

BOOK REVIEW

The Brave ‘New’ World of Education: Creating a unique professionalism

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It is without a doubt an intriguing title. It has a certain enticing quality that seduces the browsing reader to follow the scent leading into an entangled web of entrapped fascination. What draws attention to the book is the ‘new’ in the title; and then the unaccentuated ‘brave’ also has a magical attraction to it. “What”, one may ask, “is so ‘brave’ and ‘new’ about the world of education in the contemporary world, most especially in South Africa?” The answer is mystical until the text is read reflectively. The unarticulated backdrop is of course developments in the global arena mirrored in South Africa’s mini but monumentally paralytic drama.

These are the thoughts and feelings that first tickle the mind upon reading the title of the book. And therein lies the entrapment. But entrapment is also filled with contradictions that have possibilities as it contains the opposite of paralysis.

Although an understanding of the ‘old’ is critical in order to understand the ‘new’, it was not the intent of the book to critique the past. The authors, it seems, arguably assumed that such understanding exists.

If you are inclined to be logical, you obviously would want to know something about the ‘old’ that must have preceded the ‘new’; for there is no new without the old. Was the ‘old’ as brave as the ‘new’, or was it timid, cowardly and, therefore, unremarkable? Surely it must have had its own bravery. A journey to the apartheid past would soon uncover a world of fixed certitudes; of ‘truths’ that could not be questioned; and knowledge willed by Providence to be understood in neat racialised, gendered, and socially stratified compartments.

The pre-1994 reigning ideology was an intolerant National Christian Education philosophy delivered through a pedantic, self-righteous fundamental pedagogics. To a large degree the bearers of the legacy, no fault of theirs, are many current school managers and teachers who imbibed both the philosophy, epistemology and the pedagogy from the old dispensation. The effects of this remain palpably stubborn today and manifest themselves in myriad educational and social dysfunctionalities. It is this troubling inheritance that is the Herculean challenge to the “developmental state’s” ambitions.

In some weird way this contrived education edifice can be seen as bravery on the part of the then prevailing apartheid authorities. But it is a miscreant bravery that has wasted vast reservoirs of potential that could have, it is reasonable to claim, made the present anaemic predicament non-existent.

It is, however, fair to say the value or contribution of *The Brave ‘New’ World of Education* can only be measured against the weighty backdrop of the old.

The authors’ aim is quite ambitious: it is premised, rightly, on the notion that the world is in a state of continuous change; that education in the contemporary world has to equip students with proper intellectual tools that will foster critical thinking skills, inquisitiveness, adaptability, and so on. They embark on a journey of critical assessment of a series of paradigms from pre-modern to post-modern educational theories and, in the process, suggesting the inadequacies of earlier forms. A thick body of research and scholarly works is marshalled to advance their argument. This critique is accompanied by associated methods of teaching and learning, ranging from the now-debunked rote learning to independent learning and critical thinking skills, for example. Critical contemporary issues such as environmentalism, rapid scientific and technological changes and their impact on societies, governance and accountability systems,

are, as should be, addressed. This is the right diet for 21st century citizenship required by knowledge economies or learning societies.

In reading this broad yet detailed critical assessment one cannot avoid sensing that the National Christian Education project and its handmaiden, fundamental pedagogics, were fatally flawed. The fundamentalism of the apartheid education project, like the general apartheid system, has left a deep imprint in the minds and behavioural repertoires of generations of educators whose general philosophical bent and pedagogical practice are informed by this history. And, as stated earlier, that is one of the greatest challenges of post-apartheid South Africa. It was for this reason that the ill-fated OBE was introduced. But unfortunately its adoption was rather hasty and an idea that may have been reasonable in certain contexts was grafted wholesale on to South Africa without sufficient surgical treatment to meet the exacting conditions of the new dispensation.

The Brave 'New' World of Education boldly engages varied aspects of education in South Africa, nay, everywhere else. Its embrace of the modern education discourse makes it eminently suitable for use in education faculties. Although complex and comprehensive in its sweep, it is able to maintain a well organized structure and employs a reader-friendly style appropriate for teacher training institutions if accompanied by creative adaptations; it is laced with an abundance of supporting quotes, chapter introductions and summaries that put the material in perspective; it has a comprehensive bibliography, and accompanied by an edifying CD-ROM.

There are, however, three serious concerns that need special attention. The first is that utmost care must be exercised to ensure appropriate and mediated delivery bearing in mind the needs of particular communities and contexts. If care is not exercised, the book's otherwise well-crafted design and rich content will suffer the same fate as the OBE which largely ignored South Africa's current realities.

The second concern is that despite claims to the contrary, the book has an overly western orientation. One example of this is (pp. 20-21, 43) references to western world events including musicians such as Elvis Presley, Buddy Hall, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Woodstock experience. There is certainly nothing wrong with that except that in so doing other equally important practitioners of this particular art form who inhabited the same space and time are excluded. In this particular genre there were the likes of Chuck Berry, Jimmy Hendricks, Buddy Miles to name a few who had great influence on the cultural landscape despite the prevailing racial discrimination of the times. Such exclusion is contrary to the declared spirit and commitment to openness implied if not explicitly pronounced in this work.

The third concern is that despite major global shifts in power centres in which the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) quartet and the Asian Tigers are emerging as formidable international players, the book seems strangely oblivious of the remarkable contributions these countries are making to the world knowledge system¹. These countries are gravitating towards the centre of the brave and new 21st century. Interestingly, or is it tragically, African contributions to knowledge hardly make a fleeting flicker on the screen. Is this a case of innocuous oblivion or epistemological discrimination?

Contemporary education texts especially designed for teacher training are obliged to address the daunting challenges of our times. Among other imperatives, education should be seen as the cradle of humane sensibilities, fairness and inclusivity in all respects.

However, on balance, *The Brave 'New' World...*, is a significant contribution that should be on the compulsory reading list of teacher, even school management, training programmes. It is an antidote to the forced toxic pre-democracy diet of unreflective texts.

¹ For insightful analyses of these global shifts see, for example, Thomas L. Freedman, *The World is Flat A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005); and Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008). On dramatic educational achievements in Asian countries see Yugui Guo, *Asia's Educational Edge Current achievements in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and India* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005).