

Book Reviews¹

What three new books tell us about the state of education scholarship in South Africa

Review of books by

Chaya Herman, 2006

Prophets and profits: Managerialism and the restructuring of Jewish schools in South Africa

Pretoria: HSRC Press

ISBN: 0-7969-2114-8

Pages: 336

Crispin Hemson, 2006

Teacher education and the challenge of diversity in South Africa

Pretoria: HSRC Press

ISBN: 0-7969-2157-1

Pages: 72

Vijay Reddy, 2006

Marking matric: Colloquium proceedings

Pretoria: HSRC Press

ISBN: 0-7969-2116-4

Pages: 140

REVIEWED BY JONATHAN JANSEN

The books we publish offer a window on the status of scholarship in the discipline, and it is with this in mind that I review three education books, each published in 2006 by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Press. These are three very different books:

- A doctoral-dissertation-turned-into-a-book on the attempted reform of Jewish community schools in Johannesburg (*Chaya Herman, University of Pretoria*)
- A segmental study (that is, one part of a larger research project on racial integration and social cohesion) on teacher education (the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education, or PGCE) programme at three universities – former white Afrikaans, former white English, and black campuses – and how each institution prepares students for diversity in schools (*Crispin Hemson, University of KwaZulu-Natal*)
- An edited collection of papers on the subject of matriculation examinations presented at a national colloquium (*Vijay Reddy, Human Sciences Research Council*)

The HSRC Press needs to be commended for its new and recent role as a major actor in academic publishing in South Africa. It has, single-handedly, increased the publication of scholarly books on education which for too long were dependent on the fragmented and

¹ A version of this review was presented at a recent HSRC Book Launch recognizing these three books. This was held at the Liberty Theatre on the Square, Nelson Mandela Square, Sandton, Gauteng, on 8 May 2006.

infrequent outputs of the established publishing houses. It has focused its publications on pertinent social issues of deep concern to all South Africans – such as *marketisation and fundamentalism* in the Herman book; *integration and inclusion* in the Hempson book; and *quality and standards* in the Reddy book. Moreover it has disseminated these publications in a much more efficient manner than is the case with standard publications, and I refer in particular to the open-access policy of the HSRC which allows free reading and 'downloading' of its products.

It is my sincere hope that an entrepreneurial university in South Africa will hasten to link up in a powerful partnership with the HSRC to produce what could become the foremost academic publishing hub on the continent, and thereby overcome the sorry state of the university publishing press in this country.

I shall begin by acknowledging that two of the authors (Reddy and Herman) are former doctoral students of mine – and all three writers are good friends – and so it is with a sense of both admiration and humility that I approach this task. Yet as all three know, the bonds of friendship do not in any way diminish my responsibility to be direct, engaging and honest in my review of these publications.

What could possibly be common in three books with such diverging foci – the matriculation examinations, the restructuring of Jewish community schools, and a teacher education programme?

One way of responding is to note that beyond their specific contents, each monograph struggles with the problem of educational change, albeit within three different domains: Do we have *it* (educational change, that is)? How much of it do we have? Where do we have it – and where not? Does it mean what it indicates? How does it compare with change elsewhere? What or who are the instigators of this change? What propels and inhibits change? How is it challenged, even undermined? And who claims that we have it?

In this respect each book makes a special contribution. One tackles the problem of change from outside the public or non-religious private school mainstream which dominates educational research and publication (Herman). Another brings together a collection of government officials, university academics and science council researchers to apply their minds, together, to the complex problems of school change (Reddy). And a third begins to interrogate the claims of universities about change and diversity beyond compliance with government policy (Hemson).

Together all three books bring a *refreshing practicality* to the study of educational change – beyond the theoretical obtuseness and conceptual pretentiousness that so often characterise the academic writings coming from especially the so-called liberal white institutions. This is not to deny the power and value of theory in educational scholarship. My point, rather, is that the institutions and the authors implicated have often used theory as a facility for intellectual grandstanding rather than as an explanatory device for deepening our understanding of the problem of change.

Like all books, these three monographs also have their limitations, and my comments cut across these three publications.

First, if the purpose of scholarship is the search for powerful answers to stubborn problems in the education system, then these books suggest that we often ask the wrong questions. With reference to the Reddy book, it is relatively unimportant how refined the statistical measures are that are invoked to declare the matriculation results valid and reliable; and the sustained study of the outcomes of these high-stakes examinations are relatively unimportant if the inputs are under-theorised. Most of the chapter contributions in the Reddy monograph spend so much time agonising over the meaning of examinations conducted at the end of twelve years of schooling, they overlook the fundamental problem of vastly disparate

starting points as far as resource inputs are concerned. Unless education reforms refocus and redress problems in the foundation years of schooling, we will remain an underperforming nation long after we have exhausted the political currency that lies in blaming apartheid for the inherited inequalities.

Second, if the purpose of scholarship in education is to probe (as Michael Fullan might put it) the depths, the meaning and the sustainability of change, then we need to start asking fundamental questions not so much about change, but about continuity. What should concern South African scholars, practitioners and parents alike, is this: what sustains the *status quo* in South African schools as far as differential performance is concerned? It is no longer a matter of pride to tout the progressive and ambitious nature of post-apartheid education policies. Why is it that most of our schools still so distinctly bear the racial birthmarks of the past – in character, culture, composition and competitiveness?

Third, if the purpose of education scholarship is not simply about documenting change, but advancing the transformation of all our schools, then our writing needs to move out of the zone of political timidity and ask some searching questions about the stalemate that has been reached in public schools: *white and middle class schools* achieve at the upper-end of the performance spectrum; *black and rural schools* achieve at the lower end of the performance spectrum. By way of illustration, here are some disturbing questions:

- What would happen if we took all the white students out of the national matriculation averages?
- What would happen if we took all the middle class students out of the national matriculation averages?
- Why is it that even though the formal distribution of resource inputs is more or less equal, the standardised outcomes remain highly unequal?
- Why is it that so much political attention focuses on 50 FET colleges rather than the still largely untransformed 29 000 schools?
- Why is it that the two most important inhibitors of academic achievement in black schools (instructional time and teacher knowledge) remain untouched by serious change or reform initiatives?

Why is it that even though high performing students occupy first-choice places at elite universities, many of them are also among the most poorly prepared on matters of race, social justice and the understanding of our common (and imperilled) humanity?

Turning to the individual books, some critical and pointed comments must be made if education scholarship is to be improved in the future. The Reddy book is weak because it brings together contributions that are politically timid, theoretically defunct, and methodologically obscure. From an editorial point of view, this weakness could to some extent have been redressed by a powerful, synthesising chapter that interrogates deeply and honestly the individual contributions in this book. Simply putting together bureaucrats, academics and science council researchers for the sake of writing collaboration is not enough unless it produces the kind of scholarship that enhances our understanding of the problems of change and continuity within our schools.

The Hempson book cannot count as serious research because it lacks the ethnographic depth and sophistication in the dataset that could have been resolved by bringing together observational evidence with interview evidence, institutional documentation with policy documentation, training data with placement (teaching practice) data, and self-reports with external reports. This lack in the depth of data makes this a very superficial study which will find little traction among those who strive to re-imagine the teacher education curriculum in South Africa.

The Herman book is a solid piece of research in part because it comes out of a long-term, single-authored project with very high intellectual demands on the substance and validation of the research. It points the way, however, for parallel studies of marketisation and fundamentalism in other religious contexts – such as Islamic and Christian fundamentalist schools – all of which grapple, perhaps in different ways, with the same problems of God and Markets.

Where do we go from here? For the HSRC Press, I propose a much more rigorous set of standards for the publication of scholarly books and a much stronger editorial hand in what emerges from this important and promising outlet for education authors. For the authors and editors of these three (and other) publications, I propose an investment in *long-term research programmes* as the gold standard for future scholarship in education, and to new and established researchers in education, I propose the generation of a bold new set of research questions that are fundamentally concerned about how we are going to resolve rather than restate the reality of the two educational economies of our country.