

Book Review

New directions in African education: Challenges and possibilities

S. Nombuso Dlamini (Ed.), 2008. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 253 pp.
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At a time when Africa appears unable to extricate herself from an increasingly complex web of crises, it is refreshing to read something positive about the continent. In *New directions in African education: Challenges and possibilities*, Nombuso Dlamini has put together a book that holds hope for Africa. The nine contributors to this book are all scholars and educationists who have actively engaged with the educational systems in various African countries in different capacities. The authors bring a rich mix of viewpoints, highlighting the book's strong point in harnessing the experiences of foreign based African scholars and those based in African universities and other key institutions. The book sets out to "reconceptualize and reinvent education in order to suit and serve pressing socioeconomic needs in the African continent" (p.1). This indeed, is a tall order and an overly ambitious undertaking given that the authors manage to address only a few educational issues. Moreover, the issues addressed are largely country-specific. In fact, the book falls into the now common tendency to limit discussion on Africa to sub-Saharan countries, and mainly Anglophone countries. It would be good to have a more inclusive coverage that includes some Francophone countries as well as countries in the predominantly Muslim North.

The nine chapters in the book are well laid out under three broad themes: gender, access, and human rights; language use, pedagogy, and development; and engaging new initiatives in African education. The authors have revisited the now well-beaten path of the colonial roots of the current educational crisis in Africa. To their credit, however, the authors have moved beyond the normal blame game and have engaged the power relations in the postcolony. A clear illustration of the skewed power matrix is the underrepresentation of women in higher education especially, and their general disadvantage in accessing life's basics. Muteshi's chapter on reproductive health in Kenya is an interesting analysis of the social-cultural terrain that oppresses women and limits their access to reproductive health care. This analysis could be improved by further unpacking the power dynamics that constrain women's participation. For instance, a majority of nurses in Kenya are women, fairly educated women who should understand better the plight of their less privileged women folk. Also, recently, the minister for health was a woman whose rise to political power came via her stated desire to uplift the standards of women, especially the rural poor. How far have these, and other such opportunities, been turned into possibilities for improving the lives of women in Africa?

Nevertheless, the authors' call for African governments to prioritize the role of women in the national political agenda is timely. The big question, however, is how to galvanize the governments (politicians) to foreground the role of women. Puja, in his otherwise

excellent article, on women in higher education in Tanzania, calls for more research. The problem in Africa, however, is not lack of information but the lack of political will to effect and sustain the desired reforms.

In the chapter “Possibilities in African schooling and education,” Sefa Dei is quite on the mark when he argues for a rethinking and revisioning of the theoretical paradigms that inform the African understanding of development. Dei calls for what we would call “grassrootization” of thinking about education and development. The educational and development crisis in Africa, following this thinking, can only be solved locally. An important issue, in this regard, is the use of language in education. Grace Bunyi’s chapter stresses the need for a more central role for African indigenous languages. Whereas this is a strong idea, the place of local languages in education is one that needs to be negotiated with sensitivity especially since the same could be used to further entrench ethnic chauvinism, which has been the cause of ethnic strife in many parts of Africa

What I particularly liked about the book is that the different authors engage in what Giroux (1993) would call discourses of hope. There is hope for African education systems to foreground African indigenous ways of knowing in language education, science education, and even in Information Technology. Such a system of education would provide enabling spaces for all children, including those with disabilities, girls, and those from poor socio-economic backgrounds. In the introduction, the editor praises the authors for moving away from using the “simple oppositional binaries in which the colonial era is characterized by social, cultural, economic, and political violence and political independence is presented as the beginning of freedom ...”(p. 2) in their examination of the power relations in the postcolony. The authors have actually done a fairly good job in locating the educational crisis in Africa at the doorstep of an inept and ideologically bankrupt political leadership.

Whereas this is a tenable position, the future for African education, in my opinion, ultimately lies in what Bhabha (2004) calls destabilizing the binaries in the postcolony. This in essence entails an engagement to dissolve the rigid frames that define the top and the bottom (in the socio-economic and political setup) by bringing the top and the grassroots into a dialogical relationship. Such a relationship puts an end to the poverty of participation (Max-Neef, 1992) that characterizes the grass root communities and all those outside the centre of power. Teachers and educational policy makers in Africa, as well as scholars with an interest in African educational issues will find this book an interesting reading.

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References

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