State of transition: Post-apartheid educational reform in South Africa[1]

Clive Harber, 2001
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In the space of seven years, there have been at least a dozen major evaluations of education and transition since Nelson Mandela's African National Congress brought to power the first democratic and non-racial government in the history of South Africa. These reviews of education reform in the post-apartheid period (1994+) have appeared in 'special issues' of international journals (Gilmour & Soudien, 2001; Pendelbury & Enslin, 1998; Williams *et al*., 1997; Asmal & James, 2001), in edited volumes (Kallaway *et al*., 1998; Jansen & Christie, 1999; Sayed & Jansen, 2001; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999), in single-authored monographs (Hartshorne, 1999), in collected conference or seminar proceedings (Centre for Education Policy Development, 1998) and in a range of individual journal publications too numerous to list (see special bibliography in Sayed & Jansen, 2001). Against this background, a reasonable question that arises with the recent publication of *State of Transition* is: what exactly does this new book contribute to the knowledge base on educational reforms after apartheid? I will return to this framing question later.

It is fair, in reviewing a new book, to begin by establishing the goals set for the publication by the author(s). In the words of Clive Harber, "The main purpose of this book ... is to provide a relatively concise overview of educational transition – to document, discuss and analyse key changes (and continuities) in South African education since the end of apartheid" (7-8). In pursuit of this object, Harber covers in eighty-seven pages and five chapters, topics as diverse as policy, finance and government (Chapter 1); race, language and gender (Chapter 2); qualifications, curriculum and assessment (Chapter 3); the culture of learning and teaching as expressed through 'life in schools' (Chapter 4); and the problem of teacher identity in teacher education policy and practice (Chapter 5). What does he make of all these reforms? Professor Harber concludes that South Africa has witnessed "dramatic and largely constructive changes in educational policy" (85) but that a series of 'barriers to implementing reform policies on the ground remain dauntingly high' (86). Among these barriers he includes the legacy of violence and inequality, the complex and rushed nature of education reforms, and the inadequate inservice training of teachers. Harber concludes, on a somewhat damp and familiar note, that change takes time. After all, "Britain began its transition to democracy some eight hundred years ago in 1215 and has still got nowhere near eliminating bigotry and racism, let alone democratising its education system" (87).

The book has some appealing attributes. It has a relaxed style in which the author blends personal observation of education reform with some of the research of his colleagues at the University of Natal in South Africa, where he served as Chair of the School of Education between 1995 and 1999. It provides useful insights on one or two topics seldom analysed in the published reviews of education reform; in this regard his analysis of "finance and redistribution" is particularly interesting in that it shows the competing influences on the new government as it sought to create greater equity within the school system while retaining the confidence of white parents in the public education system. And it locates the review, albeit weakly, in the context of globalisation pressures on the Third-World state and the impulse for democratisation fuelled by the years of anti-apartheid struggle.

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Sadly, the book has many limitations which largely overshadow any potential contribution to the knowledge base on educational change after 1994. First, it presents a very superficial review of the major education reforms after apartheid. At best, the reader is treated to snapshots of instances of reform, without any detailed or sophisticated analysis of how and why specific changes failed or succeeded, how the reform initiative itself changed over time, and what the legacy of a particular reform carries into the future. The 'snapshot' approach makes much of the writing outdated even as it appears in print; another approach would have been to follow the trajectory of a particular policy reform and trace its effects over time, a disposition lacking in much of the published education research in Southern Africa.

Second, there is little original research that drives the claims and contentions of the author. Certain sections, like the one on curriculum, lift detailed quotations from the works of other authors, with these (acknowledged) writings forming the sole basis, in several cases, for the writing of the author. A mix of anecdote and already published research is hardly a defensible basis for launching new arguments or testing fresh ideas on education reform.

Third, there is no organisational logic to the book. Why these five cases or selections of education reform? How do they fit together, if at all? What insight does each selection offer to our understanding of change and non-change in educational reforms? Even with the acknowledgement of "the length restrictions of the book and [my] own particular interests and idiosyncrasies" (8), there could have been a more rational and logical organization of the selections in order to build a broader and clearer picture of the reform process, its politics and problems.

Fourth, the book offers no theory (or theories) of educational change. It reads like so many other superficial publications on African education, which simply list the barriers limiting reform, suggesting that if only the right 'ingredients' were mixed together, continental education would be wonderfully transformed. It is this under-theorisation of the change process that perhaps explains many of the other limitations of the book: its superficial character, its lack of original research and thinking, and its poor organisation. Here an obvious question cries out for theory and analysis: why – with a considerable electoral victory of the dominant party in government (approaching a two-thirds majority in both elections, in 1994 and 1999), a host of more than 30 universities and education research institutes, unprecedented international donor support, and a relatively stable infrastructure for schooling (compared to Namibia or Zimbabwe, for example) – why, despite all these "positives" backing educational reform in South Africa, has so little change been effected "on the ground"? The repetitive line that there was not enough money, or the teachers' morale was low, or training was inadequate simply does not hold water. Countries with fewer resources in Africa (such as Namibia and Botswana), have much more to show for their investments in education after independence. Yet South Africa scores lowest on almost any measure of learner performance in international and comparative benchmarks on the quality of education. Why? There is no clue offered in the Harber publication except for isolated, almost footnote-quality references to 'transition' studies and globalisation, with no systematic pursuit of how such concepts enable and constrain educational reform in developing countries.

State of transition is a poor cousin amongst the plethora of publications on educational reform in South Africa. It might be an interesting and accessible, personal and anecdotal account of change useful for recruiting undergraduate students from Europe (where Harber now works) into a first year of study on African education. It certainly is not a serious work of scholarship on education transition in South Africa. For that, readers might have to look towards the indigenous literature on the subject.

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