

# Changing class: Education and change in post-apartheid South Africa<sup>1</sup>

Linda Chisholm (ed.) 2004  
HRSC Press (local) and Zed Books (International)  
446 Pages  
ISBN:1 84277 590 1 HC

REVIEWED BY VENITHA PILLAY

## Not quite a class act

To edit a collection of articles that not only review, but also offer an analysis of education change and developments in South Africa over the last decade is no easy task. Chisholm has succeeded in doing this with remarkable finesse. While the depth of analysis and detail offered in each article is somewhat uneven, and this is to be expected in a book of this length, the unevenness is not spectacularly so. Also not surprising is that the text adopts a fairly blithe use of education jargon and there is an assumption that the reader is not left along the wayside. And since it is more than likely that readers of this text would be involved in education issues in varying degrees, the jargon is quite acceptable. Still on the question of style, a more significant point perhaps is that the articles are written in an accessible way that is easy to read, and yet do not compromise on academic merit and rigour of research and for academics to write about obfuscation and obtuse meanderings is an achievement in itself.

Arguably the text covers all significant areas of education change in South Africa in the last decade. The first section, 'Changing Contours' looks at the education system and its "interaction with wider social change" (p.16). Here the overarching issues of education equity, quality, decentralisation and the social and political challenges embedded in change imperatives are addressed. The second section, 'Changing Landscapes', deals with what Chisholm refers to as the "stuff of education" (p.18) and the focus is on the classroom and the day-to-day issues of teaching and learning and being an educator. The final section, aptly titled 'Changing Margins', covers issues that, without good reason, often sit on the margins of government priorities. Three significant areas, *inter alia*, covered here are early childhood education (ECD), adult basic education (ABE) and the development of a severely marginalised and unemployed sector of society, namely the youth. It is worth noting that the contributors are both local and international and most were able to convincingly demonstrate expertise in their field. Sadly, there is no contribution by and individual from a historically disadvantaged institution, and the usual "elite" institutions such as the University of Cape Town, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria, once again take center stage.

At the level of a review the text is valuable, and in most instances an accurate source of information. The majority of articles draw on both legislative frameworks and historical contexts and developments to describe particular areas of change. In particular, the piece of Bhorat, 'The development challenge in post-apartheid South African education', was good. It has been researched and the analysis is well grounded. In evoking data from the October Household Survey of 1995 and the Labour Force Survey of 2002, Bhorat shows that "economic growth has disproportionately managed to create employment for more 'educated individuals'" (p. 37) while there is a simultaneously high level of unemployment of South African graduates (p. 43). The

---

<sup>1</sup> This review first appeared in the Mail & Guardian, 12 August 2004.

recognition he makes, that there should be some synchronisation between both the quality and quantity of the labour supply and the demands of labour is a useful one given the analytical frame that Chisholm signals in the introduction of the text: the human capital theory is an inadequate driver for the reconstruction and development of post-apartheid South Africa. I shall give fuller attention to Chisholm's point in due course.

Fiske's and Ladd's article, 'Balancing public and private resources for basic education: school fees in a post-apartheid South Africa', links intelligently with the scenario presented by Borat. Whereas Borat points to an educationally improved and expanding middle class, Fiske and Ladd demonstrate how the school fee system, which they argue was put into place mainly to placate and retain the mainly white middle class in the public school system, functions to further entrench and define class idiosyncrasies. Borat's and Fiske's and Ladd's articles elegantly reveal the dichotomies between the "education as investment" mindset of the pre-1994 ANC and the "education as a tool for economic growth" position of the current ANC-led government.

An article whose case is mildly threatened by its lapse in accuracies is that of Grant Lewis and Motala. The Norms and Standards Document is first referred to as an Act (p. 117) and later on page 118 as a regulation. In my view it is neither and is a guiding policy document instead. Another carelessly made point is that the "national Department claims it needs the freedom to deploy teachers as needed across the system" (p. 129). In the first instance the national Department does not employ or deploy teachers and I suspect, given their momentous challenges, that they have no desire to either. Another disappointing example, of the loose use of terminology, was Sayed's use of "state" in confusing and multiple ways. The statement on page 255 is illustrative: "In negotiating these diverse and contradictory demands, a state emerged that on the one hand was internally reorganised into a national state at the centre and on the other was reorganised into dispersed, decentralised states at sites (provinces)". I find the idea of decentralised states within a national state hard to figure and worse still when these decentralised states are more or less equated to sites and simultaneously to provinces, the picture becomes quite baffling. Still on a disappointing note was Mda's article "Multilingualism and education" which makes little significant and new contribution to the language and education debates.

On the other side of the coin, Soudien's article demonstrates an admirable awareness of language and writing and an intense consciousness of the exigencies in thinking about the changes that so take place and how we perceive such changes. In drawing attention to the varied identifiers of class (the only article in the collection to do so) and the almost inevitable and normative use of race as a lens through which we understand difference in the South African context Soudien makes what I believe is a valuable point: that the reconstruction of education is about social reconstruction, and if this is so, then the ways in which we perceive and understand society should be nuanced by the complexities of our society and not by the simplified organisers of race, gender and economic class.

On a comparative note, Muller's article: "Assessment, qualifications and the NQF in South African Schooling" is also one that I found particularly useful. Aside from Muller's inimitable style of a linguistic minimalism that succeeds in making a profound point, a style which he uses to good effect in such a technical piece, I found that he makes a point which resonates well with the interrogation of ideology that Soudien raises and which is also given central attention in Chisholm's Introduction. In clearly describing the pro-testing and anti-testing positions, Muller evokes one of the dualisms that underpins this text – the demands of the market and the supply of education. While the market may call for a detailed assessment of the capacities of the labour force, "education progressives" as Muller calls them, continue to resist what may be deemed to be normative testing and is likely to expose class and race differentials in extreme ways. And this, I suggest is the nub of this text.

The strength of this collection is, I believe, that it is not simply an educational text. It is also a political one. And whether one agrees with the political positioning expressed is beside the point.

Chisholm confidently and courageously asserts such politicality in her Introduction. She says that the authors "show how the market-friendly orientation of the state has been a major factor in shaping unfolding policy and the character of the state" (p. 15). There is unequivocal acknowledgement that the contributors use the analytic framework of human capital theory to write the achievements in South African education thus far. Wisely she explains the fundamentals of human capital theory. "Human capital theory posits that improving individual educational attributes will lead to economic growth ... The concept is usually applied in a manner that removes from the analysis of national education systems their history, social and economic content, complexity and interrelatedness with socio-economic and political structures, processes and struggles" (p. 4). She goes on to say that the authors in this text wish "to demonstrate the flaws of such an approach by engaging in a full social analysis of education which takes its historical roots seriously" (p. 4). By and large, I think the text achieves this goal remarkably well. That the articles are rooted in a historical and contextual analysis of South African education, that there is appropriate consciousness of the dissonances between political aspirations and implementation imperatives, that the writers show expertise in their field of analysis and that there is either tacit or explicit recognition of a neo-liberal agenda embedded in the education changes taking place in the last 10 years, bears testimony to the stated purpose of this text. In collating these articles to achieve a measure of unity of analyses, (and indeed she succeeds in doing this despite her acknowledgement that all the chapters do not employ the same approach) Chisholm argues that the major conclusion drawn from the book "is both simple and dramatic: Educational development and the emerging system have favoured an expanding, racially mixed middle class" (p. 7). I have no argument with this conclusion – the papers do indeed show this.

My contention lies in Chisholm's, and indeed the text's stance, or shall I say lack of stance, on the issue of class. That she explicitly states that "[n]either this Introduction nor the authors' tries to provide a definition of this middle class" (p. 8) is not a convincing redemption. In the first instance the Introduction alone makes numerous references to class as do a number of the articles. With the exception of Soudien's article which draws attention to the complexities of the notion of class, there is no elucidation of a term that forms the core of the conclusion of the text. Not surprisingly then, the term at one level seems to imply a simplistic economic determinant of class and as such silently draws on classical Marxism. Yet I suspect that none of these authors are classical Marxists. And on another level, the term is used to imply certain patterns of behaviour that seek to protect dominant forms of culture. More significantly, the title of the text, *Changing Class*, signals the centrality of class to the intellectual problem on hand. I believe that intellectual and political project of this text would have been enhanced if a point made by Belinda Bozzoli twenty years ago, albeit guardedly, in *Class, community and conflict*, that class cannot be understood as a reified category and that the relationship between class, identity and social action should constitute a basis for social analysis, was given attention. The text leaves one with the feeling that this expanding middle class, although now racially somewhat more mixed, a bad thing. The simple explanation why it is bad is that the mass of the population remains poor and therefore unable to have access to such a class. Does this then mean if the middle class is far bigger than the working class, and racially more representative, then all is well. Or does it mean that the entrenchment of middle class interests changes the political and transformation agenda radically?

The singular strength of this text is its bold assertion that neo-liberalism has not and probably cannot fulfil the redress and poverty alleviation challenges facing this country. But therein lies its weakness too. While it is decisive in its analysis of the last years it does not adequately open the debate for the future. Its silence on the notion of class obscures the complexities of struggles yet to come.