

Decolonising Schools in South Africa: The Impossible Dream? by Pam Christie

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The Backyard of Decolonisation?

The fundamental question posed by the author in this path-breaking book is whether, in 21st-century postcolonial/post-apartheid democratic South Africa, the idea of a quality education for the average child in the rural backyard of colonialism represents an “*impossible dream*”? Whatever one’s assessment of this new study by Pam Christie, it is hardly deniable that it scores highly on ambition, originality and innovation. It represents a brave attempt to confront a wide range of highly complex global social and economic problems that are captured through a unique study of the very specific local context of the small, isolated town of Carnarvon in the Karoo hinterland of South Africa.

Schooling is viewed as a proxy for the social world of the marginalised. The study demonstrates the complexity of debates about social policy and education in the micro-context of Carnarvon’s schools and seeks to link those issues to the global policy challenges of the 21st century. More specifically, Christie seeks to explore education as an index of social change (or lack of change) in the historical context of the specific social and educational transition of the Northern Cape from a 19th-century colonial frontier to its gradual incorporation in the colonial structures of the Cape Colony and South Africa, to the advent of apartheid (1948–1994), and the post-1994 “democratic” state. After 1994 and the transition to democracy, the study assesses the impact of the new political, social and economic order associated with “democratic government” and the challenges of new policy development in educational provision. The final chapter represents a picture of the Carnarvon community’s encounter with Big Science as the location of the enormously ambitious and costly international space exploration project,

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the international Square Kilometre Array (SKA) since the selection of the area as a site for the location of significant infrastructure for the project, and the potential implications of those changes for a more appropriate equity-driven educational provision.¹

Five key issues seem to be:

- The overarching theme that addresses the crisis of educational provision in a post-neoliberal age and the context of decolonisation. The focus is on the “impossible dream”(?) of educational equity in the global context, especially with regard to the “border populations” of rural communities in the context of “the decolonisation” of the South.
- The changing role of missionaries and the state in the shaping of social relations through education in the isolated rural community (communities?) of Carnarvon from the 1850s to the present.
- The implications of this legacy for the formation of a specific set of educational policies in the context of the promise of educational equity after the formal end of colonialism and apartheid in 1994.
- The conflict and contest relating to local and national educational policy, and within the community related to the rhetoric and reality of educational policies based on international norms of provision and school governance and local expectations concerning democratisation and the end of apartheid in the years after 1994.
- The implications for the community of the arrival of “Big Science” in the form of the international Square Kilometre Array (SKA) project at the present time and its influence on the nature of economic, social and educational relations.

Christie is concerned to emphasise the enduring educational legacies and continuities of the capitalist/colonial state and their implications for the present policy development in relation to the achievement of goals of social justice. She seeks to provide a historical perspective on the social, economic and political challenges faced by a remote community located at the town of Carnarvon with special reference to educational change in the period since the transition to democracy in 1994. In a rural community characterised by high levels of poverty, unemployment, racism and deprivation, the raft of new national policies that were assembled by the new democratically elected government aimed at addressing the legacy of inequality that has deep historical roots in the national and the community context. Consequently, educational policy gained a

¹ The only similar study I am aware of that focuses on a specific local context of a peripheral town in South Africa is Leslie Bank’s study of East London, *City of Broken Dreams: Myth-Making, Nationalism and the University in an African Motor City* (2019), though this does not deal with educational issues. For similar literature on an urban context, see Mark Hunter’s *Race for Education: Gender, White Tone and Schooling in South Africa* (2019).

prominent place in the rhetoric of transformation and the search for equity on the national stage.

In the context of the schools of Carnarvon, this study seeks to explore how a variety of educational struggles ensued. In particular, it seeks “to understand how particular patterns of inequality in schooling were formed in this place, and how they have endured while also shifting over time” (p. 14). It proposes to consider how such policies might be re-examined if the “dream” is to be engaged with in a satisfactory manner.

Pam Christie locates this local study within the broad ambit of studies of the colonial/postcolonial periphery as it attempts to engage with the world of the 21st century. While its historiographical background could be stronger, the study is conducted through an examination of the differential nature of the education/schooling provided in the community and the change (or lack of change) in that provision over time. The central issue that is posed is that this case study represents a “classic case of the complexities of policy formulation and implementation” (p. 150) and how to understand the “enduring inequalities” (p. 7) that persist in society and in education: why do schools not fulfil their mandate to promote equity and access for young people in the modern world, in general, and in postcolonial societies specifically, despite the adoption of policies professing to grapple with these issues (p. 2)?

It is not possible here to explore the historical chapters in detail (Chapters 3 and 4), but I found that they provide a fascinating window into the educational history of the Northern Cape that has remained unexplored to date. They relate to the emergence of a hunting/trading/missionary/farming frontier with the *fontein* (spring) at Schietfontein (Carnarvon) in the Kareeberg, on the wagon road between the Cape, Griqualand West, and the Diamond Fields, which provided a focal point for the development of a Rhenish Mission Society station where San/Khoi/Baster/Xhosa and Boer frontier communities met from the 1850s. This church and school provided a common meeting place for these people and the foundation for the later establishment of state schools. By the end of the century there were separate schools for whites and Coloureds, but they were all formally under the control of the Cape Department of Public Education. Only during apartheid times did the provision of education for whites and Coloureds come to be under separate governance, even if Afrikaans remained the language of instruction for all.

One of the lessons to be learned from the era of democratic transition in South Africa, which has been pointed out repeatedly in the post-war era of development studies, is that education is not the powerful lever for societal change that policymakers have often assumed. What is missing from Christie’s review of the literature on these issues is the significant literature that emerged in the wake of the optimism of the post-war development decades that indicate the limits of the relationship between educational reform and the promotion of social equity. In a study that focuses on “coloniality”, it seems important to understand why educational policymaking in South Africa since

1994 has failed to draw significantly on the policy literature of the era of decolonisation.²

In a study that focuses on schooling as a proxy for the social world of the marginalised in the 21st century, there is a focus on the racial politics of schooling and the tenacity of racial divisions and frictions, but it is a pity that, despite the clear difficulties, Christie's fieldwork did not manage to engage more effectively with the social/class fault lines *within* the "white" and "Coloured" communities. Who were the leaders of the "*besorgte ouers*", and who were the white parents who dominated the School Governing Body of *Höerskool Carnarvon*? Such insights might assist in an understanding of the nature of the "lingering relationships of inequality" (p. 151) and the interface between social morality and equity, on the one side, and the (legitimate/illegitimate) self-interest of groups and individuals on the other, and how to engage with these issues into the future.

The final chapter on the possible choices for equity-driven educational policy in the context of the new environment dominated by the SKA project is suggestive but inconclusive. The suggestion that in terms of school access and school curricula vocational and cultural options *relevant* to the local context should be re-explored seems unconvincing given the limited success of such initiatives elsewhere. The challenge posed is nevertheless of the utmost significance to policymakers in the light of the promise suggested by the engagement of the area with the global context in the form of Big Science.

Whatever my reservations, this study represents an important spur to historical and location-based studies of educational history that is totally missing in South Africa at present, especially given that there is an urgent need to address the complex links between history, education and social structure and issues of identity/community in educational provision and the everyday practices of schooling in a deeply divided society.

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² A classic article on this theme is Hans Weiler's "Education and Development: From the Age of Innocence to the Age of Scepticism" (1978).