

# Tensions in the Educational Debate

Bill Nasson & John Samuel (eds) **Education. From poverty to liberty** Report for the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa. David Philip, Cape Town, 1990. ISBN 0-86486-154-0.

This book seriously addresses two major, through intimately related questions, which face South Africa today:

- \* How can education work towards the removal of inequalities in our society?
- \* How can education assist people living in poverty?

In tackling this task each author takes one particular focus and the reader can then weave her/his own image of how successful future educational initiatives are likely to be in this country.

The book helps to meet an urgent need to provide material on which educational planning can take place. We need to move beyond the rhetoric of resistance to apartheid; that time is past. While not denying the need to work through the history of apartheid, we need now to put all our energies into devising strategies to effect the transformation of the education system into a just and equitable one. This book makes it abundantly clear that this is not just a question of pumping more resources into education. Fundamental restructuring is needed.

The volume is divided into three parts: Inside South Africa; International perspectives; and Strategies for action.

The plan of the first part is to paint a clear, chilling picture of the current state of education in South Africa. In beginning the task Samuel traces the history of 'Bantu Education' from the 1950s, through 1976 and into the school boycotts and protest of the 1980s. The account is succinct and well documented. It is supported well by Pillay's statistical picture of educational inequalities and underdevelopment in South Africa, although I do think that a synthesis of the two contributions into one would avoid repetition and provide an excellent overview of the history and extent of the current crisis in education.

Already, after these two contributions, a key element in the debate emerges: the concept of education as the vehicle for identifying, and refining appropriate values within society needing to be tied to the need for education as a contributor to the needs of the economy. This creates a strong tension which must be debated within a context of the huge pressure that the backlog in education has created. This tension continues and develops throughout the rest of the book.

The analysis that Nasson makes about the State's reformist strategies is an especially important contribution. While the de Lange (1981) report and the White Paper (1983) which eventually followed it do provide for increased resources for black education, there is no doubt that these reforms are based firmly within a

modernization perspective which does not question, indeed seeks to legitimize and strengthen, the existing power relations in society. Under this model, a meritocratic elite replaces a white elite as being the privileged class in society.

There is a clear plea that education within a new South Africa must not fall into this modernization trap. Yet, as Hyslop reminds us, we have a huge and increasing number of poorly educated and unemployed youth. There will be a very strong temptation in educational planning to put a lot of resources into emergency training schemes and not enough into fundamental restructuring. Hyslop suggests that the unions must enter the educational debate now.

Of course, as Nasson then points out, increased acquisition of education qualifications does not have any marked effect on levels of unemployment. His demolition of human capital theory is, to me, very satisfyingly done. There is a need to develop ways to break the certification stranglehold on education and link education to life – the life of work and the life of making meaning. The same tension between meeting the needs of the overall economy and the exploration of human values.

How can we apply these ideas to rural development? How can we prevent rural schools reaching for 'the straw of urban income mobility' (p 106)? The debate always becomes more nebulous at this point. This is not a criticism of this book, but rather an acknowledgement of the fact that new educational ideas and plans have come from the educational protests of the 1970s and 1980s – and these protests and ensuing dialogue have been in urban townships. If education is to seriously assist the majority of people living in poverty in South Africa, then models for rural schooling have to become central to educational debate and planning.

It may be for this reason that case studies of Cuba and Tanzania are included in the second part of the book. It is clear in both countries that educational changes alone cannot effect a democratic revolution in society. There is much talk at present on concentrating on primary education, on rural school expansion, on adult literacy, and these are all vital needs in South Africa. In both Cuba and Tanzania there were dramatic changes to the education system after independence along these lines. And these changes were successful in terms of mass literacy and a greater equity in resource distribution. However, in both countries the expectations placed on education were too high and other factors were not given due cognizance. The lesson of Cuba where economic pressures have

forced a return to more traditional patterns of education must be closely examined in South Africa. In Tanzania the prevalence of certain political and economic elites distorts the drive for democratic socialist development.

The concept of education with production, found in both countries, seems to offer the model which can accommodate the tension between assisting people to develop marketable skills and giving people the opportunity to explore the environment of their own lives. Just how this concept should develop in South Africa needs a great deal of exploration.

The firm plans offered by Reynolds for Zimbabwean education remind us that educational ideology needs to be translated into financial reality. That means, especially in an expanding population, a greater involvement of parents in financial and other terms in the education of their children. It seems unlikely that any government of this country in the foreseeable future will be able to afford free education on an adequate scale without backlash effects such as has been experienced in other developing nations in a process of social and political transition.

Part three, 'Strategies for action', contains two contributions. In the first Gardiner begins in a sense where Samuel left off – with the concept of People's Education. People's Education for People's Power: the slogan which replaced Liberation Now – Education Later, and has now developed from a slogan into the beginnings of a network of action for the transformation of education in South Africa. Gardiner focuses on People's English. He sees the development of a coherent language policy as essential if democratic dialogue is to take place. Without dialogue about the tensions in our society there will be no transformation. I agree with him.

The final contribution to the book is by Alexander who examines the spaces which already exist in the present education system where democratic innovation has already begun and where a great deal more can be done. He looks at the work of individual teachers, teacher unions, alternative education projects, and some private schools. I believe that from these initiatives will emerge the patterns which will direct the decisions to be made about the balance point between the various tensions in the education debate. In this respect I hope that this book is the forerunner to other monographs or journal articles which explore the experiences of people working here in South Africa. As Alexander suggests the sharing and

refining of experience is essential to appropriate development.

So what are my feelings about the value of the book? Events have moved significantly in South Africa since this book was published. But it is still of great value. Its strength lies in an examination of how the education system in South Africa has evolved and what are the problems we now need to address. This debate will be with us for some time. I certainly will find this book of immense value in teacher education courses.

One minor criticism. It is clear to me that the book is intended to promote dialogue and that I am sure it will do. The contributions can each stand alone as useful documents. And there are links which one can clearly make between them. Part of the process of debating these complex issues involves searching for the links between ideological and economic factors, between the history of an educational system and people's thrust for change, – in short between all the tensions that shape our society. As I have said earlier, it is only through dialogue around these tensions that meaningful change is likely to occur. However, I do think that more explicit cross-referencing between contributions or short discussions before each section could facilitate this process of dialogue and so enhance the value of the book. This would certainly be true for my own students who are teachers, both at pre-service and in-service levels.

One omission which I feel is a serious one is the silence about issues of environmental education. People living in poverty are living in degraded environments. They do not have access to clean water, secure housing, or adequate energy resources. Issues of environmental quality at both local and global levels are political issues and need to be addressed as such. The future of South African society will be determined by issues of water purity, of toxic waste disposal and soil erosion as well as by issues of justice and social equality. Educational transformation involves people having the awareness and skills to take greater control of the environment in which they live; this environment has political, social, economic, bio-physical and personal dimensions. As we become more aware of this totality and explore more the tensions inherent in it, then we have a greater chance of finding educational patterns to suit the needs of a transforming South Africa. □