

# Perspectives in Education

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Volume 8 Number 3 July 1985

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The policy of *Perspectives in Education* is to promote rigorous critical discussion and debate about education, particularly in South Africa. At this stage of South Africa's educational development, the vigorous exchange of views is vital. The major purpose of *Perspectives of Education* is to clarify the issues at stake in the relation between education and South African society.

*Perspectives in Education* is published jointly by the Faculty of Education of the University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg, and the Johannesburg College of Education, 27 St Andrew's Road, Parktown, and printed by the Central Printing Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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## Editorial

We may perhaps be forgiven for hoping that the papers by Penny Enslin and Michael Cross published in this issue of *Perspectives* are harbingers of a greater sophistication and subtlety in critical accounts of South Africa education. Enslin's starting premise is that certain tendencies in radical writing over approximately the last decade have been rather crude, indulging in some measure of over-generalisation, and that some of these writers have been insufficiently careful with their historical sources. In particular, she is concerned to show that the attribution of the category 'liberal' to 'dominant' accounts of South African education is open to question. By means of a careful re-reading of certain selected sources, Enslin shows that these accounts are not liberal at all; rather, they are more than a little conservative.

With the luxury of hindsight, it is easy to see how this situation came to pass. Despite often elaborate disclaimers to the contrary, a number of early radical accounts made unproblematic use of a base-superstructure model of social functioning that entailed that the world of ideas was to be read off rather directly from the domain of material interests. This meant the following: if the system was capitalist and therefore run by the bourgeoisie, then the ruling ideology also had to be bourgeois — that is, 'liberal'.

It would be ungenerous and misleading to see this over-simplification simply as one of bad scholarship. The priority for at least some of those early writers, embarking as they were with a new paradigm into uncharted terrain, was to be as lucid and unambiguous about the paradigm and its conclusions as possible, an aim of Christie and Collins' for instance, and successful at that. But the matter is not solely pedagogic.

One of the theoretical issues at stake is whether a person's consciousness and his or her class position necessarily have to correspond. Do ideological tenets (like liberalism) have a class base or a class belonging? If someone writes as a liberal, is the result always functional for the capitalist state? Or conversely, if someone writes what seems to be an apology for the state educational system, does this make him or her a liberal? The assumption that the two do go together informs Kallaway's position, and Enslin takes

has in mind the modernising educationists who have associated themselves with the de Lange initiative.

Third, there are those who look at the present education situation with extreme feelings of dissatisfaction. They argue that the present educational system is geared to the preservation of a fundamentally unjust and unequal system based on huge disparities between black and white people. In their perspective, the crisis in education cannot be overcome by a simple adjustment of the education system to the needs of the economy, which they consider to be a technocratic view of the problem. The solution will only come with deeper changes at all levels of social life. This position is articulated by the emerging radical literature on South African education, which presents a challenge to all the traditional assumptions on education advocated in the first and second views. Within this context, new theoretical and methodological formulations have been proposed towards a redirection and reinterpretation of studies of education in the South African context. Strong criticisms have been made against the dominant tradition in studies of education in South Africa. This is considered to be dominated by liberal ideas. Some of these criticisms, however, have not been sufficiently grounded and have raised certain reactions, mainly in the liberal ranks. Within this trend, Enslin's paper has come as a welcome traffic sign. In this article, I will discuss Enslin's paper and try to place it within the context of the so-called 'radical-liberal' debate. Enslin is intent, in her paper, on showing that:

- i 'the radical critics are mistaken in suggesting that the dominant tradition in studies of education in South Africa is a liberal one'<sup>1</sup>
- ii 'the examples of liberal writers cited by the radicals are to some degree conservative rather than liberal'<sup>2</sup>
- iii 'there is some confusion in radical circles about the use of the term "liberal"<sup>3</sup> and "the criteria of the liberal tradition implied in the radical criticisms of it are inadequate" and incomplete'<sup>4</sup>
- iv 'a large part of the problem is the failure of the radicals to link their arguments convincingly to their sources'<sup>5</sup>
- v 'the radicals have taken a particular critical argument from a certain context and applied it to another object of interest, without considering the extent of its applicability'<sup>6</sup>.

## Open the parcels and check inside before you stick on the labels: a response to Penny Enslin

Michael Cross

Education is presently one of the most controversial fields in the social sciences in South Africa and a site of bitter struggles. The schools crisis manifested by the 1976-80 uprising and boycotts, and the ongoing 'manpower crisis', has led to the crystallization of three main positions amongst educationists.

First, there are those who seem to be committed to the prevailing values of the inherited South African educational system, and who are blinding themselves to the changing nature of South African society. In their demands, there is a strong appeal for the preservation of the fundamental structures, nature and character of the present educational system. There is little that they criticise in either the writings on the educational past or that past itself. Education in South Africa must continue to maintain its traditional role of providing appropriate education to different 'cultures'. If there is any perceived threat to this group, it comes from the daring attitude of those who try to change the beliefs, conceptions and values inherited from the past by using forms of thought completely divorced from the dominant educational tradition. Amongst these might be cited some 'traditional' Afrikaner academics committed to maintaining the CNE vision in South African education.

Second, there are those who believe that the South African reality today is not the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago. They think that South Africa, at the present stage, is a new reality with new social, economic and political needs and is under different pressures. Thus, as far as educational development is concerned, a 'moderate', 'responsible' and 'realistic' choice is required. What is at stake is to adjust the inherited educational apparatus to the requirements of the new economic and social reality. More money must be pumped into education for blacks. The demands of the economy are now considered stronger than the colour bar. Here one

In this article, some remarks will be addressed to the above-mentioned key propositions, the method (theory) implicitly suggested and the respective implications. It will be argued that the considerations on liberalism made by Enslin have done little to overcome the 'confusion' about the use of the term 'liberal', and that the proposed additional criteria, in the way they were used in her paper, can hardly provide a persuasive solution to the problem at stake. Any assessment of South African liberalism requires not only the identification of certain political values and general features of liberal 'scientific practice' but also an understanding of the way particular historical situations were confronted by the 'liberals'. Further, it will be argued that if Enslin has succeeded in pointing out that the 'radicals' have provided an incorrect critique by using a wrong approach, she has also herself failed to indicate a more adequate alternative method. Her traffic sign has remained a warning sign more than a guiding one. And this is, I think, the result of theoretical problems entailed by her approach. I shall discuss this point too. Let us start from the method which has led Enslin to her conclusions.

#### The criterion-based method

Enslin starts by listing the common accusations formulated by the radicals against the dominant historical tradition in education. These are: the emphasis on white education; the neglect of the study of black education; its descriptive, unanalytical and uncritical character; its superficiality in analysis and inability to show the relationships between education and other features of South African society. After criticising the validity of these criteria which she considers *inadequate and incomplete*, she suggests that two more fundamental criteria must be added for an adequate characterisation of the liberal tradition:

- i the opposition to the Apartheid policies of the Nationalist Government;
- ii the defence of certain principles like those of 'equality', 'rejection of racist discrimination' and 'defence of certain rights'.

Although she argues that these principles, drawn from Robertson's *Liberalism in South Africa* change in form, she stresses that 'they remain applicable to and definitive' of liberalism in South Africa'. She then examines whether the examples of the literature given by the 'radicals' (Coetzee, Pells, Rupert, Behr, Macmillan, Rose and Turner, Malherbe

and Horrell) fit into the criteria framework. Obviously, for Enslin, only one, Horrell, could receive a green light as an uncontroversial liberal writer. All the others are kept behind the conservative wall. This conclusion raises some problems.

It seems to me irrelevant to adjudicate on who is right and who is wrong, the 'radicals' or the 'liberals'. This is not the place and the best way for this kind of judgement. Other questions, however, can be raised. From the sample of writers, Kallaway finds six 'liberals', while Enslin finds only one: the rest are conservative. How can perceptions of the same writers be so radically irreconcilable? Clearly, only if different meanings are attached to the notions of 'conservative' and 'liberal'. This brings us back to the question of the validity of the criteria used in each case. The 'radicals' armed, on the one hand, with these criteria and, on the other, with their new theoretically-informed perspective, should have been able to avoid the charge that they had not researched their subject matter adequately. But they failed to do so. As Enslin has pointed out, they have drawn conclusions before having carefully scrutinised as much as they ought the main sources.

The problem becomes larger when we come to Enslin's own position and conclusions. As I have already mentioned, if her criterion-based method is to be accepted, only one of those examples would receive a green light as a genuine liberal. I have no reason to agree or disagree with her conclusion at this stage, since there is no convincing argument in her paper about that. This is because the premises used to draw the conclusion are also questionable. Before one can judge the veracity or validity of her conclusions, one must first discuss the validity of Enslin's criterion-based method. Let us look at this aspect in detail.

Put the problem another way and ask if Enslin's criterion framework or method is *adequate and complete* for an assessment of liberalism in South Africa. The answer could be both 'yes' and 'no'. Yes in the sense that her criteria reflect a combination of some of the basic universal values of liberalism in general with some particular forms of expression of South African liberalism. No in the sense that those 'definitive' criteria do not consider the notion of relativism determined by variables like time, place and social context. Inevitably, they lead to a confusing reductionism. The concepts are related to the use of words. The way in which a word is used varies or changes over the years and at any one time there are national, regional and individual variations. As John Wilson has pointed out, words 'do not have only one meaning: indeed, in a sense they do not have

meaning in their own right at all, but only in so far as people use them in different ways<sup>9</sup>. More concretely, the concepts and notions of 'opposition', 'equality', 'racist discrimination', and so on, are subordinated to the relativism determined by social, economic, political and ideological conditions. Ask, for example, a 'liberal' black worker and a middle-class English-speaking white clerk what the main problem is that they face in their work place. They might both say: racist discrimination. We have the same word-expression, but, on the ground, we have, indeed, two different concepts of 'racist discrimination'. Similarly, so-called 'liberal opposition' was not the same during the segregation period and the Apartheid regime. Furthermore, 'equality' as such is a meaningless concept. Following some kind of philosophical reasoning one could ask: 'Equality? What do you mean, equality? Equality for what? Equality in what? Under what circumstances?' and so forth.

It is clear that to resort to that kind of abstractionism, to resort to the most common and 'definitive' features (criteria) of liberalism without looking at different and particular forms of liberal expression and practice, makes the problem too intricate to be clear. It makes it difficult to grasp the dialectical development of liberalism, its specific shape and particular forms of expression in each historical moment, amongst different communities and social strata.

An extreme alternative position would be a relativist one, that is, to forget about the generalisations and to rely on the particularities of each historical stage. Using Enslin's criterion-based method, the first would be, perhaps, to pinpoint the main historical phases of the development of educational literature. Of course this creates a difficulty. Which criteria would be acceptable for the definition of those stages? Suppose that we have the suitable criteria and we have defined the historical phases. The next step would be the determination of 'liberal criteria' for each phase. We would face another problem. It would be difficult to find terms of reference to evaluate our criteria. It would be difficult to get a consensus on the number and adequacy of our criteria. Undoubtedly, we could be accused, not without reason, of producing empirically-loaded conclusions. Besides, our research would become more difficult. Indeed, some social scientists would consider the possibility of a combination of both general and particular criteria.

Although this spirit is in some way present in Enslin's paper, this last alternative could provide the possibility of exploring many other criteria. One way would be to assume that there are different forms of expression of

liberalism: political liberalism, economic liberalism, and so on. Other criteria would be drawn from these different spheres. Why not the 'free market ideology' or the 'free enterprise ideology' present in current economic liberalism? But, here again, we could be trapped by the problem of evaluation and acceptability of our criteria. In addition, we would have to confront another difficulty. Who would benefit from our generosity and receive a green light? For example, adding these last criteria, Malherbe, as we shall see later, could receive the green light as an 'economic liberal' but we could be confused by his commitment to the CNE criterion introduced by Enslin.

What is questioned, in the three mentioned alternatives, is not the possibility of arriving at a more objective critique. This might eventually be possible but, using Enslin's method, only in a quasi-jackpot fashion. The search for a more suitable method is a fundamental component in the present debate. Thus, our discussion of criteria brings us back to the basic problem: the criterion-based method itself, as implicitly suggested by Enslin.

I shall argue that the problem with this method involves not only the difficulties raised by the use of criteria, but mainly the implications of the static character of the analysis it provides; in particular, the way it views the expression of liberalism in educational literature. But before I discuss this aspect I would like to make a point about the historical foundations of the criterion-based method itself. It seems to me that the criterion-based method is a reflection of the influence of 'analytical philosophy' as applied in education within the English tradition, specifically in its orthodox form, as formulated in the classic studies of Peters and others. To pick up one example, Peters in *Aims of Education - A Conceptual Inquiry* has suggested that a way handling the 'concept of education' would be to lay down 'criteria to which a family of activities must conform'. These criteria would be 'those that characterise the successful outcome of education in the form of an educated man; and those that characterise the processes by means of which people gradually become educated'<sup>10</sup>. On the basis of this framework he formulated his concept of education as 'the initiation of people into a worthwhile form of life'<sup>11</sup>. Although his concept of education did not pass uncontested, his form of conceptual inquiry or reasoning has had a considerable impact in philosophy of education.

Peters, however, after strong criticisms has been forced to recognize the weakness of this form of conceptual inquiry:

... the term education is used valuatively, but vaguely with lack of precision regarding its area of application. From this it might be mistakenly suggested that all that needs to be done is to pick out certain criteria that seem central to one's understanding of education and lay these down as stipulatory preliminary to the issues to be discussed. This, I think, would be a pretty pointless and presumptuous procedure<sup>12</sup>.

This remark is also true if we substitute the term education by the terms *liberalism* or *conservatism*. Returning to the first point, the static character of the analysis, to list criteria drawn from a changing phenomenon in order to see whether the ideas formulated in different stages about such a phenomenon do or do not fit into those criteria, is easily conducive to errors. Although an individual as a subject of knowledge is not, epistemologically speaking, a passive reflector of outside stimuli we cannot ignore the complexity of human experience and its influence in the development of human thought. What is meant here by human experience is the whole complex totality constituted by factors such as the social environment in which man lives, the pressures exerted by generations, schools, the economy: a totality which is not static and harmonious but rather, dynamic, contradictory in nature and always in a changing process. The interaction of an individual with that totality changes and so his ideas change even if they seem to remain the same in their basic principles. The recent developments in educational literature prove that there has been a certain radicalisation of the so-called liberal positions in South Africa. The literature indicates that there has also been significant mobility between the three main ideological positions (conservative, liberal and radical). Some educationists who are associated with the de Lange initiative come from the so-called conservative ranks. Thus, it is possible to find a 'conservative' of the 1940s becoming a 'liberal' of the 1980s.

#### Towards a context-based method

The basic assumptions which underlie an alternative approach, to be suggested here, can be illustrated through the example of the Malherbe of the 1930s and of the 1960s. This is one of the extracts used by Enslin to show Malherbe's liberal view:

'In general, it may be said of South Africa that whenever a

particular system of education did not recognise the people's ingrained love of liberty, their deep religious sense, and their desire for self-government, it was doomed to failure<sup>13</sup>.

This is an example which is difficult to judge without digging deeper into the social context in which it was expressed. The liberal connotation stressed by Enslin is misleading and it cannot be accepted as an inference from the extract.

There is no doubt that Professor Malherbe of the 1920s and 1930s was much concerned with the promotion of 'South Africanism', national development and the rationalisation of methods through the promotion of scientific research. His first volume, *Education in South Africa* (1925), was more concerned with this rationality than with liberal opposition to outmoded practices. Perhaps the well-known term of 'organic intellectual' might qualify to characterise Malherbe at that stage. To understand this point one must realise that the Malherbe of that time was not completely defined in the first volume of *Education in South Africa*. One must also look for him in the *Carnegie Inquiry on the Poor White Problem*, where he confidently started his career in the struggle for rationalisation of methods which were necessary to building white supremacy. One must look at his role in the *South African Council for Educational and Social Research*, which was an executive inspiration for the formulation of national policy at different levels but mainly at an educational and social one. For example, during the 1930s, when the influx of the black proletariat into the towns became a threatening problem, Malherbe was one of the men who relied on the rationality provided by social research as the first step for the formulation of suitable measures<sup>14</sup>.

Then, new developments produced a new Malherbe in the 1960s. He became, indeed, more critical in relation to some practices which for him had become archaisms. He began to react against job reservation and other aspects of the restrictive legislation designed to protect the privileged section of the population. He also began to criticise this for having an uneconomic effect. Thereafter, for him, the expansion of education facilities to the 'non-white' groups and the removal of racial restrictions on employment became the conditions *sine qua non* to ensure economic growth<sup>15</sup>.

This change, which makes Malherbe uncontestedly a member of the 'new liberalism' in South Africa, is well substantiated in his paper delivered to the 1966 National Congress of the Progressive Party, in which, with a high

sense of humour, he compares the situation and conceptions of the 1930s with the present and future reality. I do not mean that he proposes a radical change in education or any other field. Of course he reacts within the same parameters in which the so-called dominant liberal tradition has functioned, that is, against what is seen as outmoded practices or archaisms:

‘... the demands of the economy of South Africa are stronger than the colour bar with plenty of evidence out of the past to support and indeed to prove this view’<sup>16</sup>.

Malherbe is only one example amongst others. But these considerations show that the characterisation of human thought cannot be done in a static way as in Enslin’s criterion method, but must be related to its social, economic and political context. For example, a teacher of European literature in a high school could say: ‘before you go to the text, first read the biography, if you really want to understand the ideas of the author’. So, the students could spend some time discussing the ‘life of the author’ in its social, political, ideological and psychological aspects, which, in many cases, could be found reflected in the author’s texts, ideas and concepts. The students could learn that a word like ‘liberty’ would mean different things, depending upon the context both of the author and the text on the one hand, and their context on the other. This means that our own theory has to be confronted with the environment of the author and his own theory produced in that environment, in order to understand what he has written in his texts. This means that the text he writes during his adolescence or schooling would be marked by an aspect other than that dominating his mature literature. The conditions in which he wrote the first text have changed and so his ideas were determined or at least conditioned by his new social environment.

In summary, one could say that in the process of characterisation of any educational study, the way one understands the ideas formulated in those studies depend on many factors:

- i the author’s theoretical framework determined by his social existence;
- ii the social environment of the author and his own conception of that social environment;
- iii the changing nature of all these factors. This means that any study of education or any criticism of such a study is basically an expression of ‘the way particular historical situations are confronted’. So, without

falling into an historicist approach, any thought or assessment about those studies must be historically conducted. The study of education must be periodized and related to the specific developments of each period as well as to contradictions of the previous periods. In doing so, we will be able to locate the development of thought within its context and formulate judgements accordingly. This idea is present in Paul Rich when he points out that:

‘... the overall assessment of South African liberalism must not be guided by, as many liberal historians have imagined, the simple ability to keep certain political values intact, but by the way particular historical situations are confronted. As Eric Voegelin has warned, (liberalism) is not a body of timeless valid scientific propositions about political reality, but rather a series of political opinions and attitudes which motivates them, and are then overtaken by history and required to do justice to new situations’<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, let me end my remarks on Enslin’s article with two supplementary points. The ‘radicals’, perhaps with the aim of strengthening their arguments about the importance of their message—the application of political economy/historical materialism to the educational field—launched the argument that the dominant tradition in studies of education in South Africa is a liberal one. Unfortunately, they gave no reasons to support this assertion. This is their main weakness. Enslin, exploiting this weakness, gave a determined direction to the debate which has an echo in this paper, although here a new dimension has been introduced. The debate is being conducted in a very misleading way. The main question raised by the ‘radicals’, the applicability of political economy/historical materialism to the educational field still remains. Many articles and some books have been published in this direction but the results have not been scrutinised.

Furthermore, it is not clear that there is any advantage in labelling different social scientists, whatever the labels (conservative, liberal, radical, marxist, neo-marxist, right-wing liberal, left-wing liberal, extreme-right-wing liberal or radical, or conservative, etc., etc.). Like many other labels, they probably conceal as much as they reveal. They tend to obscure the fundamental differences between those dialectical, and those whose thinking is criterion-based or categorical. Rather, it seems that what is important for a social scientist is his ability to critically discern, select,



develop or use the theoretical tools provided by the different schools of thought which can, more easily and safely, lead to the intelligibility of the social reality, without being arrested by unnecessary scholarly apartheid. To conceive scientific praxis as an art of labelling the product of social research, especially when it assumes the form of expression of the present debate would be a short-sighted view of what has to be done, not only in terms of priorities but also in terms of safeguarding scientific rigour and discipline. There is a risk of transforming education into a field of academic recreation.

However, there are some labels which are conventionally accepted as terms of reference of the different schools of thought. In this sense, the terms 'liberal', 'radical' or 'conservative' and others have a place. But before we stick on the labels why not open the parcels and check what sort of commodities are inside?

Enslin has made an important contribution in demonstrating that the 'radical' writers have come to conclusions without 'checking the subject and its central texts as carefully as they ought'<sup>18</sup>. However, relying too much on her criterion-based method, she has 'thrown out the baby with the bathwater'.

#### NOTES

- 1 P Enslin 'Is the Dominant Tradition in Studies of Education in South Africa a Liberal One?' *Perspectives in Education*, Vol 8 No 3, p 130
- 2 *Ibid* p 145
- 3 *Ibid* p 130
- 4 *Ibid*
- 5 *Ibid* p 149
- 6 *Ibid* p 151
- 7 *Ibid* p 134
- 8 *Ibid*
- 9 John Wilson *Thinking with Concepts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963, p 10
- 10 R S Peters (ed) *The Philosophy of Education*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p 15
- 11 *Ibid* p 16
- 12 R S Peters *Essays on Educators*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, p 33
- 13 E G Malherbe *Education in South Africa*, Vol 1, 1652-1922, Juta, p 8
- 14 E G Malherbe *Education and Social Research in South Africa*, 1939, pp 40-41
- 15 E G Malherbe *Education and the Development of South Africa's Human Resources*. Paper delivered to the 1966 National Congress of the Progressive Party of South Africa, pp 23-39
- 16 *Ibid* p 66
- 17 Paul Rich *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism 1921-1960*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984, p 123
- 18 P Enslin *op cit* p 151

## Justice and education in South Africa: Plato, Verwoerd and the White Paper

Mark Dorgan

Central to the debate surrounding the recently published White Paper<sup>1</sup>, is the moral question of whether a more just system of education is being proposed or not. It is as a contribution to this debate that I would like, in this paper, to consider the close similarities in the notion of justice in the following: Plato's *Republic*<sup>2</sup>, Dr H F Verwoerd's educational policy in South Africa in the 1950s and the official response to the De Lange Report<sup>3</sup> (the White Paper).

I will begin by analysing the notion of justice Plato advances in the *Republic*, arguing that it involves anything but justice because of Plato's omission of the notion of equality from his account<sup>4</sup>. I will then argue that the same notion of justice is implicit in the education policy of Dr H F Verwoerd and, finally, that in the White Paper, a misunderstanding of the full implications of the notion of equality leads to the same Platonic notion of justice being adopted. In the White Paper, this results in a kind of 'horizontal hierarchy' being proposed — a contradictory position. I will conclude by pointing out that the Platonic notion of justice as adopted implicitly by both Dr Verwoerd and the authors of the White Paper, can only perpetuate injustice.

### The Republic of Plato

In Ancient Greece there was a tradition which linked justice and equality. This is evident, for example, in the following quote from Pericles, 'Our laws afford equal justice for all alike in their private disputes, but we do not ignore the claims of excellence. When a citizen distinguishes himself, then he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as a reward for merit; poverty is not a bar . . .'<sup>5</sup>. Plato himself, in one dialogue, talks about the Greek notion of justice by saying, 'justice is equality'<sup>6</sup>. And yet, in the *Republic*, the work in which Plato claims to be explaining justice,