, I had seen several e-mails calling for consultants who could adapt Eritrea’s curriculum to the Texas standards. I never did find out what happened to Texas, but once the school year started, it turned out to be irrelevant.

Teachers were accustomed to new policies being introduced and then either sluggishly implemented or never fully implemented at all. Educational policies, it was often said, like laws in Eritrea more generally, were “written in pencil.” They were reflective of someone’s *idea* of what education should be but so disconnected from the material reality of overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and lack of materials that they were impossible to implement. The jokes about cowboy hats, on one level, were a commentary on the lack of capacity to implement new policies and the misfits between these policies and the lack of resources in schools.

However, while certain components of the policies introduced in 2003 were weakly implemented, other components were anything but. These policies were far more comprehensive than any previous policy reforms—they applied to all subjects, all grade levels, and even the system of higher education as a whole. They were intended to radically change curriculum, course offerings, pedagogy, and promotion policies. They restructured secondary and tertiary education. Indeed, these policies did radically change the education system, but not in the ways denoted by policy documents. This chapter explores these 2003 policy reforms, the differences between policy reforms on paper and in practice, and how these radical policy changes revealed competing visions of the ideal Eritrean citizen. Teachers struggled to make sense of these new policies and reconcile them with long-held beliefs about the meaning of education and its potential to bring about a bright future for the nation. What was revealed in this process was the complex micropolitics of making meaning out of education. As technologies of the state shifted away from teachers’ disciplinary focus on producing a small cohort of educated, elite individuals and toward the government’s biopolitical emphasis on producing a nationwide mass of student-soldiers, inconsistencies emerged. Teachers and students continued to assert their own beliefs about what education meant and to argue that changing educational priorities would result in profound consequences for the nation.

### **A Bright Future?**

The education reforms had many facets, but the most radical was to seamlessly integrate the education system with military training and National Service by requiring all grade 12 students to attend school at a boarding facility in Sawa, the location of the military training center, where they would complete the first part of military training prior to their final year of high school. Students would enlist in National Service prior to grade 12, by virtue of moving to Sawa and beginning military training. Prior to

the implementation of the 2003 policies, students were required only to go to Sawa for military training and enter National Service after they either turned eighteen or completed the highest year of education for which they qualified, whichever came last. Previously, students entered into secondary school, were promoted each year of secondary school, and then qualified for university by passing rigorous exams. Under the new policies, students took a selective exam to enter into secondary schools, but after that all students were mass promoted through each year and went to Sawa for their final year of high school. From there, they were given exams to qualify for higher education; those who did not pass seamlessly entered the military, while those who did were assigned to National Service as teachers or civil servants when they completed their education.

It is well known that schools either directly or indirectly, officially or unofficially, by design or by default, prepare students for particular economic, political, and social roles once they complete their schooling (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Foucault 1995; Levinson and Holland 1996).<sup>2</sup> The 2003 reforms changed the ways in which educated Eritreans were prepared for these roles in two ways. First, the reforms made military service a prerequisite for completing secondary school and moving on to higher education. Second, military service effectively became a direct consequence for students' failure to qualify for tertiary education. This altered both the imagined and actual life course of educated people and had implications for how the nation, national duty, and state were imagined.

There are inherent tensions between the "bright future" of being an educated person and the bleak future of being a military subject, which we can better understand by examining how educated persons are culturally produced, particularly in the developing world, where education is available to very few and educated people tend to see themselves as a somewhat exceptional, valued, and valuable elite. Educational development and expansion are integral to developmentalist aspirations at both the personal and national levels. In much of the postcolonial world, schooling—particularly secondary and tertiary schooling—is a scarce resource, accessible to very few and oriented toward producing not just a national subject but a national elite who comes to think of him- or herself as an educated person destined to play a particular role in developing the nation (Levinson 2001; Stambach 2000).<sup>3</sup> In Eritrea, educated people were thought to not only possess particular skills but also be endowed with particular moral attributes that would enable them to lead society. The perceived superiority of educated people in terms of skills, morality, and responsibility is a key part of how the educated national subject is constituted in much of

the developing world, and it is a traditionally prevalent view in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Education produces a teleological imaginary of the nation—an imagined past but also an imagined, aspirant future and, most importantly, a sense of the role of educated people in bringing this future into being (Kaplan 2006; Stambach 2000). The hopes for progress and prosperity in the future of the nation are cultivated through education and the processes of producing educated subjects. Students are, in theory, endowed with particular skills and knowledge to provide the human capital to bring this imagined future into being, but they are also taught to think of themselves as doing this for the nation (Benei 2008; Kaplan 2006; Levinson 2001).

In contrast, the military is the instrument of sovereignty, defense, and violence. If one of the key roles of educational institutions is to produce national subjects who can imagine a brighter future for the nation and help bring that future into being, one of the key roles of military institutions is to produce a sense of the might and power of the nation and national subjects willing to kill or die to defend the nation. The military is responsible for protecting and defending the territorial state, the people within it, and the values that the nation is imagined to stand for. Soldiers, the national subjects produced through processes of militarized nationalism, are symbolic of the state, responsible for its defense, and victims of state violence (Bickford 2011; Macleish 2013). As symbols, they represent the state's protective, paternalistic capacity and its capacity for violence. They represent patriotism at the height of its passions—the willingness to kill, hurt, and die for the highest ideals of the nation. But the lived experience of *being* a soldier is often at odds with what the soldier symbolizes. Being a soldier is often marked by the trauma associated with suffering or perpetrating violence, harsh living conditions, a lack of control over one's daily existence, and the general invisibility of soldiers to society overall (Macleish 2013). Somewhat ironically, while soldiers as symbols are celebrated and venerated, soldiers as people are disposable (Macleish 2013)—bare life, in Giorgio Agamben's (1998) terms. They are allowed to die to defend the nation. But soldiers are also sovereign in Carl Schmitt's ([1922] 2005) and Agamben's (1998) sense that the sovereign is the one who “decides on the exception” or decides when to apply violence and to what extent.

The teleological orientation of education thus clashes with the sacrificial orientation of the soldier. In Eritrea, government employees, bureaucrats, and officials themselves seemed aware of the fact that while both were essential for nation-state making, experiences of being militarized and being educated were radically different. Citizens in Eritrea and elsewhere imagine

education as bringing promise, while the military brings pain. Educated subjects think of themselves as having power to shape the nation, while militarized subjects must think of themselves as giving up power over their own survival in the name of the nation.

This student-soldier was a very different kind of national subject than the educated citizen imagined by teachers and students. These educated people thought that the attributes, character, and life trajectory of a student subject should be distinct from that of a soldier. This is not to say that teachers and students believed that educated people should be free of responsibilities to defend the country or fulfill their duty in National Service. Indeed, most teachers had either fought or trained to fight during the border war, and most would argue that it was their duty to defend the country in times of crisis. But in peacetime, the outlook of these educated people was that the student subject must be able to envision an imagined future distinct from that of the soldier.

As I discuss in more detail below, when I asked teachers what was wrong with the new educational policies, they repeatedly said that students no longer had a “bright future” and asserted that a “bright future” was necessary to motivate them to work hard and do well in school. Exploring the way teachers imagined this bright future, and perceived that it was endangered, helps explain how the relationship between the nation and the state was recalibrated at this particularly complex time for Eritrean schools. For Eritrean teachers, “bright future” referenced a particular way of imagining the future of the nation *and* of the individual students, and it depicted a particular relationship between national subjects and the nation. Teachers believed that for the future of the nation to be bright, the future of the students had to be bright, and vice versa. In this particular moment, the future for educated people seemed bleak rather than bright.

## The Rapid Transformation of Eritrean Education

The official rationale for new policies in Eritrea was to increase the overall level of education, with level defined as the number of students who had *completed* high school. Other elements of the reforms emphasized more pragmatic education with an emphasis on skill building. But ultimately, in its moment of transition, the new package of policies implemented in 2003 created an entirely new pathway through which students were channeled into the military while they were still students, replacing the imagined “bright future” of being educated with the bleakness of a military future. The main aims of the reforms are summarized in the draft document out-

lining the “Rapid Transformation of the Eritrean Education System” (Ministry of Education 2002a):

Now the time is ripe for the Eritrean government to make all the necessary changes and reforms it needs to make so that the Eritrean educational system would measure up to the needs of the country to produce manpower necessary to propel it forward as a viable and vivacious nation of the twenty-first century. The reforms that should be introduced must achieve the following:

- a) All wastage of manpower, resources, effort and time in the educational system must be abolished in as much as it is humanly possible.
- b) All doors and opportunities must be open to Eritreans of all ages to develop to their full potential both professionally and personally.
- c) Education must be employment oriented such that at the end of any level of education any person can find gainful employment commensurate with the person’s level of education or training.
- d) The standards and quality of education and training in the educational system must be high enough such that products of the educational system would have a high degree of acceptability in the international arena of education and employment.

To meet these goals and make the Eritrean education system simultaneously efficient, pragmatic, internationally competitive, and high quality, a plan detailed the following changes. The overall emphasis of these changes was twofold—to make education more oriented toward job skills and to expand access to education. Education would become job oriented through the addition of certain subjects, such as IT and home economics, and by emphasizing learner-centered pedagogies. Over the course of the coming fifteen years, Eritrea planned to build more schools at all levels, develop regional vocational colleges, and implement new curricula in all grades and subjects (Ministry of Education 2002b). Additionally, at the tertiary level, there were plans to build six new colleges. Finally, the new policy changes also radically changed the structure of secondary education and promotion policies. Grade 12 was added as the final year of Senior Secondary School, but, as I have noted before, it was offered only at a boarding facil-

ity in Sawa. Elementary schools continued to teach grades 1–5, and Junior Secondary Schools continued to teach grades 6–8. All Senior Secondary Schools around the country offered grades 9–11. And all students went to Sawa for grade 12.

Before and after the reforms, education was, in theory, open to everyone up to grade 8, although Junior Secondary Schools were not available in all areas and some students chose to withdraw from school before grade 8, usually for financial or family reasons. In grade 8, students would take an exam to determine whether they qualified for Senior Secondary School. Promotion levels between grades in Junior Secondary School and between Junior and Senior Secondary Schools remained largely unchanged. Admission to Senior Secondary Schools had always been extremely competitive, but there was also intense competition between grades. Many students flunked out between grades, and many others did not make it to university. In 2000, only 9 percent of Eritrea's Senior Secondary School–aged youth attended school at that level, only 55 percent of students who entered Senior Secondary School had the opportunity to sit for the matriculation exam, and only 10 to 15 percent of those had the chance to go on to some form of higher education (Ministry of Education 2002a).

New promotion policies sought to ensure that once students passed the grade 8 exam and entered into Senior Secondary School, they would complete grade 12. They would begin military training in the summer before grade 12, complete grade 12 in Sawa, and take the matriculation exam. If they passed the matriculation exam, they would gain admittance into one of the new colleges and then complete National Service after their schooling in a professional capacity. If they did not score well on the matriculation exam, they would go into National Service immediately and would likely serve in the military.

Despite the fact that the military component of the new policies was the most strongly implemented, it is largely unarticulated in policy documents, where the merging of military training gets only a brief mention. The Ministry of Education policy document that outlines the change in educational policies mentions the integration of summer service and National Service with secondary education only briefly toward the end (Ministry of Education 2002b):

According to the new recommended education system, the students start to branch out into different fields of study starting from Senior Secondary School. This allows for students to take military training as electives. So, most or all of the six months' training of



the National Service that Eritreans have to undertake can be incorporated into the Senior Secondary School education program. For example, students can take military training as elective courses during the school year when they are in the eleventh and twelfth grades. This combined with field training during two summers at the end of their eleventh and twelfth grade school years should enable them to complete all the military training they are supposed to get in the National Service. Actually, the training they acquire this way should be much better because they would have more time for theoretical military training in the classroom and they have a longer time in general to seep in their training both physically and mentally. Some Senior Secondary Schools in the USA actually have such programs.

Interestingly, while this clearly states the ideal of merging military training with secondary education, such as exists elsewhere, it suggests that this is an elective, an option, painting quite a different picture of how the military would be embedded in secondary education. In contrast, military training was a required component of education and was experienced as being forced on students.

There is a striking difference between the policy priorities stated in documents and the way these policies were actually implemented. As with previous policy changes, many remained changes on paper only, or changes weakly implemented. Meanwhile, other components of the policy were not just implemented but expanded.

New courses and the promotion of learner-centered pedagogies were never fully put into practice. The Ministry of Education introduced new curriculum in select grades, and a selection of teachers from all grades were trained in learner-centered pedagogies; however, the new textbooks were not available in any of the subjects in the Junior and Senior Secondary Schools by the time I completed fieldwork in 2005. Teachers generally disliked and distrusted the oversimplified content of the new curriculum. Furthermore, they balked at what was communicated to them as a prohibition on lecturing. “They told us we are forbidden to lecture,” one teacher complained to me. Initially teachers blamed the adoption of a “foreign” curriculum for the policies’ ineffectiveness and commented that what worked in Texas would not necessarily work in Eritrea. Teachers were also concerned because it seemed that, in the absence of textbooks, there actually was no curriculum; instead, there was a set of vague guidelines that they were told were loosely based on the Texas standards. A train-the-trainer model was implemented whereby a few teachers were trained in the capital and then would give similar training

to the rest of the teachers in their schools; however, these training sessions tended to be poorly attended. While teachers were given a stipend to attend the train-the-trainer training in Asmara, the local training sessions carried no such stipend. The fact that teachers were paid very little if at all meant that there was much bitterness and jealousy about who got to attend training in Asmara. In fact, teachers spoke of training as a chance to earn much-needed extra income rather than as a chance to gain professional skills. This meant that training sessions in Asmara were much coveted, while training sessions in local sites stirred up resentment. Additionally, teaching materials required for learner-centered pedagogy, such as lab equipment, manipulables, and even library books, were often nonexistent or in short supply, making many new subjects and new activities impossible to implement. Despite these limitations, many teachers experimented with learner-centered pedagogies. I witnessed some very creative attempts to do lab experiments and science demonstrations with large classes and few materials. I also observed history, geography, and English teachers engaging students in debates and discussion activities with some interesting results. But overall, there was no mechanism to enforce the implementation of these “new” methods, and teachers tended to teach in ways that were familiar, comfortable, and effective given the constraints of class size and resource scarcity.

The teaching of new subjects did not fare any better than the attempt to change pedagogy. The situation in the Senior Secondary School in Assab was typical for many such schools. Memos would come through mandating that schools offer new subjects, such as IT and home economics. The director would diligently change the weekly schedule to incorporate the new subjects, but then no teachers arrived to teach those subjects. Existing teachers were then assigned to teach the subjects, but they lacked materials and training to do so. The teacher assigned to teach IT barely knew how to use a computer himself and had only one computer to wheel to class with him. One teacher, whom the students commonly regarded as a buffoon, taught the home economics class infrequently and irregularly. After an unqualified teacher had been attempting to teach a new subject for a few weeks, inevitably another memo would arrive cancelling the subject. One semester, the director had to change the roster four times as he dutifully tried to comply with mandates for which he had no resources. Eventually the Ministry of Education agreed that schools did not have the resources and retroactively advised them to cancel the new subjects. By the end of each school year, only the traditional subjects were taught. As a result, students never took new subjects seriously. These classes were poorly attended, and students who did attend were even more poorly behaved.

In contrast, several elements of the new policy were stringently implemented. First, the government opened the Warsai Yikaalo School in Sawa immediately. The first class of high school–aged students in that school completed grade 11 in spring 2004. Almost immediately after the 2003–2004 school year ended, the government arranged for buses to take students to Sawa to begin military training, and, despite a somewhat-delayed start to the school year, they began grade 12 the following fall.

Second, the tertiary education system was also overhauled, although popular perception of these changes differed significantly from the rationale for the redesign of the system. There was a common belief that the government was trying to destroy the University of Asmara. Many believed that this was out of anger toward the students who had protested in 2002. Beginning in 2003 and going until each class had graduated, the university did not enroll new first-year students. At the same time, in 2002, a new college in Mai Nefhi was opened, and in the years that followed, other colleges were opened around the country. Once all students had graduated from the University of Asmara, it was temporarily closed and then reopened to house one of these new colleges, but this college was one of a network of colleges and did not have the same symbolic significance as the national university had. Although the university was not immediately or officially closed, the failure to admit new students to the university was generally believed to be the beginning of the end of the university and all that it represented. At the time, there was little faith that these new colleges could equal the University of Asmara in quality or stature. Many Eritreans believed that this new higher-education structure was a government effort to destroy the national university. Subsequently, teachers and students believed that the role of Senior Secondary Schools was fundamentally altered. Senior Secondary Schools would no longer funnel students into the university, once the pinnacle of the education system, but instead into Sawa. As of 2015, seven colleges exist around the country, and students who pass the matriculation exam currently move from the Warsai Yikaalo School in Sawa into these various colleges, thereby integrating the military/National Service system with the education system (NOKUT 2013). Students moving into tertiary education have to do so via Sawa and military training. They then move from tertiary education into National Service.

Finally, the policy of “avoiding wastage” by changing promotion policies was implemented very seriously, although with complex results. The policies implemented in 2003 mandated that all Senior Secondary School students should be promoted from grade to grade, and all should be given the chance to sit for the matriculation exam. By the end of the 2003–2004 school year,

Senior Secondary School teachers understood that students should not fail. Almost all grade 11 students passed to grade 12; this was accomplished by simplifying the curriculum but also by changing the role of the teacher. Teachers who previously created competitive conditions designed to weed out large numbers of students were now responsible for enabling students to pass.

Subtle and not-so-subtle messages made it clear to teachers that they were to ensure that their students were promoted. The new policies mandated limited student failures; however, initially teachers and school administrators were confused as to how to pass students. Prior to 2003, students who “failed” for the year would repeat the grade the following year. Students who failed a second time had to withdraw from school.<sup>4</sup> Following the policy changes, teachers and students were initially told that students who failed would be required to take a summer make-up class (for which they would pay) and to pass a “re-sit” exam before being promoted to the next grade. However, during the two years of my fieldwork, the school did not offer a make-up class, few students took the re-sit exam, and all of those who did, passed to the next grade.

Despite the initial confusion, it quickly became clear that the government was serious about enforcing the policy intended to promote students. To ensure that students would not fail, in spring 2004 the Ministry of Education dropped the grade necessary to pass from 60 percent to 50 percent, and again in spring 2005 from 50 percent to 40 percent, meaning that almost all students passed. Because mass promotion coincided with sending grade 11 students to Sawa, teachers, parents, and students interpreted dropping the promotion grade as a government technique to enlist as many students as possible in National Service.

Meanwhile, in grade 8, many students actually feared passing, because failure in the Junior Secondary School was a means to avoid being sent to Sawa. As I noted above, education was open to everyone through the Junior Secondary School level (grade 8). At the end of grade 8, students took a national examination to determine whether they would be promoted to Senior Secondary School. However, there was no uniformly implemented policy that determined how many times grades could be repeated in the Junior Secondary School. In the absence of a clear policy regarding promotion at this level of education, increasingly large numbers of students, particularly students who knew they would not be promoted to Senior Secondary School, were failing and repeating grades year after year as a means to avoid entering into National Service. These students, according to teachers, were not interested in learning or being students but merely using schooling as a means to evade service.

Taken together, these three policy changes—the change in promotion policies, the changes to tertiary education, and the addition of grade 12 in Sawa—altered the way schools prepared students for the future and transformed the future for which students were being prepared. It was difficult for teachers to understand why the government would undermine what they saw as a functioning education system by simplifying the curriculum and promoting most students. The fact that everyone was sent to Sawa for military training made teachers even more skeptical of the government’s “real” motivations in changing promotion policies. Although some teachers understood and supported the logic of helping weaker students and avoiding wastage by making sure all students learned, most believed that this clashed with their educational values of rigor and competition and undermined their primary role of cultivating elite students for participation in university. The University of Asmara was effectively being closed and students were simultaneously being mass promoted via the grade 12 boarding school in Sawa into the military, which meant that teachers became even more skeptical of the government’s motivations. They questioned whether the government really cared about education. The fact that certain components of the reforms were weakly implemented (new textbooks for the new curriculum, an adequate number of teachers, substantial teacher training, and materials for the new subjects were not provided) while those most closely affiliated with militarization were strongly implemented further fueled mistrust in the government’s motivations. As I illustrate below, it was generally perceived that what motivated the government to “avoid wastage” and institute policies of mass promotion was its desire to enlist all educated people more efficiently in National Service. Schooling had been reduced to a conduit for producing soldiers.

### **Students or Soldiers?**

Eritrean teachers and students were quick to assume that the government’s implementation of new educational policies was merely about producing soldiers. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front/People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (EPLF/PFDJ) has a long history of subsuming education into the military. During the struggle for liberation, education as a strategy of nation building went hand in hand with fighting to defend the nation (Gottesman 1998). The EPLF always prioritized education, and as soon as resources were available it ensured that recruits in the liberation forces were literate (Gottesman 1998; Müller 2005, 2007; Pool 2001). Additionally, it implemented literacy campaigns in liberated areas and set up schools (Gottesman 1998). In

Chapters 1 and 2, I showed how pivotal military identities were to a sense of being Eritrean, but these military identities meant something quite different for Eritrea's leaders, most of whom were fighters in the struggle for liberation, and for ordinary Eritreans, especially educated Eritreans.

The revolutionary front's ideal of merging "fighting and learning," to borrow Les Gottesman's (1998) term, never quite took hold in the post-independence years. During this time, many Eritreans revered and celebrated the figure of the fighter as liberator of the country, but these same Eritreans were not necessarily keen to become that revered figure. As I discussed in the last chapter, once the government started forcing everyone into indefinite terms of National Service, the meaning of being a fighter changed. Fighters no longer represented the national value of sacrifice but were instead seen as punished figures. While Eritreans might have venerated fighters in the postliberation years, they now experienced being a soldier as a punishment. At the same time, the inevitability of almost everyone becoming a fighter/soldier threatened educated people, because this was the antithesis to a "bright future" for both the individual and for the nation. Being a fighter indicated a future of endless sacrifice as one waited, ever ready to defend a country that might be plunged into conflict at any moment.

For teachers, who had always tried to help students imagine a bright future for themselves and the nation, the policies signaled an attack on what they thought of as their nation-building work—to produce a motivated, educated person who would build the nation through example, by having a nice life, and by contributing to society by virtue of being educated. Educated people believed that the government regarded them as a threat. The president in particular developed a reputation for being "anti-education." On several occasions, I heard teachers complain that the president never attended a graduation ceremony at the University of Asmara, yet he never failed to attend the graduation of each group of recruits at Sawa. Another subtle but reoccurring critique that I often heard throughout my fieldwork was that the country was being run not by educated people but by fighters who had gotten their education in the field. Teachers often questioned the legitimacy of educational administrators who had received their education in one of the many schools set up for fighters during The Struggle. This challenge to the legitimacy of fighters, whom teachers regarded as uneducated, set up a contrast between two forms of education—that of soldiers and that of formally educated people.

As I noted earlier, the dominant, official version of Eritrean nationalism asserted that being Eritrean was defined through the values inherited from the struggle for liberation, values that were to be embodied by the lived

experiences of all Eritreans, particularly through National Service. Those who fought in The Struggle, and particularly those who were in leadership positions, would argue that Eritrea's indigenous education originated in The Struggle. The director general of General Education emphasized the importance of teaching these values to produce students willing to defend the country:

This [new policy] is modern. At the same time, it has some elements of the *indigenous situation*. In general, we are transforming the education system in terms of content, and at the same time this transformation takes place in the attitude of the child. . . . Let me give you an example [of] modernity: We have to introduce information technology. This is one of the aspects of the modern. *At the same time, we also have our own values that we should give to the society. These values are inherited from the armed struggle.* We want to build on that so this will be one of the subjects incorporated into civics education. (Interview, Director General of General Education; emphasis added)

Teaching the values of The Struggle was seen as an essential component of producing an Eritrean student who was willing to defend his or her country and make sacrifices for it. In the following quotation from the director of Quality Management, an Eritrean's love for his or her country is characterized primarily through a willingness to defend and sacrifice for the country:

We want to make students who love their country, who love work, who love their people, and who are willing to defend their country. . . . And the whole idea behind civics education is about doing this. We provide civics education, we provide [the] history of Eritrea, we provide [the] geography of Eritrea, we teach about the liberation struggle, and we bombard the child from all sides, and the whole idea is to produce a student who loves their country, who is ready to defend their country, who is willing to sacrifice. (Interview, Director of Quality Management Division, Ministry of Education)

The merging of love of country, love of work, willingness to defend the country, and values of The Struggle, as articulated by the director of the Quality Management Division in the Ministry of Education—himself a former fighter—mirrored the rationale for National Service itself. As Gaim Kibreab (2009b) notes in his discussion of National Service, the institution

was set up not only to defend the country but also to instill in youth a “love of work” and the values of National Service. In fact, Kibreab (2009b) quotes President Isaias Afewerki in the *Eritrean Profile* in 1994, when National Service was instituted, as using the phrase “love of work.” Furthermore, as Kibreab notes, the proclamation that set up National Service outlines its key goals, including (1) establish a defense force; (2) pass on the “courage, resoluteness and heroic episodes of the last thirty years”; (3) “create a new generation characterized by love of work”; and (4) promote economic development and national unity (GoE 1995). The ideal Eritrean citizen, as defined by officials in the Ministry of Education, directly mirrored this language in the National Service charter and also resonated with other official accounts of what it means to be Eritrean.

In contrast, for teachers, the ideal citizen revolved around notions of morality, knowledge, and respect. Teachers’ discussions of their role in making students into citizens focused less on helping students develop a willingness to sacrifice for and defend their country and more on having “a great responsibility to make citizens, to make them knowledgeable and respectful of society” (Interview, Yakob). Being a good citizen was equated with morality. As another teacher reflected, “The teacher should try to mold the students as a good citizen of the nation. How do they become a good citizen to the nation? We have to introduce some moral values into the minds of the students” (Interview, Estifanos). Teachers saw themselves as shaping students to make the nation a better place:

When I started teaching, I got very much interested. I found that it’s a very noble profession, and a desire in me started—I should produce better children for our nation. . . . You see, to build a nation, it’s in the hands of the teacher, so we can produce such children for the nation. Those [children] themselves *are* the nation. I think the teacher is the luckiest person, whose work is to shape a child. We know what is good and what is bad. We just concentrate on the good things, not only teaching what is there in the lesson. The teacher has in his hand the development of the child. He is like a potter. If he shapes it in his hands, he makes its shape. He decides if he wants it to be narrow or round. The teacher is very lucky to have this chance. If I teach two plus two is five, he learns five. If I say it is four, he believes four. It is in the hands of the teacher. (Interview, Arvind)

These were common sentiments among all teachers: The student was a moral blank slate, an unformed lump of clay who needed to be taught to



distinguish right from wrong. Rather than being prepared to sacrifice for the nation, children “[were] the nation.” Thus, for the nation to be good, the child had to be made good. The notion that the students were the nation reflected the ideal, common among educated people, that the future of the nation was reflected in the future of its educated people. This posed a direct contrast with notions of soldier-citizenship, in which the future was sacrificed for the nation. As another teacher noted:

When the teacher gives advice [to students], their behavior becomes good. If they give respect for school or learning, then they help the society. This is a young generation. When they have a family, they will become good parents for their students. The teacher tells them about their future. Otherwise, if the teacher doesn’t care about behavior, they become bad students. (Interview, Isaac)

The belief that there was a continuum between school and the society was apparent. If students developed well in school and learned right from wrong, they would be good parents and good members of society. Respect for school helped society. Learning to be a good student made them a good parent. Focusing on the future would make them good citizens. Teachers’ beliefs about the moral worth of schooling itself was evident in this and other quotations, as was the moral worth of the educated person to society as a whole.

Additionally, teachers’ vision of the ideal educated citizen was someone who was characterized by the motivation to do well in school and had the discipline to accomplish this goal. Ideas of respect for authority and society were embedded in this vision of the disciplined student. Respect was specifically exemplified by the idea that students should follow the rules, adhere to schedules, be neat, and observe particular spatial boundaries. Ideally, teachers in Eritrean schools expected students to follow schedules, arrive in school at the appointed time, sit in class in an orderly way, remain in the classroom throughout school hours, and generally comport themselves “as students should.” As one teacher told me, ideal students “follow the rules and regulations of the school. They should attend the flag ceremony and the class properly. They should go out only at the time of break time. They know all these things” (Interview, Vijay).

Teacher Iyob fleshed out this notion of the morality of the educated person and rooted it in Eritrean traditions. He spoke specifically about what motivated people toward education and the importance of rewards:

The value of education in Eritrea goes back to the old generation. They [our parents] have that idea. The person who has studied and learned has a better life and also more money. That [idea] comes from the old generation and also from how the educated people are acting in the society. Even when I was a child, I didn't like to go to school, and I remember how my mother was encouraging me by giving me some sweets or some chewing gum to encourage me to go to school. . . . They [our parents] used to also say as a proverb, "Those who didn't learn cannot save you from anything." This is an old proverb. . . . They can see the society and how educated people are leading the country and working in different departments. And they think, hopefully, their sons and daughters will accomplish that. Even to be a priest, a religious leader, they have to read, they have to write. So on the basis of this, they have this interest [in education]. (Interview, Iyob)

I would like to highlight two points about the value of education and the role of the educated person that emerge from Iyob's words. First, he outlined the role that educated people should play in leading the country and society and bringing about change. The belief that only educated people could help society was commonly held among students and teachers; in fact, some version of this was repeated in almost every interview I did and in many of my informal conversations with students and teachers. Iyob's reference to the proverb stating that "those who didn't learn cannot save you from anything" reflected the sentiment that educated people were special.

Second, Iyob linked being educated with personal improvement—higher levels of education should bring with them "more money" and thus a "better life." As I noted earlier, educated people were supposed to have a bright future. But it is also interesting to note that Iyob suggested that his mother had to bribe him with sweets to do well in school. The emphasis here was on using something sweet to create positive associations with education. Sweets were given to students because the rewards of education were to be sweet, he suggested. The way Iyob's mother talked about sweets was similar to the way teachers talked about giving students a bright future. Children were to be motivated by sweets, while high school students were to be motivated by the promise of a bright future. The message here was that education is hard, so there should be rewards for those who engage in this hard work.

Many teachers depicted having a bright future as essential to motivating students to do well in school and thereby become the ideal educated citizen.

The University of Asmara played a key role in framing how students imagined their future. As the only university in Eritrea, it was what secondary students ideally strove for and the goal for which all teachers prepared their top students. It was the pinnacle of the competitive education system. The university also functioned symbolically to determine the aspirations and define the imagined future of educated persons.

Such universities as Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia and the University of Asmara are inherently elite, competitive institutions. Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia was at the top of the education system and the most prestigious university in Ethiopia. Prior to independence, the University of Asmara functioned as a satellite site of Addis Ababa University. The vast majority of all university-educated people, including the Eritrean secondary school teachers of the older generation in my study, were educated at Addis Ababa University. One gained admittance to the university through successfully competing one's way through eleven or twelve years of education. A quotation from Emperor Haile Selassie's ([1961] 1965: 306) speech at the inauguration of Addis Ababa University in 1961 acknowledges the elite nature of the university: "The educational process cannot be a narrow column; it must be in the shape of a pyramid and broadly based." While universities were for the elite at the top of the pyramid, they in theory relied on competition among those who wished to become the educated elite—a broad base for the top of the pyramid to rest on. In African countries, where the demand for university education far exceeded the capacity, this competition was especially exacerbated. Since Eritrea had been part of Ethiopia in the memory of most teachers at this time period, Addis Ababa University was seen as the pinnacle of educational accomplishments, highly competitive but worthy in part because of this competition.

In the early days of independence in many African nations, universities were charged with not only developing nations by creating skilled manpower but also cultivating the social, cultural, and spiritual development of the nation. With words that resonated with many teachers' beliefs about educated people, Emperor Haile Selassie ([1961] 1965: 305) spoke to the highly nationalistic and profoundly symbolic role that the university played and the value of university educated people: "A university taken in all its aspects is essentially a spiritual enterprise which, along with the knowledge it imparts, leads students into wiser living and a greater sensitivity to life's true values and rewards." These words in many ways resonate with the comments made by teachers in the emphasis placed on moral "wise living," knowledge, and rewards. The quality and existence of institutions of higher

education, the competitive nature of the university, the wisdom and morality of educated people, the rewards they would reap, and the future of the nation were tightly linked. The university thus symbolically embodied the potential of the nation to have a bright future and represented the pathway through which educated people would develop the nation.

Teachers' vision of producing educated citizens hinged on challenging students, making them work hard, and encouraging competition. Teachers believed that the move to mass promotion indicated to students that they did not have to challenge themselves educationally and that if students were assured of passing, they would not see the value in working hard and striving for educational success. In the following quotation, Teacher Kessete explains how facing challenges in one's education was essential for learning to face life and to develop the country:

Life itself is difficult. We are teaching students to cope with life. . . . We need to give them challenges. If we forget the difficult things in life, how are we thinking that students are going to develop the culture? If we make things simple, how are they going to solve their problems? For everything, we have to fight. Even for grades. There is now a very big difference between [the new policies] and the real life. (Interview, Kessete)

For teachers, it followed that this shift to mass promotion undermined the rigor of the education system and, by extension, the quality of the educated manpower that was needed to lead and develop the nation.

A very particular notion of self is apparent in these ideas about what it meant to be an educated person—the educated subject is seen as having a special role in the future of the nation. For this reason, the educated subject needed to be a cultivated self, cared for and nourished not only with good moral lessons and knowledge but also with the material rewards promised by the sweetness of a “bright future.” In contrast, the military subject, as I showed above, was supposed to be willing to sacrifice his or her time, aspirations, freedom, and, if need be, life for the nation. The educated citizen was prepared for rewards. The military citizen was prepared for sacrifice.

Teachers saw that requiring students to go to Sawa was incompatible with cultivating the educated subject. It was the opposite of giving them a bright future. Teacher Fitwi linked the idea of making things easy on students through the policy of “avoiding wastage” with the government's intention of forcibly recruiting more students into Sawa for military training:

This new policy says that there should be no wastage, so this makes the students not work hard. They are thinking that the government is going to take them to Sawa and, because the government wants to send them to Sawa, there is no chance for them to repeat grades. (Interview, Fitwi)

Fitwi suggested that students saw no point in working hard if they would be sent to Sawa regardless of how hard they worked. Repeating grades indicated having a second chance to work for university admission. Without the chance to repeat grades, students could not move on with their education. Instead, with the policy of avoiding wastage, becoming a soldier became the inevitable outcome of being a student, regardless of how individual students performed in school. Teacher Fitwi continued:

The thing I always think is that the curriculum should make the students have a bright future. It should make them have a bright future. It should encourage them. How do you encourage them? This National Service, going to Sawa, in my opinion, should be voluntary. We should not push all people to go there. Those who have done service should have government advantage and privileges. By having those privileges, you can push other students to go there. Now students are discouraged to go there. So it should be voluntary. Then the students would have bright futures. So the students would try to compete in the classroom for opportunities. (Interview, Fitwi)

Fitwi argued that if Sawa were voluntary and based on rewarding the students who went, students would be more motivated. Students could not see a “bright future” if their education was leading them into the punishing conditions of Sawa rather than the reward of attending university.

Teacher Vijay also reflected the sentiment that Sawa should be voluntary and that its being mandatory was damaging the good students:

Now at this time, when they complete 11th grade, they are all going to Sawa. I don't know, going to Sawa, they are afraid of it. When they go to Sawa, they are going to do some work. They are going to delay what they do in grade 11. Earlier it was not like that; when they completed their matriculation exam, some would go to Sawa and some to university, but now all the students will go to Sawa. Of course, the students were needed to do some work, but they should not be forced to do it like this. Even in India, the students

are doing some National Service. Those who are interested to join will join. But here, it is not like that. They are forcing the students to these things. All the students are forced to go to Sawa. Before there were some brilliant students who were curious and asking many questions, and now they don't care; they will say, "We are going to Sawa." (Interview, Vijay)

Other teachers noted that a large part of the problem was that National Service had become permanent. Embedded in these complaints about the length of time that the military took was a complaint about the nature of suffering in military training as well. One teacher explained to me why Sawa was incompatible with having a bright vision:

Tomas: Students aren't motivated. In order to motivate them, they must have a vision. A bright vision, but they don't see it. Without that vision, they are not ready to learn, so that's why they don't go to school on time, they don't follow rules, they don't care if you send them out or not. So they don't care; they don't expect a bright future. I'm afraid of it.

Jennifer: The future?

T: Yeah. The near future.

J: What makes you afraid?

T: Students do not have vision. Unless they learn and have the positive vision, who are we? They are not ready for education.

J: There is a whole generation who is lacking vision.

T: I'm sure of this.

J: What could be done to improve or correct the situation?

T: The policy of the government should be changed.

J: Which parts?

T: The military training. The way they are handling it.

J: The length of time or the training itself?

T: Well, no length of time is good. You go there. You suffer. You serve five or seven years. The youngsters see it that way. So I think this is the case. It's the way they are handling the military training and the length of time they serve. I have my daughter there. She was nineteen, and now she is twenty-six, and she is still serving. So this is the problem, of course. (Interview, Tomas)

Again, here we see commentary on the belief that suffering inhibited the bright future of both students and the nation. Military training, indefinitely

imposed on students, prevented the nation and individuals from having a bright future.

None of this is to say that teachers did not think it was their (and their students') duty to defend their nation, but rather that being a soldier was antithetical to being educated for the nation; thus, when the government forced students to become soldiers, their passion for National Service was dampened. Teacher Kessete complained to me that even his very clever students lacked motivation because "they just think they will be soldiers." This was a common refrain among teachers. In a conversation that appeared in my field notes, he contrasted the enthusiasm that young people had for going to Sawa when National Service was instituted in 1995 with the current situation. Whereas once they were excited to go to Sawa, he noted, "They think it [Sawa] is the worst place." But then he added at the end of his comments, as if to put all of this into context and remind me that Eritreans are patriotic, "We still love our country and would defend it." Teacher Kessete's and other teachers' comments revealed that teachers and students were critical of the state that forced them to serve but not of the nation itself, which they were still willing to defend.

Teachers also suggested that National Service had undermined their ability to motivate students' and society's respect for education. This was manifested by parents' lack of concern for their children's education:

National Service has spoiled the teaching and learning process. Everyone here under forty is in National Service and cannot support himself and cannot have anything. So he has some [work] other than teaching. The way society thinks about teachers—they don't give respect for teaching. They send their kids to school but do not follow up because they think about other things. They send their students, but when they come home, no one follows up. There should be [a] connection between parents and teachers. So when students come home, parents will follow up [on] their behavior. At this time, there is not much relationship between parents and teachers. So we don't know what the society thinks about us. There should be a close relationship. If the society knew about the teaching and learning process, they would respect [it] and be responsible. National Service spoiled not only teaching but everything for everyone. Everyone in this country is trying to think of something else. We give respect for our country and are trying to protect our country from outside attackers, and we always try to develop our country socially, eco-

nomically, politically, but to do all these things, you should have something comfortable. (Interview, Isaac)

This quotation outlined the belief that National Service took away the hope of “something comfortable” for the future, which not only had eroded the teaching and learning process but also had led parents, society, and students to devalue education and teachers. The words “National Service spoiled . . . everything for everyone” are a powerful statement about the relationship between stalled progress, dashed hopes for the future, changed parental expectations, and radically altered educational processes, even though Eritreans still had a strong desire to defend and develop the country.

One argument teachers and students often made was that students should first be given the chance to finish school before joining National Service. As one teacher described, “Grade 12 is very military, and children at this age should be with their family. They are told when to study, when to work, when to eat, when to play. They have some military exercises. They don’t like it” (Field notes, October 2004). Another teacher who was assigned to take the students to Sawa in summer 2004 recounted their fear upon getting off the bus. He told me that when the students arrived, military personnel immediately drilled them, something the students had never experienced and were terrified of. This teacher shook his head sadly and reflected the same sentiment stated above—that they were too young to go off to Sawa alone: “They should be with their family. They should be students” (Field notes, July 2004).

Anxieties about students being sent across the country to Sawa where they would be removed from families and communities and at the mercy of military commanders directly referenced an imaginary of the punishing state. “Family” was thought of as safety and security for students. In Eritrean culture, as elsewhere, family is supposed to protect young people and keep them free from harm and, even more importantly, from corrupting, immoral influences, an idea that I expand on in the next chapters. Comments that “students should be with their family” suggested that if they were removed from their families, students would be vulnerable because no one would be there to morally guide them and to protect them from potential abuses. Rumors of military trainees being abused by superior officers—and, in particular, women in service being sexually abused—heightened this sense that students were vulnerable. Adults’ uncertainty about whether the government (and individual government actors) would behave in benevolent or abusive ways was key here. The fact that they had little faith that



state actors in Sawa would take care of the students who were in their care reflected an imaginary of a state turned against its people rather than of a caretaking state that had legitimate rights to require service.

While educated people in Eritrea increasingly saw “student” and “soldier” as two radically opposed ways of being Eritrean, the imaginary of the state as punishing further amplified the disjuncture between the two national imaginaries. Embedded in the distinction between student and soldier was a very different notion of the national subject. In short, the military subject needed to be willing to subsume all parts of him- or herself to the nation, sacrificing any ability to choose or work toward his or her future. In contrast, the educated person was supposed to cultivate him- or herself with learning, good habits, and the promise of future rewards. The educated subject was produced through discipline—specifically, the competitive conditions of the national exam, the hard work needed to do well on the exam, and the rewards given if he or she succeeded. The educated subject was an elite who not only expressed love for the nation by striving, studying, and working hard for it but also embodied the hopes for the future of the nation and its capacity to move in new, “bright” directions. The military subject, in contrast, needed to be willing to obliterate him- or herself for the nation. A military subject’s love for the nation was expressed through his or her willingness to sacrifice and die for it. Merging being a student with being a soldier, symbolically and literally, contradicted the role that the educated elite was envisioned as playing in developing the nation. This new and uniform military future in National Service directly contradicted the “vision” of a “bright future” that teachers believed students should have to perform well as students.

### **From Discipline to Biopolitics**

Above, I suggested that when the promotion policies changed, there was a great deal of uncertainty as to whether schools were preparing students for a future as educated citizens or a future as soldier citizens. Previously, examinations were the sorting mechanism and also the orienting principle around which schooling was organized. Examinations determined which level of education each individual student would achieve. If a student failed a grade in Senior Secondary School twice or did not get a high-enough score on the matriculation exam, he or she would go into National Service; when finished, he or she would be eligible for a job, probably in one of the ministries. In Eritrea, secondary schooling was so competitive and there were so few secondary school students in the country that each grade completed

in secondary schools added a level of stature and qualified students for better jobs and higher salaries. Although students feared examinations, which were very difficult to pass, teachers and students believed them to be fair. Teachers and students thought that the stringency of the examination put all students in the same field, emphasizing the commonality of the student experience even if that commonality ultimately landed students in different places.

As I outlined above, teachers believed that this rigorous and competitive system motivated students, but they also thought that students were motivated by their future ability to get a good job by virtue of having completed some secondary education:

Earlier, before the war started, when a student completed secondary school, he thought he could become a worker in any office, and he knew his elder brother and sister would have the chance to be employed in the port or the refinery or the offices. So they knew they would have good futures, and they were encouraged to study in the school. And they were very much interested in studying and learning in the school. (Interview, Iyob)

Here Iyob, like many other teachers, linked students' motivation to do well in school with their understanding that working hard would lead to educational accomplishment, a job, and a "good future" even for those who did not matriculate to university.

All of this changed with the implementation of the new promotion policies, which effectively changed schools from institutions oriented toward rigorously preparing *individual* students for a tremendously selective and challenging matriculation exam to institutions oriented toward preparing *all* students in the nation for promotion. This transformation entailed a shift from disciplining individual students to managing the entire student body.

Michel Foucault's (1997, 2004) discussion of the transition from discipline to biopolitics as a technology of state power is particularly helpful to illuminate these shifts. Discipline focuses on the regulation of space, time, and the body to simultaneously train individual bodies to behave in appropriate ways and to normalize the rationale for doing so, such that disciplinary training comes to seem natural and inevitable. Biopolitics shares with discipline the capacity to produce norms but, in contrast, is concerned with the attributes of the population rather than the individual. Indeed, biopolitics is concerned with the population only as understood through a series of measures, statistics, and indicators and not at all with the individu-

als who make up that population. In Eritrea, the new educational policy was concerned with the entire student *population* completing high school rather than the quality of rigorously trained *individuals* who would pass into university. In this transition, teachers were told that they had to be concerned with promotion rates among the student population *as a whole* rather than with building the capacity of *individuals* who were capable of passing the matriculation exam.

Schools are extraordinarily adept as disciplinary institutions. They consist of rules and procedures that regulate time, space, activities, and behaviors. Systems of punishment keep these regulations in place. Schools are “observatories” in which surveillance and strict regulation of time, space, and the body instill in students “correct” attitudes and dispositions (Foucault 1995). In the process, schools not only train students to act appropriately but also define and normalize what appropriate student behavior is. The disciplinary nature of schooling thus is about not only disciplining individual bodies to comply with school rules but also making the rationale for discipline, an often taken-for-granted norm.

The changing meaning and use of examinations in Eritrea illuminate the shift from discipline to biopolitics and highlight why this change was so threatening to students and teachers. According to Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), the examination is central to disciplinary power. Disciplinary power combines hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment, merging the two through practices of examination. Examinations simultaneously produce a sense of collective experience (everyone takes the exam and views it as a pivotal event in schooling) and differentiate among that collective (the examination determines different life outcomes).

In Eritrea, the collective experience of taking exams and the collective anxiety about this experience were key components of what it meant to be a student. In addition to the National Exam and the Matriculation Exam, which were the culminating events that students spent their years of education working toward, rigorous end-of-semester exams framed the student experience. Teachers shared the collective belief that this system of stringent selection examinations would ensure that the best and the brightest would move on to each level of education. Students became students through participation in this experience. Competition itself was disciplining; although not all students would pass, the disciplining effects of preparing for and orienting oneself toward that exam compelled disciplined behavior. As a technology of the state, these national examinations thus produced a common, national experience of being a student, but they also distinguished between good, bad, and mediocre students. And since there was limited

money and space in higher levels of education, examinations determined whom the government would allocate these scarce resources toward.

In this highly selective and competitive system, the impetus was on students to be motivated and do the work needed to pass. Selective examinations disciplined students to act like students—to study hard and follow rules. The role of the teacher was to set a challenging examination rather than an examination that would enable students to pass. In fact, in conversations with many teachers, I learned that they intentionally put a certain number of challenging questions on their exams, even if they had not explicitly taught the material or skills to answer them, to distinguish the exceptional students.

The new promotion policies (and the fact that the Ministry of Education was very serious about making sure that these policies were being implemented), including the mandate that *all* students should pass, represented a decided shift toward biopolitical forms of management and away from disciplinary technologies as being the central role of examinations. Few documents were available from the Ministry of Education, but a quotation from the World Bank, which was working with the Eritrean government on these reforms, utilizes the language of biopolitics to explain what was increasingly seen as the “problem” with the Eritrean education system. This report describes what the World Bank, and, indeed, the Eritrean government, regarded as the “problem” of grade repetition, efficiency, and wastage prior to the implementation of the new policies:

Internal efficiency indicators are unacceptably low. The repetition rate stands at about 20 percent for elementary and middle levels and 27 percent for secondary school. Repetition is encouraged by highly stringent selection examinations and the limited spaces as the learner progresses up the education ladder. In an attempt to improve their chances of qualifying for a place in the upper grades, learners repeat grades sometimes several times. . . . In addition to increasing the cost of education, high repetition rates deny other children an opportunity for schooling. It is estimated that at a ratio of 42 learners to a classroom, about 16,870 repeaters occupy 401 middle school classrooms and 11,627 repeaters take up 277 high school classrooms. (World Bank 2003)<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, the World Bank document accurately assesses the education system as tremendously competitive due to few slots at each progressively higher level of education. However, what teachers valued as competitive and

challenging for students is described in this document as an “unacceptably low” “efficiency indicator.” For teachers, the fact that few students were promoted and many had to repeat grades had previously indicated that the system was working well, because it channeled the appropriate number of students into higher education; the World Bank, though, labels this as “inefficient,” because too many students failed and repeaters were taking up classroom space. The shift in emphasis here was away from the quality of the educated individuals and their experience in school (for example, what they learned or became capable of as a result of their years in school). Additionally, what promotion, failure, and repetition meant to individual students was not taken into consideration. The focus instead was explicitly placed on indicators that reflected a concern for the system as a whole, such as the “percentage rate” of failure, promotion, and repetition, as well as an emphasis on the completion of each “level” of education.

The new promotion policies rewrote the goals of the education system and reinvented the norms on which the system was based. The “stringent selection examinations” that teachers valued as “competition” because they motivated and trained individuals, particularly the very talented, were now thought to hold down the overall percentage rate of students who completed each level of education. The meaning of “promotion” changed from a privilege for a few to something that was accessible to everyone. Meanwhile, promotion rates became a way to assess the country as a whole. Prior to the new policies, many students expected to fail. After the new policies were implemented, “failure” itself became not a norm for most students but an indication that schools were failing. Grade repetition was transformed from an opportunity that gave many a second chance to an indicator that the system was inefficient. The completion of each level of education suddenly became the normative expectation rather than a much-coveted reward for a select few.

New policies in Eritrea were concerned not with creating a carefully cultivated educated *individual* who possessed attributes of discipline but rather with creating an educated *population* of high school graduates. Like discipline, biopolitics aims to internalize power by naturalizing a particular set of behaviors; however, unlike discipline, which is concerned with producing norms and normalized behavior at the individual level, biopolitical technologies are much more concerned with management through statistical means and accountability measures designed to produce particular behaviors on a larger scale. For teachers, making this shift from participating in state technologies of discipline to being part of this biopolitical machinery was troubling.

## Teachers as Troubled Technologists of the State

According to the new policies, there were to be limited failures among students; however, initially there was a great deal of confusion as to how this was to be accomplished. The transition between the disciplinary and biopolitical paradigms was not easy. This normative shift from discipline, with its focus on training individual bodies, to the biopolitical regulation of the population as a whole led to pressures on teachers to change the way they engaged with students. Teachers were told that they had to promote students; furthermore, they were quite suddenly held accountable for student performance in a way that they had not been previously. The system blamed teachers when students failed despite the fact that one year earlier, teachers, Ministry of Education officials, parents, and students themselves expected that many students would fail. However, as teachers predicted, students who were no longer challenged by a selective examination were simply not motivated to work. To make it even more complicated, many of the students themselves were purposely trying to fail to avoid or delay going to Sawa even though the system was reoriented to make them pass more easily.

Teachers were charged with the duty of following up with and helping “at-risk” students, a term first heard in Eritrean schools after the promotion policies changed. Prior to 2003, failing students were the majority. These students were not considered “at risk,” because it was expected for large numbers of secondary school students to fail and there was nothing wrong with their doing so. Completing secondary school was not seen as a necessity for everyone, but a privilege for a few. The shift to labeling failing students “at risk” was confusing for teachers who saw these students as no more at risk than they had been prior to the implementation of these policies. The creation of the “at-risk” category was fundamentally a biopolitical technology that enabled failing students to be considered a problem (rather than an inevitability) and thereby enabled teachers to manage this problem. Previously, a teacher’s job was to work within the system of stringent examinations to discipline students, enact rigorous training, and let the exam itself determine who would or would not pass. Under the new biopolitical dispensation, a teacher’s job, in theory, was to manage the entire mass of students and ensure their promotion.

Teachers were instructed that they should also utilize a variety of techniques to enable students to pass. The school director made it clear that teachers were to contact students’ families if they were doing poorly and offer extra help to these students. While some teachers had always been in touch with families and most teachers had always been willing to offer

extra help, previously teachers had done these things out of a sense of kindness, community, or intellectual camaraderie. The mandate that they do so had a distinctly biopolitical tone. It was the teachers' duty to manage their students' lives by staying in touch with the families of at-risk students and recommending that these students get extra help if the teachers determined they needed it. Supervisors also advised teachers to use a rigorous system of record keeping to monitor students' progress.

Another strategy that teachers were instructed to use to help students pass was "continuous assessment," which involved giving students more frequent assignments and tests. Most teachers believed that this technique made it easier for students to pass. "The more tests, the more promotion," many teachers often repeated. Trainers urged teachers to "continuously assess" students and emphasized theories of assessment for formative and pedagogical rather than summative and evaluative purposes. A series of assessment "frequencies" mandated precisely the number of homework and classwork assignments, tests, quizzes, and projects teachers were to assign each semester. Under the previous disciplinary system that revolved around examinations, students themselves were responsible for their performances on the exam. Under the new system, teachers had to monitor students and help them pass. Continuous assessment was a means to do so.

Despite all these techniques, many students were still doing all they could to fail. In many cases, students were showing up for class infrequently or not at all, or they were not doing their work when they did show up. Teachers were not willing to simply pass these students, despite the mandate to do so, so they labeled large numbers of students "incomplete." This category had always existed but was seldom used and was typically reserved for a student who had a good reason for not completing his or her work during the semester—for example, a severe health issue. The large numbers of students labeled "incomplete" were in a holding pattern, a liminal space of sorts between the disciplinary paradigm, under which they would have failed based on their lack of hard work and attendance, and the biopolitical paradigm, which sought to include them among the statistics of those who were promoted. Teachers knew they were supposed to pass these students but could find no grounds on which to do so.

The increased usage of the category of "incomplete" revealed the troubled transition between the disciplinary and biopolitical systems. Teachers, caught uncomfortably between two paradigms of promotion, were troubled technologists of the state and from this position created a new category in which to fit students. The following excerpts from a description of a staff

meeting, which occurred in February 2004, a few months after the new policies had been implemented, illuminate the troubled nature of teachers as technologists of the new biopolitical machinery. The debate during this staff meeting addressed the issue of incomplete students and the role of teachers in managing student promotion more broadly.

Henok, a new teacher who had been teaching for less than a semester, asked earnestly what to do about incomplete students. The director answered that first Henok should try to “make the student understand his problem.” The director then said that homeroom teachers should have a record from all classes and asked whether Henok had such a record for his own homeroom class. Henok, growing frustrated, said he did. The director then asked whether Henok had given these students “moral advice,” a sentiment that echoed older views of education as inculcating moral virtues rather than the biopolitical technique of mass managing the population. To this, Henok replied that he did not even know the students, because they had never come to his class. Effectively the director was suggesting that Henok utilize three different techniques to biopolitically manage the students so they would pass—informing the students of their progress, monitoring the students through record keeping, and advising the students about what they might do to avoid failure.

Ironically, Henok could utilize only one of these techniques—record keeping—because these students were not coming to class at all. They existed on paper only. Still, the blame for the failure of these techniques was placed on the teacher; the assumption of the director was that Henok was not using the tools at his disposal to appropriately monitor and promote his students. In the past, these students would have been categorized as school leavers and removed from the school’s roster. However, because of the new policies of mass promotion, students were no longer allowed to be dismissed from school.

As the discussion continued, other teachers became involved in the conversation. A more senior teacher, Kessete, supported Henok by noting that many students were not attending classes. Another teacher then added that it was “not a teacher’s work to do all of these things,” meaning that it was not the teachers’ responsibility to monitor students who refused to show up for classes.

The director then jumped back into the conversation and responded with frustration, saying that there was a common problem throughout the nation about the students’ futures, but the school was still charged with a particular responsibility. He said, “So what shall we do? Kick them out



of school? Or try to help them?” Interestingly, the director quite clearly articulated the problem and the mandate: He noted that the problem was a national one, implying that the problem was with National Service, but then he returned the conversation to the idea that teachers must try to help students.

Alem joined the discussion and argued that while teachers could better take measures to monitor students, they could not resolve this problem: “In my four sections, all of the teachers are doing this kind of counseling. The attending students didn’t fail. But some students had to sign a disciplinary warning for absences and still they are absent. If they are doing that to me, what are they doing to the new teacher?”

The conversation concluded with Mahendra asserting angrily, “They should fail.” This was the first and only acknowledgment in the conversation of the role of failure in maintaining a disciplined system.

There are a few points to highlight about this exchange and teacher responses to the new policies. First, no teacher suggested that teachers should not be monitoring students. Teachers accepted their biopolitical mandate to monitor students and facilitate promotion and adapted their techniques to the ethos of mass promotion. But while teachers seemed to have partially made the shift from their disciplinary roles to their biopolitical ones, most drew the line when it came to passing students who were simply not coming to class. They could not manage all of these students into passing, because the situation was out of their control.

The school never fully resolved the dilemma of what to do with incomplete students, who were doing all they could to fail while schools were mandated to pass them. Similar problems were occurring around the country. Eventually, a Ministry of Education mandate would make a much larger percentage of students pass by dropping the grade required to pass from 60 percent to 50 percent. These students would not do well enough to move on to higher education after military training, so when they were inevitably shuttled off to Sawa, they would find themselves endlessly trapped in National Service. Given that permanent National Service would be the end result of mass promotion for many students, we might view teachers’ refusal to pass incomplete students as a refusal to take part in a system that wanted to transform schools into a biopolitical mechanism oriented toward militarizing students en masse. Teachers were, at least in part, willing to make the paradigm shift to manage and facilitate student promotion, but they chafed at the mandate that they promote students who they knew would be relegated to a life of National Service.

## Conclusion

Teachers and students were mistrustful of the new policies from the beginning. These policies, introduced under the auspices of modernizing and improving the education system, were unevenly implemented. While weakly implemented policies were familiar to teachers and students, what made them mistrust these policies was the fact that the parts that were effectively implemented resulted in shuttling students into Sawa, dismantling the tertiary education system, and radically altering promotion policies. It looked like education was being embedded in the institutions of the military and National Service. As teachers and educational officials commented on these new policies, what was revealed were two radically different ideals of the kind of national subject to be produced by schools—an official, government-sponsored version of the soldier-subject revolved around sacrificing for and serving the nation, while an educated student-subject revolved around students' becoming a carefully cultivated elite who would set a good, moral example for society.

Simultaneously, the new promotion policies radically changed the techniques and technologies that teachers used and were mandated to use. Teachers' roles shifted from one oriented toward discipline to one oriented toward biopolitics, from a focus on disciplining and cultivating talented individuals to shepherding and managing a mass of students through a system of mass promotion. Many teachers were willing to make this shift, in part. They slowly embraced the biopolitical shift in their work as educators, but they were not willing to become part of a state technology that simply shuttled students into the military.