

The liberatory discourse of education: Education and Discourse in South Africa

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ABSTRACT:

Education is universally seen as an unqualified good.

UNESCO (United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation) talks of the developmental and anti-poverty benefits of a good education system: It enables countries to achieve high rates of growth and to address successfully the economic

and social effects of poverty. Educated people make appropriate choices leading to social and economic advance.

Guarantees implicit in the constitutional ‘right to education’, and the ‘liberatory’ aspects of education as developing human potential and capacity, however, need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Without undermining possibilities, this piece will subject ‘common’ views of education to a reality check, by situating educational realities in a developing and historical context within South Africa’s political economy.

INTRODUCTION:

Education is universally seen as an unqualified good.

UNESCO (United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation) talks of the developmental and anti-poverty benefits of a good education system. A good education system enables countries to achieve high rates of growth and to address successfully the economic and social effects of poverty. Educated people are able to make appropriate choices leading to social and economic advance.

This can be easily challenged: from Nazi Germany to whites in apartheid South Africa, to Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, educated populations have been seen to make poor social choices. More specifically, education will not automatically create jobs or raise levels of technology (which are more likely to be subject to controls by multinational companies and their power relations in a globalized world). Even the economic or developmental goals of education needs to be carefully conceptualised and interrogated.

Education is seen as releasing potential, and allowing individual and social advance. Yet, sociologically, it can be seen how education systems can and do contribute to reinforcing social differentiation, locking poor communities in inequality and even reproducing racial inequalities – certainly reinforcing class and gender differentiation - against constitutional guarantees of equality and human rights imperatives.

The danger of individual narratives of education advance lies precisely in the potential to lay blame on those individuals, racial groupings, genders, or social classes unable to overcome structural disadvantage. Redress or transformation is sought in individual advance.

In a crude analysis opposing the above, education might simply be seen as part of the Ideological State Apparatuses that hold the subordinated masses in the grip of ruling class power. It is not necessary to fall back in this way on Althusserian-structuralist analyses or to impose crude class categories, to see that the realities of education often do not match the claims that are made about learning.

While this chapter will focus on South Africa, concerns and myths about education are an international phenomenon, with a range of concepts and terminologies brought together, made common and ‘popularised’ by institutions such as UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Education Fund) and UNESCO as well as by international campaigns such as 1-Goal (an initiative related to the 2010 Football World Cup in South Africa, strongly supported by figures such as Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the United Kingdom).

So guarantees implicit in the constitutional ‘right to education’, and the ‘liberatory’ aspect of education as supposedly developing human potential and capacity, need to be taken at least with a pinch of salt. Without undermining such possibilities, this piece will subject ‘common’ views of education to a reality check, by situating educational realities in a developing and historical context in South Africa’s political economy.

The aim is not to undermine the importance of education and education achievement, nor to subordinate or lessen the importance of struggles for improved and more equal education opportunities, but rather to understand how the current and dominant rhetoric and language of education may often obscure realities. These realities may require emancipatory confrontation or at the least an acknowledgement of their force, if education is ever to play out any of its positive aspects or potentials.

This means that clarity in educational advance will require ‘struggle’, and is often overwhelmingly complex. Context/history and social interest groups in their power relations need to be considered, as well as how dominant ideas may often be sustained and integrated in a dominant discourse to the disadvantage of subordinate groupings or classes.

Nonetheless, the discourse and language of aspiration, of achievement and of liberation through education, of intellectuals and their role as knowledge bearers or creators, are not simply illegitimate calls or unreachable chimera. Like the language of human rights, if situated and understood for their limitations and within all their ‘dialectical richness’, education terms have the potential to transcend their false

neutrality, to enable an organic definition and development of intellectuals and knowledge that can contribute to human liberation. A Gramscian perspective is implicit here, of reordering symbols and commonly held viewpoints into a new discourse that challenges social realities while unifying society around new goals (Burke 2005).

What this piece suggests, is that the language and rhetoric of education and achievement is not without context, is often obscurantist in relation to reality, and has to be recovered and re-formulated, if an intellectual project around education is to play a specifically emancipatory role.

Suggestions around the meaning of this for discourse theory and for language may be made, but the wider theory is not paramount in this chapter. Rather, material is presented that provides the raw material for the kind of overview that this book suggests and for the discursive practices opened up by the book as conceived by the editors.

The focus will therefore be to a minor degree on analysing interventions in education at the level of discourse and predominantly on the dominant discourses as they play out, in particular in the South African context.

EDUCATION AS LIBERATION:

Under the heading “Apartheid will die only when we have education for all” (*Star* newspaper 2012) the Chief Rabbi of South Africa Goldstein tells us that “it is impossible to be free without being educated”.

In similar vein, though the polar or dialectical opposite, a leading anti-apartheid activist, now Black Economic Empowerment magnate and chairperson of a major mining company, tells us that the country's education system today is worse than under apartheid (Ramphela 2012).¹

Feeding into this, the official opposition in South Africa says "Education is the antidote to inequality" and argues a non-racial education system creates "expanding opportunity to all" (Mazibuko 2012).

The international discourse on education, which is similar, has been reinforced by organizations like UNICEF and UNESCO, and at conferences such as Jomtien, Thailand where the EFA goals were first discussed in the 1990s and at the Dakar EFA conference in 2000 (Education for All). Given the international and United Nations initiative, the countries gathered were motivated to launch and sustain a global education initiative around basic education as a human right. Specific goals were enhanced at the conference in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, and there have been regular reports and updates from UNESCO (See UNESCO 2011, which also lists the Dakar Declaration of 2000).

Three elements of education are extracted by this author as paramount in the above discourses and confirmed in lengthy quotes below:

¹ (Ramphela is wrong, In 1976 only 26% of black children even made it through primary to high school: now of course primary completion is virtually universal, though only half of black children make it to the end of Grade 12).

- 1) personal advance through skills, leading especially to higher productivity and earnings;
- 2) attitudes and citizenship development, which is also a personal contribution to social cohesion;
- 3) the (national) developmental and social impacts of a highly educated population, especially the implications for jobs.

These elements of the international discourse appear in a quote from UNESCO (2004) which is worth quoting in full:

“There is good evidence that the benefits of education to individuals and society are enhanced when its quality is high. For example, better learning outcomes – as represented by pupils’ achievement test scores - are closely related to higher earnings in the labour market; thus differences in quality are likely to indicate differences in individual worker productivity. Furthermore, the wage impact of education quality appears to be stronger for workers in developing countries than for those in more industrialized societies. Empirical research has also indicated that good schooling improves national economic potential - the quality of the labour force, again as measured by test scores, appears to be an important determinant of economic growth, and thus of the ability of governments to alleviate poverty.”

We see spoken of here both the elements of individual advance, and the general social good as seen in development and productive capability for the nation.

“Benefits do not only arise from the cognitive development that education brings. It is clear that honesty, reliability, determination, leadership ability and willingness to work within the hierarchies of modern life are all characteristics that society rewards. These skills are, in part, formed and nourished by schools. Similarly, evidence shows that bright but undisciplined male school dropouts who lack persistence and reliability earn less than others with the same level of ability and cognitive achievement, and will continue to do so beyond school. Schools that encourage the above characteristics more successfully than others will bring greater long-term earnings benefits to the individuals who attend them.

Schools also try to encourage creativity, originality and intolerance of injustice – non-cognitive skills that can help people challenge and transform society’s hierarchies rather than accept them. These, too, are important results of good schooling, having broader benefits for society, irrespective of their impact on individual earnings.

Good quality in education also affects other aspects of individual behaviour in ways that bring strong social benefits. It is well known, for example, that the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, especially by women, has an impact on fertility behaviour. More recently it has become clear that the cognitive skills required to make informed choices about HIV/AIDS risk and behaviour are strongly related to levels of education and literacy.” (UNESCO 20004: 226; also quoted in Bloch 2009: 18-19).

The Department of Education (now Basic Education) in South Africa has similar arguments in their White Paper. The White Paper sets out government policy in relation to education after substantive public comment, and provides the basis for enabling legislation that follows. (A Green Paper indicates initial formulation and a call for public comment).

The above-mentioned elements of personal advance through skills; citizenship; and the social and developmental impact of education, all come through strongly, as indicated in the quote below.

“...Successful modern economies and societies require the elimination of artificial hierarchies, in social organisation, in the organisation and management of work, and in the way in which learning is organised and certified. They require citizens with a strong foundation of general education, the desire and ability to continue to learn, to adapt to and develop new knowledge, skills and technologies, to move flexibly between occupations, to take responsibility for personal performance, to set and achieve high standards, and to work cooperatively.

... In response to such structural changes in social and economic organisation and technological development, integrated approaches toward education and training are now a major international trend in curriculum development and the reform of qualification structures...this approach is a prerequisite for successful human resource development, and it is thus capable of making a significant contribution to the reconstruction and development of our society and economy.

... An integrated approach to education and training, linked to the development of a new National Qualification Framework (NQF) based on a system of credits for learning outcomes achieved...will open doors of opportunity for people....”

Here, above, we see the rhetoric of individual advance and opportunity.

“Appropriate education and training can empower people to participate effectively in all the processes of democratic society, economic activity, cultural expression, and community life, and can help citizens to build a nation free of race, gender and every other form of discrimination” (Department of Education 1995, paras 5-7).

What is seen above, apart from the elements of education discourse already identified, are the translation of these into so-called ‘technical’ solutions such as the National Qualifications Framework to enhance international best practice within South African education systems. The social neutrality of education within a liberatory framework is reinforced.

Similarly, the widely used quote of Nelson Mandela confirms this approach:

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela 2012).

What is going on? The problems in education in the new South Africa are widely known (see Bloch, G 2009 for an overview and detail). Is education in the new South Africa simply failing? Are expectations and analysis unrealistic? Does the slogan “no liberation without education” as propounded by the Chief Rabbi not have any resonance with reality?

A critical theoretical approach that makes alternative readings possible, is thus clearly needed, and that does not take ‘ideological’ assumptions for granted (Wodak 2007).

In South Africa, racist education was solidified under the Bantu Education Act of 1955, which created separate education for black people. Education was to reinforce the goals of apartheid. Limited and unequal expenditure and opportunities for black people were reinforced. Poor education would ensure social compliance of black people and their preparation for menial tasks and a life of democratic exclusion in South Africa.

Nonetheless, education and education institutions were some of the most powerful arenas for anti-apartheid struggle and resistance in general, most often led by young black people.

Notwithstanding this, the new democratic government in South Africa appears unable to have overcome such divisions. Poor quality education for the largely poor majority and for black youth specifically appears to have been reinforced since the democratic elections of 1994. The state of education and the search for quality have remained

alive in post-apartheid South Africa with improved education being defined as one of the apex priorities of the new government (Zwiegers 2011).

Perhaps Norman Fairclough (2003) provides some answers as to what is going on. It is to his analysis of discourse we must turn for clues, at least. Analysing both discourse and developing a critical analysis of society and context (i.e. through exposing power relations) Fairclough provides a frame for analysing the ‘liberatory’ discourse and language of education in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Also, as Wodak (2007) argues:

“every theoretical approach in CDA (critical discourse analysis – author) is inherently interdisciplinary because it aims at investigating complex social phenomena which are inherently inter- or transdisciplinary and certainly not to be studied by linguistics alone.”

This paper argues that the ‘liberatory’ potential of education may be true, however it is only a potential. It provides a discourse centre that needs to be fought and struggled over, to create a hegemonic discourse that can affect social structures and impact social reality, as Gramsci might have it. However, unsurprisingly in a country where social transformation has giant leaps still to make, where many commentators harp on the dominance of ‘neo-liberal’ economic strategies and thus their failures, education may indeed be – to over-simplify – another tool in the ruling class armoury to maintain dominance.

METHODS OF/AND ANALYSIS:

As is argued by Wodak:

“The biggest challenge, I believe, is to implement careful and detailed linguistic analysis while also venturing into the domains of macro social theory. Bridging the gap is not easy” (Wodak, 2006).

This paper largely hints at the first imperative of detailed linguistic analysis, and strongly suggests a social analysis that interrogates the discourses or linguistic issues.

The exclusions created by a failing education system, and the many continuities with the past that Ramphele seems to pick up on above, are perhaps thus no coincidence in a society containing many inequalities.

A clear argument may be put forward that these inequalities and continuities with the past are precisely a means to exclude and short-change the working and poor majority. Indeed, the discourse of education as liberation, in this view, serves mainly to hold back change, to put blame on individual short-comings; or on the other hand to encourage select individuals to fly, to refuse to allow their circumstances and origins to hold them back, while implicitly laying blame on those in the majority for whom the structures of dominance continue to be faced as overwhelming.

On the other hand, another perspective could argue for a common and unified struggle for education to be a central part of change, to open up paths to liberation. Cross class struggles, led from below, and seeking both changes in the hegemonic structures of discourse as well as the inequalities in society, may be both possible and a necessary part of breaking the chains of oppression. Seeking the flaws in the discourse is not to

give up the need to struggle, and the inherent potential of the discourse to open up a path to greater liberation; or active involvement in constructing a future based on equality and real opportunity (Burke 2011). This possibility is not explored here, though it is a central preference of the author.

Does an educated population mean a liberated population? Educated Germans voted for the Nazis under Hitler; educated whites supported apartheid; the most educated nation in Southern Africa today, the Zimbabweans, whose education system wins universal praise, suffer under the arbitrary actions and systemic oppression of Mugabe's ZANU-PF. Education, in a general sense, clearly does not automatically lead to freedom. What is going on here?

In South Africa, it has been argued that some 60-80% of schools are dysfunctional (Burke 2011). These schools are inevitably situated in poor township and rural (black) areas, while formerly white schools and white children seem relatively immune from such deep distress. International comparative test scores, and the recent Annual National Assessments (ANAs), have not only indicated inadequate if not appalling levels of literacy and numeracy at Foundation levels, but have shown South Africa to be amongst the worst performing nations internationally: This despite relatively high levels of education spend.

These failings have results all through the system, ie throughout the education pipeline, from high school dropout rates before graduation, a lack of sufficient high-level skills, to even tertiary levels of education indicating racially differentiated access and throughput. In a country like South Africa, there are racial dynamics and

consequences too, reinforcing the racial bias of education acquisition at all levels despite wider constitutional imperatives of equality. If you are a white child you have a 98% chance of matriculating and a 60% chance of going to university; for black children, there is a 50-50 chance of even reaching the final matriculation exam, and only some 12-15% of these go on to tertiary study at a university. The Vocational post-school landscape is still fairly bleak, despite recent attempts by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training to address these.

It has been argued that education actually plays the function of trapping large numbers of poor children in a “second economy”, held back by participation in a dualistic school system. Thus poverty appears to be reinforced by poor education and non-functioning schools. There are however many individual cases of children, schools or authorities such as principals, being able to escape the limiting effects of such social structures and thus to achieve high-performance results. The possibility of hope, of such difference, may or may not lead to more systemic change.

A variety of causes and elements have been identified in this ‘Toxic Mix’. This mix helps to ensure a disabling combination of in-class factors (including poor teaching and learning), around-school deficiencies (including poor administration and organisation by officials and principals) and societal issues (from backlogs in infrastructure to poverty impacts of poor health or even hunger). These problems are reinforced by major disparities between black schools and former white schools – such that while white children may expect almost universally to graduate from school and some 60% go on to access colleges or tertiary study, 50% of black children do not

make it to the final exam (some 30% then fail) and perhaps 12-15% of the graduates who are black go on to tertiary institutions (Bloch 2012).

Poor results, beginning at Foundation or early primary levels, show that mathematics, science and literacy abilities for poor, rural and black children are bad, (averages in the Annual National Assessments are around 35%, confirming most international tests such as PIRLS or SACMEQ – the Southern African Consortium for Education Quality). These results have the effect of putting the overall education system right near the bottom of league tables, despite a relatively well-resourced infrastructure in South Africa.

In short, poor, black, rural and township children find themselves disadvantaged and trapped both by poor schooling and – paradoxically - by a social discourse that sees schooling as an essential component of social transformation and individual advance, as well as the individual tales of advance of people or schools. Poor schooling can be seen in the poor results for mathematics and science, as displayed in numerous international test scores and in the published outcomes of recent Annual National Assessments (ANAs).

In particular, it is noted that conditions in the classrooms are not conducive to learning, many teachers lack appropriate skills for teaching, management by school heads or support from surrounding school districts and officials is often lacking, and high proportions of children may go to school hungry (as recent UNICEF reports have indicated) or without their health needs being met, or with gangsterism and confusion

facing scholars within the learning environment. My own book (Bloch 2009) details much of the statistical material underlining or confirming such inequalities.

South Africa provides perhaps only a classic or an extreme case of the limits and inconsistencies of the dominant educational discourse, features that operate in all class-based and divided societies where inequalities may predominate. Nevertheless, there appear to be severe gaps between what education promises and the unequal and often overwhelming realities that learners and educators face on a daily basis.

Some of the negative consequences of the dominance of a particular discourse may be:

- 1) Self-blame: if circumstances do not hold you back, you can be “whatever you want to be”; how does one then take account of the realities of structural blockages? A “victim” mentality or pure idealism are two sides of the same coin here. If you do not get ahead, what is it holding you back?

- 2) Excuses by capital abound, in this case those who control decisions about on-the-job training or access to employment: in a flourishing new democracy, with keen new educational graduates, the routes into employment could be expected to be smoothed. A focus on apprenticeships and mentoring makes allowance for youngsters with limited work experience but with potential despite otherwise indicated by educational scores. Yet businesses may play “fast and loose”; corporates may argue: “graduates with required skills are unavailable due to the poor nature of education. Otherwise, graduation certification tells one little of who has real potential.” True, up to a point.

Mixtures of the realities, and failures of the discourse, provide excuses for capital that may simply reinforce the exclusion of the youth.

- 3) Energy may be expended on showing how great education can be, rather than on fixing the real outcomes of the education process. In the absence of a discourse or national consensus, there is potential for much misdirection of reformist energies. (Unresolved questions may be: what is the aim of school – will everyone go to university? What infrastructure makes for an acceptable school?). Certain questions are of more concern to subordinate groupings than others and the issue of ‘who’ leads a national discourse or agreement is crucial.

Yet, what this paper wishes to focus on is indeed the positives of education. A pinch of salt, as argued for, does not necessarily discount the liberatory elements in education. All in society believe that education is a “good thing” and can provide routes to advance. Does this not provide a space for developing a national consensus or hegemony across class, an agreement that even working-class deficiencies in education need to be addressed, and a willingness to allocate real resources where needed?

It is suggested here that a Gramscian struggle to insert educational realities for the majority into the centre of education discourses, has more potential for liberation than a simple unqualified acceptance of current national and international education desires and imperatives.

What would a wide cross-class set of alliances imply? These have been seen in past South African Struggles around education, especially in the 1980s where the slogan of “People’s education for people’s power” was coined by the democratic movement, specifically the NECC (National Education Crisis Committee).

Nonetheless, a key challenge of such mobilisations would be the incorporation of teachers, highly unionised and militant within the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU). Many of their demands play on the inequities and disadvantages in the system; yet a closer analysis might suggest that the militance of this classically petit-bourgeois grouping of teachers, is largely self-serving. This has the potential, though not in all circumstances, to derail popular struggles around education.

In other words, alliances need careful construction. As social organisation often happens on terrains not of one’s choosing, as mobilisation may often be ‘messy’ or even inconsistent, a loose call for the building of alliances and the construction of a counter-hegemony, is often easier said than done.

In the South African and other contexts mobilisation must imply a challenge to structures of inequality. Education aspirations and thus an education focus is not always ‘equal’ across the board but requires serious effort to ensure transformation that may challenge both social and educational disadvantage. Current discourse around education is too ‘neutral’ and technicist to allow for such challenge.

CONCLUSION:

Lastly, the attempt to attain education – especially in difficult circumstances or in a society in deep transition – certainly encourages hard work and achievement. Where this meets with success, it may be of immediate benefit to individual and society alike.

The take of this article, is just don't be fooled by the discourse, understand its limitations, and operate carefully and vigorously where parameters may be difficult to challenge. This is to ensure that subaltern groupings do not further disadvantage themselves through a refusal to take education attainment seriously, in societies globally that value education and achievement and – more crudely – in societies that encourage the certification that indicates such levels of attainment.

What has been shown above is that the many claims for what education can or should do not necessarily resonate with reality. In the South African case, severe inequalities may be hidden from view. Alternatively, claims may be made for the healing, liberatory and democratic powers of education which need to be very carefully interrogated. A social analysis of education, and the impacts in society, may show that the structures of education as they currently exist act largely to reinforce inequalities in education as well as in society.

Understanding this, could lead simply to a fatal dismissal of education as a force for social change. Struggles to change society as a whole, first, would somehow seem in this view to be of a higher order than struggles around education. This may encourage abstract rhetoric rather than concrete struggle, which is as damning as right-wing acceptance of inequality.

Yet the piece above has argued there is much that can be achieved through ‘taking the discourse at its word’. In other words, the question would be, why is education failing so dismally and who is feeling the impacts? In answering this, fixes might be generated for both education and for a series of wider social ills.

SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

Some Policy implications flow from the above analysis, in relation to education:

They include:

1. Developing a vision: what is the point of education? How does one understand context, particularly the historical realities of a country such as South Africa. Based on these realities, of the people and of the education system, what would be the goals of education? What would a developing country with great inequalities like South Africa, be trying to achieve – can a single education system and approach achieve this and how and by when? A plan for achieving goals thus relies on a vision of reality and possibility. Reality is not an excuse, but possibility is not a pipe-dream or an idealistic set of impossible visions.
2. How does one understand structure and circumstance, such that individual “escape” is still possible or even desirable, but still structure may be challenged? This is to find the balance between individual circumstance and the changing of the structures that hold individuals back; a balance between individual and the collective, without condemning individuals to be part of the uneducated masses as the only alternative to “escape”.

3. Related to the above are issues such as institutional and social change. Where should energy be applied, and to what end? This includes educational institutions in the first place, but also a range of social and political institutions that may have to shift or disappear.
4. How does teaching happen that takes account of “where learners/students are at”? This is not a dropping of universal standards, but an understanding that applied teaching takes people from where they are to somewhere further. This makes teaching more context-bound, and therefore also raises the bar on what is required and points the way to meaningful change. Language is only one aspect of this.
5. What issues exist beyond the purely “educational” that needs to be addressed? These include health-care, policing, women’s oppression, and of course, employment and the economy.
6. What is the meaning of education in the context of the “knowledge economy” or the competition engendered by globalisation? How do car workers in the Eastern Cape, with the worst provincial education results, nonetheless produce globally-competitive products? What does the growth of ICT imply?
7. What research is required of a comparative nature, in order to understand other contexts, where an educated population may have been an issue and a benefit? How has education contributed to development in Korea or Japan or Venezuela or Brazil? How has the world changed, such that ICT or new visions of learning and learning space (beyond the Victorian four-walls approach) may be developed?
8. What alliances can be built? What is the role of values? What is “ideology”, whether popular or in analytical frames?
9. Is there a lack of capacity (as in high-level skills) or is it a lack of political will and direction, thus of application?

The above is more than simply adding questions to the mix. It is to say that the questions are indeed complex. It is to say we do indeed need to go way beyond everyday assumptions, to question how we frame things as well as why, and to

understand the societies in which we live, to develop a deeper and more considered set of frames for understanding the world, as well as the worlds of education.

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What Is Critical Discourse Analysis?

Ruth Wodak in Conversation With Gavin Kendall

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