

A new history of formal schooling in South Africa, 1658-1910: An education in contradictions

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A new history of formal schooling in South Africa is a very welcome and stimulating addition to the scholarship on education in South Africa. It takes a fresh look at the origins and development of schooling in both the public and private sectors, from the establishment of the first school in the Cape in 1658 until the Union of South Africa in 1910. At first glance this rather ambitious scope, in terms of the length of time and the diversity of schooling experiences, has been brought together in a relatively concise volume. The chapters themselves also do not seem overly long in relation to the topics and periods which they cover, which is a move away from more traditional histories of education, which often favoured an immense amount of detail. With these features in mind, the authors are to be commended on successfully accomplishing the extremely complex task of weaving together the diverse and contradictory histories involved in schooling in South Africa. In a very readable and accessible volume, the authors have brought together various strands of the wide range of schooling experiments, experiences, policies, and directions in a narrative which has a strong core focus, while also embracing the contradictions and exceptions present in this history. While this book does not aim to include the volume of detail found in pioneering narratives of education in South Africa, it is by no means superficial, dealing with care and taking into account the changing context and the complexities of the educational and social landscape.

The introduction, which gives an overview of trends in the historiography and literature review, sets the tone for the authors' novel approach to the history of schooling in South Africa, which is to consider the social, cultural, economic, and ideological aspects of formal schooling, highlighting not only the roles education can play in subjugation and dominance, but also "the potential for disruption".¹ This is also summarised in the second part of the title "an education of contradictions", setting this book apart from earlier histories which provided often grand, triumphalist and neatly delineated descriptions of education and schooling. Not only in this opening chapter, but throughout the book, the authors draw on a wide range of relevant and significant literature, which also makes it useful to scholars. The literature incorporates important sources on race, class, social history, missionary histories, and identities. While this chapter, and the book, have an overarching focus on modernity, the book takes into account different perspectives and debates throughout.

Much attention is given in the narrative to the context in which schooling developed in South Africa. At times, even the book reads more like a general history of South Africa than a history of education. This focus on the context, however, bears evident fruit as the many aspects of society—including race, class, culture, economics, intellectual and religious thought, and politics—point to the motivations, aspirations, and responses regarding schooling of diverse interest groups. Furthermore, what emerges is not a simple tale of either positive or negative growth, but a complex interwoven history of nuanced and sometimes contradictory experiences. This strongly contextual approach brings the history of South African schooling into the mainstream of the historical narrative of the country, in contrast to many earlier histories of education which tended to be more inward looking and parochial. This book, in a very real sense, places "education at the centre of the historical picture"² following the urging of one of its authors, Peter Kallaway.

The guiding question around which the narrative is framed is the notion of modernity and how ideas of progress and the project of modernity can be traced in efforts to adopt or promote schooling and responses to schooling. The book gives a concise, but detailed and nuanced view of the socio-cultural landscape of South Africa over time, returning at each juncture to the framework of modernity and what this meant for education. The elements addressed include the politics of identity, race, and class; intellectual thought; ideas of progress; and modernity. The book successfully encapsulates key developments and trends in context which, while also calling attention to evident contradictions, is commendable.

¹ C Soudien, C Fischer, M Cross, and P Kallaway, *A new history of formal schooling in South Africa, 1658-1910: An education in contradictions* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2024), p. 8.

² P Kallaway, "The forgotten history of South African education", *South African Review of Education*, 18(1), 2012, p. 15.

A new history of formal schooling in South Africa covers the history of schooling in South Africa, chronologically and by geographical region chapter by chapter, considering the former British colonies and Boer republics. The periodisation makes sense as the book endeavours to cover the pre-unification period of South African history, before the advent of an increasingly centralised and uniform policy regarding education. Particular attention is given to missionary schools, as in many places these were the first formal schools of any sort to be established. In chapter five, this examination of missionary schools expands to also include neighbouring countries. The description of how missionary education evolved in neighbouring areas (Bechuanaland, Basutoland, Swaziland, and Namibia) adds texture and nuance to the role and form of missionary education in the region, which is a bonus in the text. Furthermore, in this chapter and throughout the narrative, the incorporation of individual cases and examples adds a personal element, reinforcing the sense of agency of those involved.

The four authors of the book come from a variety of academic backgrounds and institutions—something which appears to have been a strength in this project. Despite the shared authorship, the style and the overarching focus of this volume remain remarkably consistent. Perhaps it is the varied expertise and experience of the authors which has resulted in a volume with a wide appeal. It can be highly recommended to all scholars of South African education as a starting point for a range of key issues historically. It is also fertile ground for young scholars, pointing to areas of interest and matters which need further investigation, as the authors pertinently point out questions and potential points of debate throughout the narrative. It also is of interest to a wider audience than just historians of education as through the lens of education, the authors paint a history of the layers of identity and socio-cultural elements of South Africa as a whole. It should, therefore, also be of interest to social historians.

What follows are some impressions which arise out of a close reading of the narrative. In the first instance, the reader is left with a strong sense of the heterogeneous nature of various ‘groups’ and their attitudes and responses regarding schooling. The agency of those on the receiving side of education is especially brought out, as responses to schooling or a lack thereof are foregrounded, often revealing unexpected and complex attitudes. The motivations regarding providing schooling in various settings over the period also show diverse goals and interests. Furthermore, the reader is also struck by the fluid and pioneering nature of schooling endeavours over the majority of the era, with differing degrees of government involvement, a lack of skilled teachers, difficulties of language

and physical distance and in many cases, parental resistance to children being removed from the labour force. In addition, the immense impact of the discovery on minerals on the politics and economy of the region is striking in the way in which this played out in the sphere of schooling. The more fluid racial and ethnic boundaries become increasingly galvanised with the sudden industrial growth, laying the foundation for the systematic protection of white interests and the promotion of white supremacy, for which schooling became a critical vehicle. The intense focus on self-protection and promotion by the white population resulted in the beginnings of a more systematically segregated and unequal provision of schooling, leading to what, in the final words of this volume, would become “A bitter harvest”.³

³ C Soudien et al., *A new history of formal schooling...*, p. 248.