Book Reviews

Brendan P. Carmody
University College, London

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University College, London

Education in East and Central Africa, edited by C. Wolhuter (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 462pp; *Education in Southern Africa* edited by C. Harber. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 265 pp; *Education in West Africa*, edited by E.J. Takyi-Amoaka (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 503ff.

These three books provide a broadly focused lens on the current situation of education in much of sub-Saharan Africa. They are part of a larger Bloomsbury series on education globally.

Education in East and Central Africa presents an account of education in Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome, Principe, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Almost all these countries view the eradication or alleviation of poverty to be a major challenge for education (pp. 16, 71,113, 155, 159, 223, 279). Unsurprisingly, most of them approach this concern through what has been known as a human capital approach to development (Brock & Alexiadou, 2013, 87-100; Walters, 1981). Investment in education for economic return makes sense even if this perspective has been seen to be highly limited when addressing issues of socio-economic development (Piper 2007:106-107; Samoff, 2013: 552-587). This is largely because of its linear framework which tends to exacerbate rather than help correct class or regional bias, often making the school resemble a factory of unemployed (p.72). Educationally, this means that we are dealing with schooling systems in the image of a pyramid where, as in colonial times, the majority were excluded in favour of an elite (Clignet & Foster, 1966). This surely does not help the cause of equity creation but instead opens the door to major social problems especially as drift to the city becomes even more widespread. Such a paradigm however feeds the deep-set desire to be selected which currently translates in many instances into a mushrooming of private educational provision at all levels (pp.53, 147). In study after study for instance we read of the increased number of private universities across the region. Some deliver quality education but there appears to be an increasing number which provide the graduate with dubious certification (p.228).

At the primary level, we are presented with much evidence to indicate that the Millenium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (EPA) projects have positively impacted the majority of settings (pp. 30, 32,43, 90, 282, 275, 301, 330). This gives reason to believe that the levels of literacy have improved significantly. That is of course if we can speak of being literate in terms of years in school which may be questionable (p.45). More soberly, what is noted frequently in this regard is expansion without concomitant attention to infrastructure. We find that all too frequently increased enrolment led to overcrowded classrooms, poorly trained teachers, and meagre teaching resources (pp.43, 49, 75, 77, 286). What emerges is an enormous demand for certification resulting in the age-old problem stretching back to the Phelps-Stokes era of mismatch between schooling and the world of

work (pp.33, 72, 53, 163). Again and again, we hear of the need for schooling to be more 'relevant' to life (37, 72, 82, 138, 155, 238, 273). At the same time, vocational education does not seem to be on high demand nor does it seem to be well included in educational systems, despite earlier calls from the 1960s and 1970s for self-reliance (378, 395). It is true that there are repeated calls for better science teaching but here again what this generally means is academic natural science rather than practical science. Allied to such lack of 'relevance' are issues linked to the need for ever greater concern for the education of girls, the rise of preschools, and better inclusion of those with disabilities. Much ambivalence also still surrounds the long-standing issue of the role and place of local languages and their significance in the localization process, which ought to help to make schooling more meaningful (Piper, 2007:111).

In *Education in Southern Africa* we find descriptions of educational systems in Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. Again, in most instances schooling is seen to be the means of development. This results in a high level of commitment to basic schooling in line with the 1990 Jomtien agreement, MDG 2000 and EPA movements. It is reported often that this development has been highly successful in so far as it has meant dramatic increased access to schooling (pp. 5, 34, 55, 93, 89, 117, 123, 128-9, 156, 189, 234). Similarly to what has already been noted already in the context of eastern and central Africa, such an outcome on this large section of the African continent is undoubtedly a huge achievement.

Nonetheless, as earlier mentioned, it has to be approached cautiously as numbers have increased without corresponding quality of learning There is for instance little evidence of reformed pedagogy even when in official statements there is talk of student-centred learning (Mudalitsa, 2002: 17; Jewett & Schultz, 2011). Rather, it is affirmed frequently that the method of teaching has tended to be outdated and teacher centred. Thus, the level of basic literacy may be weakly correlated with the number of years in school (pp.11-13).

We are reminded almost everywhere that there is a widespread demoralization of teachers and educational personnel resulting in a marked widespread decline in professionalism. Concern about lack of punctuality, absenteeism, appointments not honoured, poor preparation for classes is reported widely. Yet, what needs to be juxtaposed to this is that teacher standing in terms of poor salaries and conditions of service have been given very poor attention universally. A consequence of teachers' lack of professionalism in the public schools appears to be an enhanced growth of private schools, particularly in Malawi (p. 119), Mozambique (p.137) and South Africa (p.236). It has also led in the South African setting to concern with 'meaningful access' to school. By this is meant not only ensuring that quality is high but also that there is generated a sense of the significance of systematic learning (p.190).

As noted elsewhere, the much debated issue of the relevance of the school's curriculum is a persistent concern. This is not to imply that countries have neglected to strive to localize their curricula (Bown, 2009: 58-59). Even in the early 1970s, as a secondary school teacher in Zambia, after some frustration with largely uninterested students in a Latin class, I was gratified to be told by my headmaster that largely because of its irrelevance this would be the last time it would be taught. This incidentally dismayed my European colleagues. In the following semester I was instead given a civics class that was intended to help students appreciate Zambian

humanism. Almost surely, students found it easier to relate to Zambian rather than classical humanism. What emerges however is that the educational systems and frameworks inherited from the colonial era die very hard deaths. To some degree this may happen because, despite their distance from local realities, they are still seen to be the unchanging road to modernity and its consequences as seen in upward mobility and salaried employment (O'Brien 2006; Larmer et al. 2013:933ff; Musgrove 1982). In general, life in the village may sound romantic but it is not what most of the younger generation want. This may explain why almost no country is reported to be seriously proposing a different educational route to development. Experiments with socialism and self-reliance, however well intentioned they may have been at an earlier stage, appear to be almost history while indigenisation of the curricula, despite the rhetoric, appears cosmetic for the most part. Nonetheless, in the context of globalization, this merits more determined advocacy if schooling's tendency to uproot from tradition is to be addressed (Carmody, 2004: xix).

Education in West Africa provides an account of the educational development in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. We have a useful introduction which helps to identify cross-cutting issues in this region. Among other things, the author argues for better communication and local understanding between donors and recipients.

This seems long overdue (Samoff,2013; Maclure 2006). As a university lecturer involved in teacher education in the early 2000s, I remember being dismayed by the crude way in which programs were imposed. In the various accounts, we repeatedly hear about how progress has been shaped or perhaps misshaped by external agencies (pp. 32,40, 44, 63, 171,185,366). It has been seen especially in the context of the World Bank's structural adjustment programme (SAP) of the mid 1980s. With minimal input from local agents, the World Bank advocated a strong emphasis on basic schooling at the expense of secondary and tertiary education.

This is not meant to imply that universal access to schooling was undesirable. Surely, attempting to enable the preponderantly youthful population to become basically literate could hardly be faulted. What was unsatisfactory was its lack of a balanced socio-economic perspective. (Vavrus, 2005; Shizha, 2006; Brock & Alexiadou, 2013, 100 ff.). As a consequence we now have numerous situations where the pyramid image has been replaced with that of a bottle-neck in describing educational systems throughout the region with large barely literate populations adrift in a sea of severely limited employment or further educational opportunities.

Yet, as elsewhere, many accounts witness major success stories in terms of widening access to schooling. This is commendable but again there is a recurring observation that quantity was gained at the expense of quality. This seems especially true of public schools, opening the door, as we have seen, to private provision. It does not help avoid the creation of social elites, whose emergence has been a major concern of African governments when striving for national unity.

In this part of the continent, we also find that the teacher has lost much of his/her professional status in so far as he/she has become part of heavily centralized and bureaucratic systems enveloped within a competitive examinations ethos, leaving little room for autonomy or creativity. In addition,teachers' salaries and conditions of service have been so abysmal that few are ready to remain long in the service as they seek alternative employment.

The emphasis on and desire for academic schooling clearly reflects the dominant perception of it as the key to development and individual success. Even though technical education may offer greater access to economic opportunity, it is still generally seen to be second class (pp.5, 91,380). Perhaps, action research may hold some promise in this regard (Serpell, 2007).

Looking at education today across the region in light of these volumes one cannot but appreciate the large-scale improvement in access to basic schooling, not only in countries that were stable politically but also those which witnessed major civil strife. The inclusion of girls and women has also gained momentum. Less impressive for the moment is the inclusion of those with disability. There is an increasingly larger profile for the preschool in many areas. Linked to the expansion of access to schooling, the social problem of the educated unemployed is exacerbated leading to the age-old concern with the relevance of a kind of knowledge that largely neglects, among other things, the personal development of the student and the professionalism of the teacher.

Here, one regrets the absence of any significant discussion of the purpose of education. While the preponderant emphasis is unmistakably upon education for development within the framework of investment in human capital, this occasionally bows briefly to some concern with holistic personal development. Yet, there is little, if any, discourse on this rather pivotal issue. Undoubtedly, schooling as an avenue to potential employment makes great sense in this setting of limited opportunity, but this is hardly sufficient (McGrath, 2010:250). What of preparing people for lives that are also flourishing? To limit students to what reason and science provide is to miss the deeper aspect of life which can have major impact on personal lives and the resulting community in terms democracy and peace (White, 2009:423-35: Bellah, 2006: 434-449; Balim & Segal, 2003; Pring, 2010).

In this context, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and some of its consequences for schooling feature much less prominently than one might expect. Besides, there is little reference to how educational systems have attempted to deal with this issue. It is far from clear that it is seen to be a concern for schooling. While practically all the countries under consideration have, or are aiming to have, multiparty systems of democracy, again there is surprisingly little discourse on how schools might better educate for it. Similarly, although religion and religious education feature in the various accounts and in some parts of the continent is of major social concern, it is disappointing that there is no extended discussion of its nature and role in different settings and its potential contribution to inter-faith cooperation and democracy (Alexander & McLaughlin, 2003; Bellah, 2011; Noddings, 1993; McCowan & Unterhalter,2015:208). Moreover, we gain little perspective on how non-government agencies have been part of the recent schooling process even though much of the present scene is rooted historically in missionary endeavour (Carmody, 2013).

Given that too high a percentage of scholarly work on sub-Saharan Africa is produced by non-Africans, the editors of these books should be lauded because nearly all the authors are African. It is also true that most of the accounts strive to connect with the local and as a result are heavily descriptive. This is commendable. Less satisfactory however is the fact that in the majority of cases the particular country's history is weakly linked to the politics and economics of national development. We find little on how for instance educational programmes fostered

social division, inequality, and injustice or how they can reform rather than reproduce social conditions. The outcome is that there is little basis for critical or comparative analysis of systems, leaving the reader with parallel accounts. In this regard, it is true that Harber's introduction in *Education in Southern Africa* provides some cross-country patterns but most of the contributors rarely give reason to believe that the educational world is larger than their particular setting that is being described. This seems to be a great opportunity lost which, if seized, would have left us with a narrative of richer texture. The editing of *Education in East and Central Africa* is especially weak leaving the reader with inaccurate accounts, unwarranted generalizations, and tediously repetitious narratives. All three books would have profited from having a map of the region under discussion.

Overall, these books provide a useful survey on what was largely unarticulated and so help to fill a gap in the scholarly literature by providing a window on what is taking place in the school in sub-Saharan Africa.

Brendan P. Carmody
Associate Research Professor
CRDCE, Institute of Education
University College, London.

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