Race for Education: Gender, White Tone and Schooling in South Africa, by Mark Hunter

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Mark Hunter established a reputation as an exceptional ethnographer and scholar with his *Love in the Time of AIDS* (2010). His *Race for Education* (2019) will extend that reputation further, this time focusing on the geography of schooling in a post-apartheid state that continues to be structured by race, class and gender, though in new configurations.

As before, Hunter's ethnography is superb in its depth and breadth. He focuses here on three areas of Durban—the Berea ridge, the Bluff and Umlazi. In each area, interviews and observations have provided the texture of the ways in which parents, learners and school officials speak and act in response to the forces of race, class and gender in negotiating their involvement in schooling. His scholarship is wide-ranging; he follows clearly on works on equity in South African education such as those by Chisholm (2004) and Soudien (2012). He draws likewise on historical records and quantitative analyses to develop his argument.

Hunter's key argument is captured in the title: here "race" refers to both competition and race in the conventional South African sense of racial difference. A key point that Hunter makes is that those who emphasise either the role of race or class in modern South Africa, at the expense of each other, miss the key point that he understands "race as *formative* of what came to be called neoliberalism" (p. 3). Race and class thus constitute each other; the marketisation of schooling that he analyses in depth shows how race—as phenotype, as privilege, as status—is caught up in the possibilities for social mobility. However, this is not reduced to the conventional understandings that white people are consistently privileged over black people. He demonstrates how an elite boys' school may exclude a child of a single white mother because of uncertainty

over her ability to pay fees while granting a sporting scholarship to a black boy whose abilities in rugby serve to bolster the school's prestige.

Thus, whiteness is present as a pervasive **white tone**. This is the book's central concept, and has three aspects: whiteness as a branding tool to attract richer white and black parents, the role that schools play in promoting "prestigious linguistic and embodied practices shaped by racial-cultural hierarchies" (p. 11), and whiteness as both a form of oppression for subordinated groups and "a route to status and power" (p. 12). This white tone sets the standard for the whole educational system, ensuring that the elite state schools of the past continue to be at the pinnacle of the public system, and no-fee state schools at the bottom. It is no longer the whiteness of direct racial exclusion; while the elite schools continue to prefer white learners, in part that is to ensure the prestige that attracts black parents who are able to pay high fees. The central role of this white tone is evidenced in a conversation I had with my friend, a businessman who supports Black First, Land First but sends his children to the most expensive private schools in Durban. I suggested he try a private school that charges maybe half the fees he is paying, as educationally it is just as good. "No, they will get a Coloured accent."

A major argument developed here is that Durban's schools have been marked by different phases, each driven by different constellations of race, class and gender. As someone who taught in white schools in the apartheid era, I find Hunter's treatment of the forces driving schooling in that period to be richly nuanced, in comparison with the simplistic treatment of white versus Bantu education that permeates much scholarship in education. He maps out these three periods: racial modernism, marketised assimilation and racialised market.

Racial modernism was in the period of the 1950s and the 1960s in which the project of the apartheid state required the end of racial intermingling and the material gains of the white working class. For this project, "urban schooling was not just cast in the mould of apartheid but *formative* of apartheid" (p. 32). It entailed major increases in the number of white schools and their funding. In this system, schools serving lower-class whites acted as a buffer that protected the interests of the elite state schools.

Marketised assimilation began with the admission of the first black learners (in particular, girls) into private schools around 1976 and continued to the late 1990s. In this period, "interconnected historical processes … growing class divisions, greater competition amongst schools, and the rising prestige of English—profoundly shaped the movement of black learners into previously unenterable schools" (p. 79). A countervailing process though was the establishment of higher-standard secondary schools in townships like Umlazi. And from 1998, white schools with insufficient numbers began to close.

Racialised market refers to the present period, which started with the introduction of the Claassen Model C, a term that still casts a long shadow over the system. It ushered

in the phenomenon of schools with levels of autonomy that are rare in public systems, most notably in their ability to exclude applicants and to charge fees of their own choosing. For the elite schools, in particular boys' schools, there has been a growth of competition as funds are diverted from educational work into marketing; within this competition school sport plays a central role as talent scouts search the country for boys of exceptional talent.

Hunter thus explores this period, examining the ways in which this market impacts on schools in the three geographical areas of the study, as well as the way it drives movement to and from these areas—for example, from townships to former lower-class white schools, or from lower-class white areas to elite schools in upper-middle class areas. As he states, "movement generates inequality—the movement of children is a countervailing force to state efforts to redistribute resources in the other direction; and learners move to access not just qualifications but also symbolic power" (p. 147).

To enable this process, white families on the Bluff, for example, have reorganised the priorities, even their family structure, to ensure that their children can access elite schools and manage the transport requirements. For the elite schools, having continued white learners enables them to maintain white tone. For black families in Umlazi, this process may require investing in one family member alone. In this process the life trajectories of individuals are shaped, leading to great differences within as well as across households.

His approach is not to focus in depth on only the interactions within one school, but also on the geographical interactions between areas and schools. Within these interactions, gender relationships play a critical role—for example, whether mothers have a relationship with fathers who are able to fund the transport and school fees.

The role of prestige in the system is central. As Hunter observes (p. 198),

> schools today sell powerful symbolic attributes, including language and accent, in the context of an increasingly service-centred economy. Whereas apartheid schooling was based on racial segregation, the schooling market today allows certain groups to buy prestige. Prestige remains associated with configurations of whiteness, and these dynamics help explain why race is not withering away in the schooling system.

While this marketised system preserves the positioning of elite state schools of white tone at the peak of the pyramid, it has also allowed the flourishing of high-standard secondary schools in townships. These also have their own systems of exclusion—the one mechanism he does not identify is the withholding of exam results to those who have not paid fees.

Within a marketised system, exclusion is systematic. The most outrageous example he gives is of shack dwellers on the Bluff who lived next door to a primary school but

whose children were excluded because their English was deemed not good enough. These families were compelled to send their children to relatives in remote rural areas. Hunter explores how schools that give preference to the children of education officials allow such issues of equity to continue unchallenged. It is left to groups like Equal Education, or movements like Fees Must Fall, to push for the system to become more equitable.

Hunter provides specific attention to the role of a particular form of English in the system—the "model C accent"—as a key expression of white tone, and argues for the acceptance of multiple forms of English, as well as the promotion of African languages, as a corrective.

The insight Hunter gives into one part of the South African educational system is thus highly informed and very bleak. Resources within the system are used not for learning, but rather as a means to actively enable upward mobility. In other words, it is a system that continues to privilege the wealthy and exclude the poor. It is also an economically failing system. There is no evidence that growth in resources for education has driven economic growth; rather, it has fuelled growing credentialism and driven the pursuit of qualifications rather than learning.

Perhaps, my one key critique of Hunter's work is the broad use of the term "excellent" to describe township schools that have their own systems of exclusion. However, he makes a valid point that elite suburban schools can learn much from township schools— in such areas as promoting more than one language, in managing large classes—rather than the other way round.

This work should be required reading for postgraduate students researching South African schools. Too often such work normalises, and fails to bring under scrutiny, the social relationships that shape such institutions, both within and across schools, and their relationship to the local and broader context. White tone permeates our schooling, and we will not have a viable and equitable system until we find ways of challenging it.

References

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